

Down Syndrome: Bottle Feeding and Your Baby

Most babies with Down syndrome grow properly and do just fine in the eating department. But some young babies with Down syndrome have a harder time sucking efficiently, due to their low, floppy muscle tone. Their mouths may be less “alert” or ready for feeding, and the extra effort they have to put out to eat gives them less endurance for getting through the whole meal.

Breast-fed babies with low muscle tone can lose interest while waiting for the milk to let down. Some babies with Down syndrome find it harder to latch on to the breast or bottle nipple and maintain a good hold throughout the meal. These babies take many more breaks and end up eating less per feeding than you would expect for the amount of time spent. Swallowing excess air is common because the baby has a less efficient hold on the nipple.

Despite these concerns, babies with Down syndrome and their parents usually find a few tricks that make feedings easier for everybody. This article looks at some techniques that often work.

What Can Be Done?

Low-tone babies need to be helped to use the muscle strength and control they have. They often prefer to be fed in the way that requires the least effort, rather than using their muscle control. To help encourage muscle strength, you need to “wake them up” or alert them before and during each feeding. Here are a few wake-up strategies; contact your baby’s doctor and developmental team to review the appropriateness of these activities for your child.

Preparation

- Start the feeding when your baby is most **awake or alert**
 - See if playing with your baby just before feeding helps increase attention for the meal. Play gentle tickle games with fingers, toys, or kissing around the face and neck.
 - Dance with your baby so head and upper body control is stimulated.
 - Bounce your baby gently in your lap. Of course, the dancing and bouncing should be done only if your baby can handle that much stimulation and has the head control necessary to participate without getting hurt.
 - Some parents have found that a **cool or tepid bath** wakes up their baby before feedings. Others have found that a brisk towel rub helps.
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- After waking up your baby’s body, focus the alerting on the face and mouth area. A cool washcloth on the face or gentle tapping around the face and mouth may increase readiness for the bottle.
 - Some parents have found that gently tickling or stretching the muscles around the lips and cheeks helps wake up the mouth. You can use fingers and washcloths.

Position

Feed your baby in as upright a position as possible. The more your baby is up against gravity, the more active the muscles must become. In addition, babies with Down syndrome seem to be more prone to ear infections. Upright feedings decrease the chance of liquid backing up in the ear canals, reducing the risk of infection.

Be sure that your baby is being fed in a chin tuck position. This position, with the head not too far back and not too far forward, seems to set up the neck and mouth muscles for the strongest sucking response. Try to rest your baby's head –not neck- on your arm when holding during feedings, which automatically tucks the chin slightly. This position also can be achieved with pillows or arm rests.

An angled bottle, available commercially, may be used to keep the baby's head at this angle until the end of the feeding. With a regular bottle, children must tip their heads back to get the last few drops. An angled bottle solves this problem.

Cool the Liquid

Temperature may affect the efficiency and speed of your baby's sucking and swallowing. After checking with your doctor, consider starting the baby at room-temperature formula and gradually chilling the formula until your baby can handle it straight from the refrigerator. This can increase not only the baby's interest in sucking but also the amount that is sucked during the meal.

Cheek and Tongue Involvement

Some babies need to be reminded to suck during the meal by having a little attention drawn to their tongues. To increase tongue involvement, try tapping the nipple on the tongue or pressing up and down on the tongue regularly throughout the meal. This may serve to wake up the tongue, but should be discontinued or decreased if it disrupts the meal too much.

Ask for Help

Babies with Down syndrome have all the basic skills necessary for taking a breast or bottle. The suggestions in this article are intended to increase babies' efficiency and control, so they can progress to more difficult food textures and consistencies.

Some babies with Down syndrome have further medical complications that interfere with good sucking or good nutritional intake. These conditions may require extra assistance. Ask your pediatrician, feeding specialist, or developmental team if you have questions or need more help.

Resources

Angled bottles are available through most toy and department stores and many grocery stores.

NDSC

National Down Syndrome Congress
1800 Dempster Street
Park Ridge, IL 60068-1146
(800) 233-6372
www.NDSCCENTER.org

NDSS

National Down Syndrome Society
666 Broadway
New York, NY 10012
(800) 221-4602
www.ndss.org

Suggested Books and Videos

The following is a list of various publications/videos available on Down syndrome. These have been read and recommended by members of the Down Syndrome Association of Central California. Our Resource Lending Library at our DSACC office has most of the recommendations available for loan.

Babies With Down Syndrome: A New Parent's Guide edited by Susan J. Skallerup, Woodbine House, 3rd Edition, 2008

You Will Dream New Dreams: Inspiring Personal Stories by Parents of Children with Disabilities by Stanley D. Klein and Kim Schive, Kensington Books, 2001

Gifts – Mothers Reflect on How Children with Down Syndrome Enrich Their Lives Edited by Kathryn Lynard Soper

Delicate Threads – Friendships between Children with and without Special Needs in Inclusive Settings by Debbie Stabu, Ph.D.

Common Threads: Celebrating Life with Down Syndrome by Cynthia S. Kiddem and Brian G Skotko

Early Communication Skills for Children with Down Syndrome – A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Libby Kumin, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Classroom Language Skills for Children with Down Syndrome – A Guide for Parents and Teachers by Libby Kumin, Ph.D., CCC-SLP

Fine Motor Skills for Children with Down Syndrome – A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Maryanne Bruni, BScOT (Reg)

Gross Motor Skills in Children with Down Syndrome – A Guide for Parents and Professionals by Patricia C. Winders, P.T.

Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome – A Guide for Parents and Teachers by Patricia Logan Oelwein

Steps to Independence – Teaching Everyday Skills to Children with Special Needs by Bruce L. Baker and Alan J. Brightman

Views from Our Shoes – Growing Up with a Brother or Sister with Special Needs
Edited by Donald Meyer

Children's Books

My Friend Isabelle by Eliza Woloson

We'll Paint The Octopus Red by Stephanie Stuve-Bodeen

I Can, Can You? By Marjorie W. Pitzer

DVD's

Down Syndrome The First 18 Months

Written, Produced and directed by Will Schermerhorn

Discovery: Pathways to Better Speech for Children with Down Syndrome

Starring: Ph.D., CCC-SLP; Professor Sue Buckley; Sally Shott; Siegfried Pueschel, Libby Kumin

Director: Will Schermerhorn

Signing Time – Sign Language Video Set

Rachel de Azevedo Coleman

Miscellaneous Resource Articles

Breastfeeding Resource/Helpful Hints