

I CAN DO THAT!

Tips for Teaching Independent Living Skills
to Blind and Visually Impaired Children
by Joan S. McCann, M.A. 2003

EATING SKILLS

Learning to eat neatly and easily is an on-going process for a blind or low vision child. It is important for your child to develop these skills, however, so that he will be accepted socially. You will need to find ways to give your child many opportunities to practice individual skills; often, this is best begun between meals, to avoid mealtime stress.



If your child has some vision, use dishes and utensils that offer high contrast so your child can use his vision to assist him. However, if you notice that your child must get extremely close to his food to see it, you may wish to emphasize tactile skills as well to help him present a graceful appearance.

USING a SPOON

Start with soft foods that will stick to the spoon even if your child turns it up-side down, such as mashed potatoes, applesauce, baby food, etc.

Use a spoon with a deep, rounded bowl and short handle to start with.

Let your child watch or feel your hand as you eat, showing how the spoon should be held horizontally.

When your child scoops, have him place an open hand under the bowl of the spoon to monitor the level of the spoon, and learn how the spills occur; fade this out as your child learns to hold the spoon level.

Practice scooping using things that will make a sound if they fall off the spoon, such as uncooked macaroni, M&Ms, Cheerios, etc. Use a tin cookie sheet as a placemat so that your child can hear when he begins to spill, as well as to help your child contain/locate his spills. During playtime, let your child scoop items from one container to another to become accustomed to scooping. Experiment with different size spoons, measuring cups, teacups, etc. to generalize your child's skill.

USING a FORK



Look for a "child's fork" that has more rounded tines and a short handle for beginning experiences. A light-weight fork will help your child tell whether his fork is full or empty as he brings it to his mouth.

When you feed your little guy, place his hand over yours as you bring the fork up, to show him what you want him to do.

To teach spearing food with a fork, give your child a plate of a favorite soft food cut into small bites (such as a sliced banana). Allow him to find a piece of food with the fingertips of one hand. With the fork held in the other hand, he can guide it into the piece of food and then raise it to his mouth. This whole process may seem quite idiotic to a hungry child who knows he can finger feed much more easily, but it is important that he persevere. You may wish to require him to use the fork for just one food item from each meal when he first begins, and to encourage his efforts.

After your child learns to spear the food onto his fork, teach him to tap with his fork lightly around his plate to find pieces of food, rather than using his fingers. A tin pie pan can be used for a plate to give audible feedback for a beginning child. You can play a game of "Finding Fork" with your child if he likes sounds, and he can practice between meals using PlayDough, Styrofoam pieces, sponges, or other pierceable items. (Do not do this if your child might mouth or eat non-edible items). How many can he catch with his fork?

Sweeping food, such as peas or corn, onto a fork for eating is a difficult skill for many blind children, and can be separated into two parts: 1) getting the food onto the fork, and 2) getting the food to the mouth without tipping the food off. Try these:

- A very young child can be allowed to use one hand as a backer, or pusher, to get the food onto the fork. Once he masters this, teach him to use a piece of bread as a pusher instead of his fingers.
- Serve food such as peas as separate side dishes for ease, or use a divided plate. However, as your child grows older, he should learn to eat from a single plate for those occasions when he is away from home and must use traditional serving.
- As with scooping, let your child practice lifting food with a fork during non-meal times using foods such as dry cereal, with a cookie tin for a placemat to provide auditory feedback of falling pieces.

USING a KNIFE



For Slicing and Cutting:


This is the easiest knife skill for a young child to learn, and will help your child learn to hold the knife in the proper position. His pieces may not be perfect at first...the beauty will be in knowing 'she did it himself!'

Basic Technique:

- 1) Start with a narrow, soft food for slicing, such as a banana; use a dull knife (even a plastic knife will work for soft foods). Place the banana in front of your child, slightly angled so that the knife can be comfortably held to slice across it. Show your child how you can cut a slice, by having him place his hands over yours as you cut.
- 2) Show your child how to hold the knife in his right hand, with the cutting edge down and with his index finger pointing down the top edge of the knife (this helps him judge the direction of the knife).
- 3) Have your child place his left hand across the food to be cut, slightly curved and raised, so that his fingertips are touching the edge to be cut.
- 4) Place the knife under the left hand, slightly in from the outside edge to make a bite-sized piece. It is important to keep the knife under the looking hand, to avoid accidental cuts when your child begins to use a sharper knife.
- 5) Saw gently back and forth until the knife hits the plate.
- 6) Practice whenever you can. Move on to firmer foods that require more effort to cut, such as hotdogs or celery.

When your child has mastered simple slicing skills, have him try slicing and cutting foods of different shapes, such as sandwiches or fruits and vegetables.

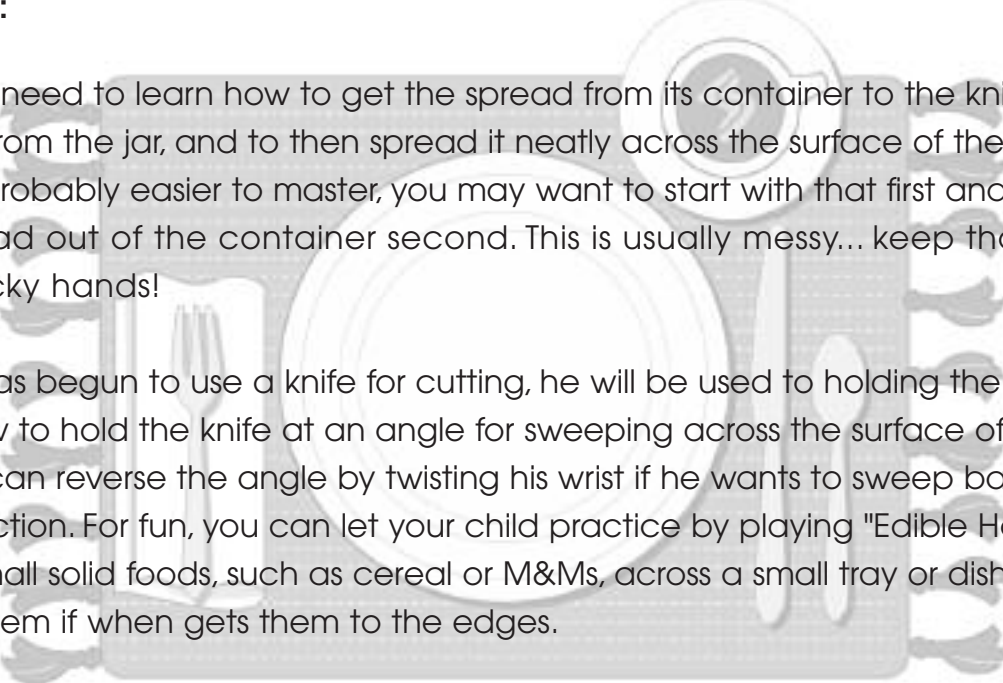
After your child becomes adept at this technique, he will need to learn how to cut and slice foods that he cannot touch with his looking hand. For example, he can't place his hand on butter served in a common butter dish in order to slice off a pat of butter. For this task, teach your child to hold the dish with his left hand. Beginning at the right edge, he can gently sweep his knife across the dish until he reaches the end of the stick of butter. He can then trail the knife to the top of the stick of butter, and move it slightly to the left of the edge to width of the amount of butter he needs. He can then make a simple slice downward (and hope that the butter is not so cold and hard that it flies off the dish!).



Your child will need to practice using a knife and fork to cut items such as the meat entrée of his dinner. A boneless thicken breast is an easy food to begin with. Teach your child to slide his fork across the meat to determine its size and shape. He can then stick his fork into the meat near one edge, and place his knife along the tines of the fork and make his cut. Your child may need practice and feedback from you to learn to judge what is a bite-sized piece.

Many blind adults use the simple, elegant Continental style of eating, which requires much less switching of hands and utensils while eating than does the American style. If you are interested in this method, it is described at the end of this section.

For Spreading:



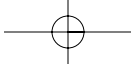
Your child will need to learn how to get the spread from its container to the knife, such as mayonnaise from the jar, and to then spread it neatly across the surface of the food. Since spreading is probably easier to master, you may want to start with that first and work on getting the spread out of the container second. This is usually messy... keep that wet towel handy for sticky hands!

If your child has begun to use a knife for cutting, he will be used to holding the knife upright. Show him how to hold the knife at an angle for sweeping across the surface of the food, and how he can reverse the angle by twisting his wrist if he wants to sweep back in the opposite direction. For fun, you can let your child practice by playing "Edible Hockey": have him sweep small solid foods, such as cereal or M&Ms, across a small tray or dish with a knife; he can eat them if when gets them to the edges.

Before starting with a knife with a young child, show him, using his forefinger as a knife, what the movements should be across the bread so that he understands what needs to be covered.

Start with a firm textured bread or toast, so that it doesn't rip or crumble as your child works with it. Have lots on hand, so that you can practice several times. Your child can use his early tries to feed the birds if they are not edible!

Choose a spread that is soft and easily spread, such as jam, mayo or marshmallow fluff, so that your child will have success. Save the butter for later times... and start with soft tub butter when you do. Warm sticks of butter to room temperature for ease of spreading... but later teach your child to deal with chilled butter, so that he is prepared for away-from-home eating.



Choose a pattern of spreading for your child to follow that will allow him to cover the whole slice of bread, and have him follow it each time. An easy one is to place the spread in a dollop on the right side of the bread near the top, and spread it right to left, then back again left to right. Place another dollop on the right side near the bottom, and repeat the spreading. Or, place the dollops at the top of the bread, one left, one right, and spread downward. Practice with different shapes of bread.

Want to give your child a lot of motivating practice manipulating the knife? Bake a batch of cupcakes together and let him ice them. They may not be perfect, but they'll taste twice as good knowing he did it himself!

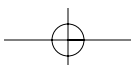
When your child can spread nicely, he may be ready to tackle the task of getting the spread from its container himself. This is tricky, because there are so many types of jars and containers, and the level, of food changes as the spread is used. Also, some spreads, such as jelly, have a truly annoying tendency to roll off the knife if the angle of the knife is not horizontal. You can help your child become familiar with the different shapes of containers, and show him how the mayonnaise is sometimes near the top of the bottle, and sometimes near the bottom.

When your child first tackles getting his own dollops of spread, you may want to start by placing small amounts of the condiment in a little bowl or container that he can easily get his knife in and out of.

For roly-poly spreads such as jelly or jam, your child can use a teaspoon to get his spread out of the jar and onto the bread. For beginners, you can bend the handle of the spoon up to form a small ladle; as he lowers the spoon downward into the jar, he should be able to feel when the bowl reaches the surface of the jam/jelly.

After dipping his knife or spoon into the spread, your child can check lightly with his fingers to make sure there is an adequate amount of spread on the utensil. This is a time when the importance of clean hands and not licking one's fingers should be emphasized! As your child becomes more adept, he may be able to tell from the weight whether he has actually gotten enough onto the utensil.

Many condiments now come in squeeze bottles or pump bottles. Pump bottles are very useful, as the amount can easily regulated and the condiment pumped directly on to the food. Squeeze bottles allow your child to avoid the trickiness of using utensils in regular bottles, but are often difficult to determine how much condiment is dispensed. Experiment! But remember that your child will need to cope with all kinds of food items when he leaves home.



EATING A MEAL



Okay, you've practiced scooping and piercing and cutting and spreading. But what you really are interested in is having your child eat his meats easily and neatly. How does he put it all together? Well, it doesn't happen overnight, and you'll have to balance the need for on-going teaching against the need for family meals to be enjoyable and stress-free. Be patient, and be willing to overlook some lapses while you attend to other skills. The good thing about teaching eating skills is that we all eat frequently, so your child will have lots of times to practice! It is worth the time to persevere bit by bit, as poor eating skills will be very detrimental to your child's social acceptance. Make sure you give lots of positive feedback, and also some breaks, so that your child isn't overwhelmed.

Many young children will start by using a divided plate, which not only helps them to locate each food, but using the inclined dividers also helps them to reangle their fork or spoon from the scooping or sweeping motion into a horizontal position for raising it to their mouth. However, your goal should be to move on to a flat plate when your child is able, so that he is prepared for away-from home experiences.

Your child should become familiar with the pattern your family uses to set each place, so that he can easily find utensils and napkins. When he is older, you can introduce him to more complex settings, using salad forks, soup or desert spoons, various napkin presentations, water glasses, etc.

When you offer the plate of food to your child, tell him clearly what is on it (We are having chicken breast, mashed potatoes, green beans and dinner rolls). If any of the foods are new (since you are at home and casual), you can allow your child to explore it with his fingers to get an idea of the shape, size and texture, and discuss how it should be eaten (if possible, do this in the kitchen, rather than at the table).

Although many older blind individuals use the "clockface method" of describing the position of food on their plates, young children may not know the clockface, and you will have to describe the food by position. Your child can tap lightly with his fork across his plate to locate foods.

If you are serving a meal with many foods, it may be easiest to place only two or three on the plate, and to serve the others in side dishes. "Run-away" foods, such as peas, are best served in small bowls.



Teach your child to periodically use his fork to sweep food from the edge of the plate in toward the center, to avoid having food spill over.

Cutting the meat can be challenging, as there are so many types of meat (Boneless? On the bone? Covered with sauce? Marbles of fat?) You can describe the food to your young child; older children can learn to ask questions to find out how the meat is being served.

Eating soup neatly is always an adventure with kids, with or without sight. Have your child place one hand on the bowl to locate it and determine the shape. Teach your child to try to skim his spoon across the top of the soup if the top of the soup is discernable (this can sometimes be felt with thick creamy soups, but is almost impossible with thin broths). He should scoop his spoon from the side of the bowl nearest him across to the outside edge. Resting the bowl of the spoon on the far edge of the soupbowl for a second or two helps to clear drips from the bottom of the spoon; hopefully, any remaining drips will land in the bowl as he brings the spoon back to his mouth, rather than on his shirt! It may help your child to start off practicing this technique with a firmer food, such as ice cream, rather than runny soup.

Use of a napkin is very important. Teach your child to wipe his face periodically throughout the meal. If he uses his fingers to touch the food in any way, he should immediately wipe them on his napkin. He should always wash up after eating, as he cannot check a mirror to see if his face is clean. He can check his clothes for any spills by running his fingers lightly over them. A messy appearance during or after a meal can be a real turn-off to sighted companions.

Sighted children learn many of their meal-time skills by watching others. You will have to give feedback to your child so that he can learn the same skills. Make sure to teach your child things such as not talking with his mouthful, sitting erect instead of hunching over their food, and how to pass food.

A sense of humor is extremely important for your child. There will be times when a milk glass is overturned into the lap of an honored guest, an empty fork is raised to the mouth, or salad dressing is poured into the coffee instead of cream. Teaching your child to handle these "disasters" will help him and those around him to feel comfortable.



EATING CONTINENTAL STYLE

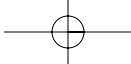
Many blind and visually impaired adults find the elegant Continental style of eating to be much easier, and you can introduce this to your child when he begins using a fork if you prefer.

For cutting food, this consists of:

- 1) Hold the fork "turned over" in the left hand, with the hand on the back of the fork and the fore-finger extended down handle toward the tines.
- 2) Pierce the fork into the left edge of the meat, to make a bite sized piece.
- 3) Place the knife to the right of the fork tines, and cut the meat.
- 4) Leave the tines of the fork in the piece of meat (which should now be a bite-size piece), and keep the knife in the right hand, resting on the right edge of the plate.
- 5) Without changing the position of the left hand on the fork, raise the piece of meat to eat.

The benefit of Continental style for blind individuals is that it eliminates the need to switch utensils from hand to hand when cutting, and then having to search over the plate for the piece of food that was cut.





GROOMING AND DRESSING SKILLS



Brushing Teeth

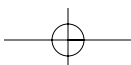
Give your child his own place to keep his supplies, such as a plastic caddy or cup, so that he doesn't have to search through the family's materials to locate his own things. If your child has usable color vision, purchase items that are boldly colored and distinct from those of other family members.

Buy toothpastes with flip-top caps; this avoids the frustration of the little round caps that roll away at the touch of a searching finger. If your brand doesn't offer flip-tops, teach your child to put the cap in a specific location, such as in a soap dish or next to the faucet. Your child can search for the cap by moving his hand from the sink edge in toward the bowl; this way, even if the cap rolls away, it will land in the sink to be easily found.

It can be difficult for a blind or V.I. child to learn how to squirt just the right amount of toothpaste and put it in just the right place on the brush. If this is so for your child, try:

- Buy inexpensive toothpaste and let your child experiment in the tub or backyard. Show him how the toothpaste can squirt or ooze, depending on the pressure of his hand. Feel around to find where the toothpaste is inside the tube, and squeeze it to move the paste around inside the tube. Think of this as an early physics experiment!
- Show your child how to squeeze a short line of toothpaste onto the end of his finger (from the bend of his first knuckle to the tip of his finger). When he can do this easily, he can learn to hold his fingertip next to the bristles of the toothbrush and guide the tip toothpaste tube along the head of the brush.
- If you have practiced and practiced, and your child just can't seem to get the toothpaste on the brush, you may decide to try teaching this later on. In the meantime, your child could try using toothpowder (shake a small amount into the palm of the hand), or learn to squirt a small dab of toothpaste directly into his mouth (he will need his own tube of paste).

Teach your child to wipe his mouth after brushing his teeth. He should also rinse the sink, leaving the bathroom clean for others.



COMBING/STYLING Hair



We all know how important our hair is to the impression we make on others ...think of the millions (billions?) of dollars we spend on hair-dressers and products. Your child needs to learn how to take care of his own hair and present a good appearance. The basic techniques are not difficult to do tactually, but your child will need information and feedback from you to know what looks good.

Most of us can comb our hair without looking at it. Give your child practice handling the comb and brush, and he will be capable. You may need to teach your child routines for when hair needs to be combed... in the morning, after each meal, when he removes a hat, after coming in on a windy day, etc.

Since a blind child cannot keep track of what hairstyles are "in" with his peers, you can help him choose styles that help him fit in. (Although I am using the masculine reference, this is probably more important for girls.) As he gets older, encourage him to go with friends, cousins or siblings to pick his hairstyle. If your child has a strong desire for a certain style, and you know it is currently out of fashion, explain this, but give your child the freedom to make choices.

Try to help your child understand the amount of care involved in various hair styles. Avoid those styles that your child will be unable to maintain independently, especially as your child gets older and needs to be independent outside of the home.

Based on your child's hair type, set up a schedule for when he should wash his hair. Older students should be able to feel the condition of their hair, and to adjust their schedule when needed (after a workout, on a hot day, etc.)

Pump dispensers for shampoo and conditioner make it easy to measure the right amounts. If your shampoo and conditioner bottles are the same shape, put a rubber band around one of them so your child can differentiate them.

Keep supplies in an easy to find location, such a plastic basket attached to the walls of the shower with suction cups.





TYING SHOES

Learning to tie shoes can seem a bit daunting for a blind or visually child. However, it is important that your child learn this, to avoid dangling laces, and also to avoid appearing "baby-ish" if he must ask others for help. Most children are ready to try this skill when they have a developmental age of 5 or 6 years old.

Keep in mind that most sighted people tie their shoes by touch, rather than bending down to watch the process. The major use of vision in the task of shoe tying is to learn the location of the laces at each step, and this can be presented to your child tactually. There are many ways to teach shoetying ...follow the WW Principle (Whatever Works!).

Plan to teach shoe tying when you have plenty of time available for practice sessions, such as summer vacation or spring break. If more than one person will be practicing with your child, make sure you all teach it the same way.

Give your child lots of readiness tying experiences by playing with pipe cleaners, twisting breadbag ties, lacing and simple sewing activities, etc.

Create a teaching shoelace by tying two laces of different textures together, so that the left and right ends are distinctive. This will help your child feel the arrangement of the laces at different stages, and also help you give clear directions: "Make the round lace in your right hand go around the flat lace that's in your left." You can use any combination of string or lace you wish, but stiffer laces that don't flop over are easiest. You can try bootlaces, velvet cording, string, beaded wire... even pipe cleaners can work, as they are bendable but still hold the shape.

Some young children learn best if they "start big". You can start off by using a clothesline or other cording around your child's waist, tying the bow over his tummy. Or, you can tie it around his thigh (above the knee) when he is sitting.

When working with a shoe, place it on the table in front of your child, oriented in the same position that it would be if it were on his foot. When your child masters the basic process, move on to tying while wearing the shoe.

You can also tie other things to make it more fun for your child... try tying around the belly of a beanbag animal, with the reward of a game of catch when you're finished. Or, try tying a fancy cord around a favorite teddy bear. Can your child help you tie ribbons on packages? No one will care if it's a little sloppy!

Most kids will learn best if you break the procedure into small steps, and practice a single step until it is mastered. Some kids will learn best if you start teaching the last step (pulling the two loops tight) first, and working backwards, so that they feel the satisfaction of "finishing the job". Others need to start at the beginning, teaming the procedure in the correct sequence.

If your child simply cannot learn to tie at this time, but wants to wear sneakers or shoes with laces, look for elastic shoelaces that can be "pre-tied" into his shoes for an easy slip on. Try tying again when he is a bit older.

BUTTONING

Learning to button is not much different for a blind or visually impaired child than for a sighted child. To get started, try these:



The most difficult part of buttoning is teaching how to slip the button into the hole at the right angle. An easy way to start teaching is to cut a slit in the top of an empty coffee can (to resemble the opening in a bank). Using large buttons, teach your child to drop the buttons down into the can. They make the most satisfying sound! Gradually reduce the size of the slit and the buttons, until they resemble normal clothing buttons. You can also do this with coins in a bank.

When you are ready to work with clothing, find a sweater or shirt with large buttons, and buttonholes that easily fit around the button. Have your child put the garment on so the buttoning is flat against his stomach, and he can work comfortably. (There are many buttoning toys in stores, but these usually are arranged so that the button is facing the child, rather than being in a position similar to clothing. Real clothing is more practical.)

Show your child how to:

- 1) Place his thumb across the buttonhole on the outside of the garment, and bend his hand around the edge of the lapel so that his forefinger can touch the buttonhole on the inside.
- 2) Spread the hole open, so that his thumb is exposed through the hole.
- 3) Take hold of the button in the opposite hand, and touch it to his thumb.
- 4) Push the button toward the thumb through the button hole. If necessary, grab it on the other side and pull it all the way through.

Easy, right? Just like Mom and Dad do it! Once your child can button easily, move on to smaller buttons; now is the time to try buttoning in different positions. Try buttoning things in different locations, such as a purse on the table, or a shirt hanging on a hanger.

ZIPPERING



Just as with buttoning, the hardest part is helping your child learn just what is going on. Once he learns, though, think of how grown up he will look to all the other kindergartners who still need help with their zippers.

Find a coat or vest with a large front zipper that your child can work with at about waist level. (It's awkward to learn using a very long zipper that begins way down near the hips). Thoroughly explore all the parts of the zipper, and give them names that your child can use. (Some people liken the zipper to a train going down into a tunnel).

Your child can practice these steps:

- 1) Pull the zipper all the way to the bottom and hold the zipper tab flat against the zipper.
- 2) Use his forefinger to find the opening at the top of the mechanism; lay his fingers next to it but not over the opening.
- 3) Grasp the other side of the zipper slightly above the end, so the tip of the zipper is peeking out of between his forefinger and thumb.
- 4) Bring the two sides of the zipper together, and slip the end of the zipper into the opening of the opposite side.
- 5) Once the zipper is pulled all the way down into the opening, that hand should grab both sides of the coat front while the opposite hand pulls the zipper up.

Zippering takes a fair amount of practice for most kids. Break it up into small steps; remember, your child doesn't have to learn the whole process at once.

When you buy your young child's winter coats, check the zippers to see if they will be easy for your child to use. Avoid coats with tiny zippers or complicated fasteners; if your child cannot get his coat on quickly, adults around him will likely "do it for him", rather than allowing the time for him to do it himself.

HOUSEKEEPING SKILLS

Every child should learn to clean up after himself, and to do chores that contribute to his family's home life. Expecting your child to complete chores and responsibilities tells him that you think he is important and capable, and a valuable member of the family. Is there any better message to build self esteem? (Of course, older kids may not see this quite so positively!)



CLEANING SURFACES

Dusting, wiping a table, cleaning a tub... all these tasks can be completed by following a few basic techniques for cleaning surfaces. Start with something small, such a large rectangular serving tray (the type used in cafeterias).

Teach your child to follow a pattern that covers the whole area. The most commonly used pattern is the "reading pattern". Starting at the top edge, wipe from left to right, and then return to the left and drop down to the next "row". Continue, wiping left to right, down toward the bottom edge until the whole tray is cleaned. (Learning this pattern and the concepts of top-bottom, left-right are great braille readiness skills for pre-readers.)

If your child seems to be missing areas when wiping, sprinkle salt or bread crumbs over the tray; he can check with his fingers to see where he skipped.

In the beginning, let your child use a thin cloth for wiping, so that he can feel the surface through the cloth. When he can follow the pattern consistently, he should be able to use a sponge to wipe (it's a little harder to feel the surface being cleaned through a thick, springy sponge).

Help your child move on to other things for cleaning. Show him how to use that same pattern to cover larger areas, such as wiping the countertops, the table, or dusting flat furniture. He should use his other hand ahead of the wiping hand to check for any objects that may be sitting on the surface.

A young child should start cleaning using just a dry or damp cloths. As he gets older, he will need to start using cleaning products for various tasks. Nowadays, there are many "pre-treated", disposable wipes for many cleaning tasks; these are really easy for a blind child, as they don't require measuring or applying drippy, spill-able liquid cleaning products.

If you want your child to learn to use a bottled cleaning product, choose one that comes with a spray nozzle or pump spray if possible; teach your child how to aim the nozzle. Then, teach your child a routine for spraying/ applying, so that he uses the right amount. To clean the oven door, one squirt of cleaner may be enough, but the coffee table in the living room may need three squirts before wiping: left, middle, and right. If your child has trouble aiming the squirt bottle, he can put the cleaning product onto his cloth and then wipe.

If you have a number of bottles of different cleaners in your house, separate the ones you want your child to use, or use a tactile marking system so you don't wind up with bathroom cleaner on your wood tables, and spray wax in your tub.

Once your child has finished wiping, teach him which surfaces he should check with his fingers to make sure he cleaned everywhere. For example, he should check over the countertops to find any remaining crumbs or spills, but not touch the shiny finish of the table he just polished.

Teach your child to always wash his hands when he finishes cleaning, to get rid of any cleaning chemicals or other dirt.



CLEANING FLOORS

Mopping and sweeping are just larger applications of the techniques used for cleaning surfaces described above. Again, start with a small defined area, such as a bathroom floor or small rug. Set a pattern for your child to follow that will cover the whole area.

There are light floor mops available on the market that allow the liquid cleaner to be put into a reservoir on the handle of the cleaner and applied with a squirt; these are much easier for a blind child to use, instead of filling and managing a bucket of sudsy water. The dry-mop dusters with disposable cloths are also great, easy to-use tools.

If your child is using a dustpan and broom, have him sweep the dust into a defined area, such as beside a wall or corner. It is easier to sweep into the dustpan with a short-handled whiskbroom; your child can check with his fingers to see if he has gathered up all the dust and crumbs.

Vacuumping is a bit trickier, as the vacuum is held out in front of the user; this makes it likely to collide with furniture (the same as a cane, but more forceful), unless the area is cleared first, and the noise is somewhat disorienting to a blind individual. Use of a vacuum is probably best left for older kids, but is important to learn for adult living. Again, set up a pattern to be followed, and move away any fragile furniture. Your child can learn to feel for large items, such a sofa, with his free hand and vacuum by walking along its side.

CLEANING A ROOM

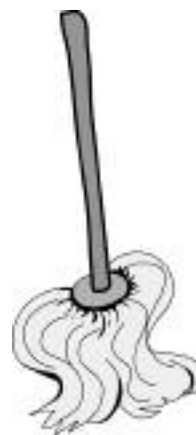
If your child can clean individual items, he can learn to clean a whole room, such as a bathroom. Start by reviewing all the things you want him to clean. Then, give him a routine to follow, such as clean the sink first and then wipe out the tub. You can add more items (the floor, the toilet, changing the towels) to the routine as he gets older.

If your child must use a product such as powdered cleanser, first make sure it is not caustic. He can measure by counting the shakes of the can. It is not recommended that such cleaning products be measured into the hand.

Check his work after he finishes, and give him feedback as to how well he did; keep in mind that a blind child does not get the visual feedback of when things are sparkling clean, but he should be able to learn to do a reasonably good job with practice.

Keep needed cleaning supplies near at hand; again, use pump bottles when possible. Let your child know about how often he needs to rinse out or replace the cleaning cloth as he works.

Again, remind him to wash his hands thoroughly after finishing cleaning.



KITCHEN SKILLS



The kitchen is such a fascinating place! All those wonderful and strange things you can find in the cupboards and drawers, and the all delicious smells and tastes that waft about. Cooking with your child can be a stimulating adventure during which he develops his reading readiness skills, fine motor skills, and self-esteem.

POURING

Give your child lots of readiness experiences pouring with various cups and pitchers when he's in the tub or wading pool.. you don't have to buy special tub toys; let him get "real-life" experience by using containers from your kitchen. At meal times, let him put his hands over yours when you pour the drinks for the family so that he understands what the process is.

Use a dish towel or tray as a placemat when you practice... there will be spills!
A heavy, wide-mouthed mug that will not tip easily will also be helpful.

To start with, find a small pitcher (about two cups size) with a narrow, controlled-flow spout, so that you don't have to contend with water flooding out if your child over-tilts the pitcher.

Have your child hook the tip of his forefinger (not his dominant hand... he should use that hand for the pitcher) over the edge of his mug, with his fingertip pointing down into the cup. Pour cold water slowly into the mug, and have your child feel when the water reaches his fingertip. You can make this into a game for fun, and have your child call "Stop", or "Surf's up!"

When your child can accurately tell when the water level is near the top of the mug, have him place his dominant hand over yours on the pitcher to see what you are doing when you pour. Show him how the spout must be centered over the mug, (and what happens if it is not!), and how to lift the pitcher so that the water runs out into the mug. Now, take your hands away and let your child have at it. It's just water!

As your child learns to do this fairly neatly, begin to use larger pitchers and bottles with different kinds of spouts, and glasses with different shapes. Show your child how to adjust the angle of the pitcher as the level of the liquid drops (he can get an idea of how much liquid is in the bottle by feeling the weight of it before pouring).

Pouring hot liquids safely for coffee or tea is a bit more difficult. Living skill catalogues sell little devices that hook over the edge of a coffee cup and beep when the liquid reaches them. There are also very useful electric "coffee pots" that boil just one serving of hot water: you pour a mugful of cold water into the top of the pot, and then place the mug underneath the drip spout. When the water has heated, you push a button to dispense it back into the mug, and stir in whatever you wish (instant soup, coffee, hot cocoa mix, instant oatmeal, etc.).

An older child should learn to fill a cup with hot liquid by estimating, for places such as restaurants that serve the coffee and tea in individual pots. Or, he can politely ask the waitress or a companion to pour for him.

MEASURING INGREDIENTS

Use metal nesting measuring cups and spoons, instead of one large cup with line markings. Your child can compare them by size to determine the correct cup. If your child has low vision, provide a dark-colored and a light-colored set of cups, so that he can use the contrasting set with individual ingredients (such as measuring flour in a black cup).

Bend the metal handle upward on the cups and spoons, to form a ladle shape. Now your child can easily scoop down into the canister to fill the cup or spoon. Have him fill it to overflowing, and then scrape a knife across the top of the cup to level out the contents.

Have your child measure out ingredients from different shaped containers... spice jars or cans, canisters, bottles, etc. Items that come in containers with small mouths, such as salt, may need to be re-packaged into plastic containers that have mouths large enough for the spoons and cups to enter.

USiNG a MiCROWave

What wonderful inventions! Microwaves simplify so many cooking procedures that they are ideal for introducing your child to cooking. However, your child will have to remain aware that while the unit itself doesn't get hot, the cooked foods and rising steam must still be treated with caution. You will have to judge when your child is old enough to consistently follow safety precautions in order to use the microwave. All children should be supervised when cooking.



Before beginning any cooking, allow your child to thoroughly explore the shape and features of your oven. A countertop model is best when available, as young children can reach it easily and remove hot food with less chance of tipping or spilling. If you have a wall unit that is too high for your child to reach easily, you may need to postpone instruction. Keep a hot pad on the counter right next to the microwave, so that your child can immediately set the food down after removing it

Have your child explore the packaging/container used for each food before cooking, so that he won't have to explore it after the food is heated. He should be adept at opening all packaging/containers before cooking.

Let your child practice moving food in and out of the oven, making sure he can hold dishes level enough that he will not spill the contents. Make sure to show your child how the door swings open toward his face when he pushes the buttons

Whenever possible, use microwave dishes that do not absorb the cooking heat, so your child will have little chance for an accidental burn. If the dishes used do absorb heat, your child must use potholders. Many blind children dislike doing so, as they blunt the ability to feel for tactile clues. However, burned fingertips can't read braille, tie shoes, or do anything else. This is a bottom line issue.

Even if you think the dishware will not absorb heat, teach your child to always touch the cooked dish lightly with his fingers at the place where he will pick it up, to test for heat, before trying to remove it from the oven. This way, your child can back off if the dish is too hot. If he picks it up first, and then discovers it has become burning hot, he is likely to drop the pot with its hot contents landing down his front.

Your child needs to know that microwaved foods trap steam inside covered dishes. Teach him to stand back, and reach out to remove a corner of the cover, to allow the steam to escape. He should wait a brief time before removing the rest of the cover.

Most microwave ovens nowadays have touchpads. You can adapt this tactually for your child, so he can set the controls. Mark only those buttons you think your child will use; an older child may need everything marked, but a younger child will need only a few basic keys. Many microwave manufacturers can provide a braille overlay if you call/write them (ask your salesman when buying a new oven). If this is not available, you can adapt your touchpad by cutting out a template overlay from laminating plastic, cutting out holes to correspond with the button locations. Or, you can attach clear stick-on bumps (these sometimes fall off...hopefully not into the food!)



USING THE STOVE

The prospect of teaching a child to use a hot oven can be quite unsettling for parents. Instruction should not begin until your child is attentive and responsible enough to follow safety precautions at all times; an adult should always be on hand to supervise children. Maturity, rather than age, should be considered before embarking on this skill; generally, use of the stove is not appropriate until children have a developmental age of ten or older. In this area, safety must be considered before independence.

USING THE STOVE TOP

Start with a "dry run": While the stove is turned off, help your child explore the parts and locations of the burners, controls, and panels of the stove top. Using different sized pots and pans, let your child move them on and off the burners, getting a feel for where things are. Your child must be able to identify right front, right back, left front and left back burners, and know which knobs control which burner.

Teach your child to place pans on the burners with the handles always pointed in the same direction, so that he will know where to reach when cooking. Usually, pointed toward "11:00" or 2:00" works well, to avoid accidental bumps and spills. If you have them, use "cool handle" cooking pots and pans.

Before starting to cook on the stove, your child can check for any hot burners by holding his hands about 12 inches above the burners to feel any rising heat. If the air feels cool, he can lower his hands toward the stove to locate any residual heat. This is especially important in kitchens where other people may have been cooking before your child starts.

Have a special place to hang oven mitts and dish towels, near the stove top but not close enough to be caught by the flame/heat. If your oven door has a bar handle, towels can be hung over this.

Most young cooks can learn to judge how to set the knob to control the heat of the flame (or heat of an electric burner) by feet; for example, turned all the way to the right is high, turned half-way is medium, and a quarter turn is low. Practice with your child to give him the feel of your stove's settings. He can memorize the proper settings for individual foods.

Many children with low vision are accustomed to bending very close to dials and controls to read them. Because of the dangers of lit burners, a low vision child should learn to use tactile cues when cooking on the stove.

With practice, your child should be able to hear the sounds of water reaching a boil. If helpful, you can accentuate the sound by placing a special device in the pan that rattles when boiling (available from adaptive aids catalogues), or simply use a small glass lid (from an oven-bake pot).

Teach your child how to carry hot pots safely to the sink or other location wearing oven mitts (practice with filled cold pots first); putting the pot lid on is helpful. He should stand back away from rising steam when opening or pouring contents in colanders. Your child should always check for the presence of others before walking with a hot pot, to avoid collisions.



USING THE OVEN

Explore the cold oven thoroughly: have your child practice placing and removing different kinds of pans in and out on the shelves. Show your child the importance of keeping pans and shelves level to avoid having contents tap over the side, and how the position of the shelves can be changed.

If you have them, try to use pans that have handles or grips on the side. Teach your child to always place the pans on the oven shelf in the same position, so he knows where to grab it



Long oven mitts that cover the forearms as well as the hands must be used to protect against burns when reaching into the oven. These are available from adaptive aids catalogues.

It is not feasible to tactually mark each temperature on the oven dial. You can start with marking just the 350* setting, as this is most commonly used, by attaching a clear stick-on bump. Most young cooks can learn to estimate the location of other temperatures in relation the 350 mark. If your child had trouble with this, you can mark a few other common settings (250, 450).

Teach your child to always prepare a clear spot on the counter with a hot mat, before removing a dish from the oven.

Timers with tactual markings are available so your child can set cooking times.

To measure cakes for doneness, your child can use the old-fashioned method of inserting a toothpick into the cake, and then feel to see if there is any wet batter on the toothpick when it is removed.

USING A PUBLIC RESTROOM

Sending your child into a public restroom can be an uncomfortable experience for parents of a blind or low vision child, particularly when you can't accompany him to check it out. Yet, this is a necessity of life that your child will have to deal with, so it's best to prepare.

Easiest is to avoid the situation whenever possible... have your child use a bathroom before leaving familiar, safe and clean places.

If the restroom is in a setting that your child goes to regularly, such as his school or church, arrange a time that either you or an O&M specialist can orient your child to the space. For "one time" locations, such as a bathroom in a mall, ask the O&M specialist to teach your child proper exploratory techniques. Make sure that your child learns about out-swinging doors.



If possible, have your child go with a sighted guide when in unfamiliar places. Don't hesitate to stand outside the door and listen if your child is young.

Blind children can't survey a bathroom and see where things are, or how clean the conditions are. This is one situation where you will want to limit your child's tactile exposure as much as possible. Teach him to use auditory cues as much as possible, and to use just his fingertips instead of a full hand when looking for stalls, sinks, etc. Paper seat covers are available from adaptive aid catalogues, and can be carried in a purse or backpack.

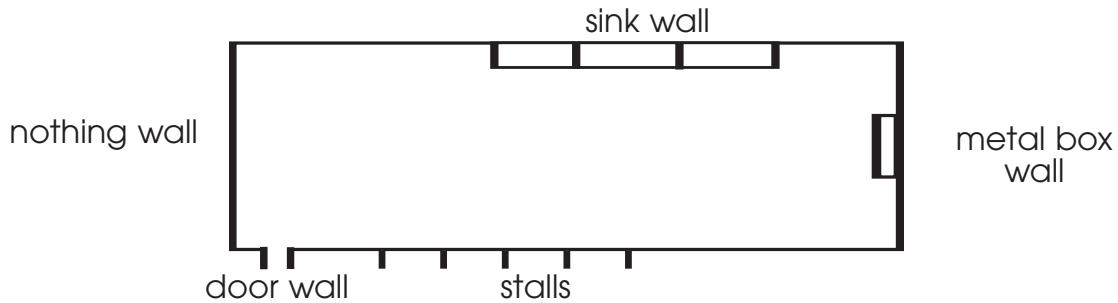
To avoid having your child tactually search for faucets, soap, towels, wastecans, etc., in unknown bathrooms, have him carry antibacterial towelettes or waterless gels with which he can wash up easily before leaving the restroom.

Sometimes, your child can quietly ask pertinent questions of a staff member, such as the waiter in a restaurant, regarding the arrangement of the facilities.

REST ROOM FAMILIARIZATION

When you are at a public place and your child needs to use a bathroom, I suggest that **you stand outside of the restroom** (next to the door, talking to your child to make sure they are safe) **and let your child explore it** so that they can take this experience and use it for future encounters with public restrooms. Obviously this happens after you talked to your child about the fact that each bathroom can be laid out differently and your child has experience with room familiarization. **This way the child learns that not all bathrooms are laid out the same but they generally have: stalls, a toilet, sink, soap, and paper towels/hand dryer.**

Room familiarization consists of naming each wall in a room. For example, the Commission's bathroom on the 5th floor of the Haddon Ave. office has: a door wall (that is long), a nothing wall (that is short in length), a sink wall (that is long), and a metal box wall (that is short). Notice that I didn't name any 2 walls the same name- that gets confusing and will hinder orientation. I made a distinction between the long and short walls. This helps with my orientation because I now know that the sink and door walls are long and across from each other and that the room is a rectangle shape.



There is no universal lay out of bathrooms. Some bathrooms are small one-person rooms, others are large rooms with stalls and many sinks. Some bathrooms have automatic toilet flushing systems others have a lever to press. Talk to your child about the various types of things that may differ in bathrooms. For example, airport and rest stops (on the side of highways) have toilets that generally have automatic toilet flushers where you do not need to do anything but walk out of the stall and the toilet flushes by itself.

Things to remind a student when entering a rest room:

- a) Have the child bring the cane into the bathroom if they use one.
- b) Encourage your child to trail the wall closest to the door using their cane, vision or hand. Note the location of the door and what is near it. If your child doesn't feel comfortable touching the walls with their bare hand they can take a paper towel/napkin in with them and trail the wall with this.
- c) Walk with the wall until you find the stalls, then gently push against the door to see how it opens. If it doesn't open, choose another stall because someone may be using it.
- d) When you are in the stall, place the cane in the corner farthest from the lock, make sure it is upright, on an angle so the grip of the cane (the black part) is against the door **and** wall and the cane tip is on the floor pointing towards the toilet. This placement of the cane helps the child to avoid tripping over it.
- e) After the child is finished with the bathroom they should trail the stall or put their hand out to locate the lock then reach for their cane. The cane is the first thing to exit the stall.
- f) The child should trail the stall until they find wall and the sinks. From here they wash their hands and locate the soap dispenser (usually above or to the side of the sink) then the trash can. **This is a time when having a cane instead of using your hands to locate a trash can is particularly helpful.** The cane can locate the trash can so the child doesn't have to touch it. Once the child locates the trash can with the cane, they should place it upright against the can so all of the lower part of the cane is touching the trash can. They will feel down the cane with the paper towel and let go of the paper towel after it reaches the trash can's opening. **Another option** is to have the child wash their hands, dry them and keep the paper towel with them until they leave the bathroom and find another trash can. outside of the room.