

Occupational Therapy for Infants and Children with Down Syndrome

An occupational therapist specializes in the development of fine-motor and self-care skills. Examples of such skills include: manipulating toys; using a pencil for writing, drinking from a bottle and cup, and eating from a spoon. Infants and children with Down syndrome are typically delayed in developing these skills and have common characteristics which affect their fine motor development and ability to eat.

Factors Impacting Fine Motor Development:

- Low "floppy" tone of the arms and hands.
- Extra flexibility of the arm and hand joints.
- Tendency for broad hands and short fingers.

Factors Impacting Eating Skills:

- Low "floppy" tone of the face and mouth.
- Small mouth/enlarged tongue.
- Medical problems: cardiac defects or swallowing dysfunction.
- Delayed eye-hand coordination and grasping for finger feeding and holding utensils/cup.

Occupational therapy provides treatment strategies to facilitate arm and hand development and feeding skills. It is recommended that an occupational therapy assessment be performed at approximately 8 months of age. This is an ideal time for evaluation since most infants are very "busy" with their hands and are eating some solid foods by this time. An evaluation may be performed prior to 8 months if issues requiring assessment/treatment arise at an earlier age, especially those related to feeding. Direct services can be provided as needed and will focus on the following:

Acquisition of fine motor skills:

- Establishment of basic fine motor patterns of reaching, grasping, and releasing.
- Refinement of basic patterns for use in manipulating toys and objects.

Oral-motor/feeding:

- Management of food and liquids
- Progression of food textures
- Independence in cup drinking, finger feeding, and utensil use.

Services are also available for older children, which focus on further development of fine motor and feeding skills, as well as on the acquisition of additional self-care skills such as dressing. Specific treatment strategies are dependent on the infant's or child's level of developmental readiness. Intervention emphasizes parent training with home activity suggestions provided. Ongoing services can be provided to monitor progress and update the home programs as necessary.

Common Feeding Problems in Infants & Children with Down Syndrome

Age Range	Feeding Pattern
0-3 months	- Weak suck on breast/bottle - Low endurance for breast or bottle feeding
3-6 months	- Delay in placing hands on bottle - Difficulty accepting foods from spoon due to uncoordinated tongue movements and food loss
6-9 months	- Delay in managing foods with texture due to lack of mature tongue movement - Delay in picking up foods with fingers - Weak biting
9-12 months	- Immature chewing patterns - Delay in managing liquids from cup
12-15 months	- Difficulty using spoon for scooping



For more information or to make a referral, please contact:

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