Improving Bottle Skills

Feeding from a bottle requires baby to allow the nipple deeply into their mouth, have the nipple touch their palate without gagging, cup the nipple with their tongue, make a seal around the nipple with their lips, create suction with the tongue, swallow the milk, breathe, and then suck again. The nipple needs to stay in place in their mouth while they suck and swallow. Their tongue should be making the suction; their cheeks and lips help support the bottle nipple and create a seal around it.

If anything in this process does not work correctly, baby will have difficulty eating. For example:

- If they gag or choke while feeding, they will stop.
- If they cannot cup the nipple with their tongue, they will stop.
- If they cannot seal their lips around the bottle nipple, they will swallow air and dribble milk and become uncomfortable as the feeding progresses.
- If they cannot keep the nipple stable in their mouth, they will stop.

This is all incredibly stressful and frustrating for parents. Your baby needs to learn what to do with the bottle so they can intentionally use it to eat, and this takes time and practice. The next step will be exercises and practice to help your baby learn to eat more efficiently and easily from the bottle. Usually families see a bit of slow progress as their baby gains bottle skills.

Daily practice

- Have baby suck on or play with the bottle nipple only (no milk) to increase comfort and familiarity with no pressure to feed. You can do this multiple times a day when baby is playing, relaxing, etc.
- Do the provided oral exercises five times per day, one minute each, to improve oral function and/or get baby used to oral input.
- Try the bottle once a day during calm times (usually early or midmorning and early afternoon).
- No forcing! If baby starts to cry, stop and calm baby down, then try once more. If baby cries again, stop. Try again later in the day or tomorrow.

Daily practice video

Watch the daily practice video

Watch from the start to 1:12.

Two days of practice and follow up

Implement the practice for two days, then follow up with me to let me know how it is going.

Oral Exercises

Do these five times per day, one minute each. During daytime hours, every time you change baby's diaper, wash your hands and then do baby's exercises. Keep practice gentle and stop if baby becomes upset.

Squishy Face

Cheek stretch and lip flare

Lay your finger and your thumb on baby's cheeks and very gently draw the skin forward. Hold the stretch while baby's lips are flanged, and make kissy faces to help baby flare their lips. If baby has trouble, you can do one cheek at a time.

How this helps

- Stretches and loosens tight or muscular cheeks.
- Strengthens weak cheeks.
- Encourages flaring lips and latching or sealing to the nipple.

Palate Sweeps

Place the pad of your finger directly behind baby's upper gums (where the upper incisors will emerge). Slowly, with very light touch, begin to move back on the palate to provide stimulation. You can also gently twist or sweep your finger pad from side to side across the arch of the palate. As you move back on the palate, baby may gag. If baby gags, remove your finger and calmly respond. Do not continue through gagging or distress.

How this helps

- Helps baby become comfortable with touch on the palate.
- Gets baby used to things other than a human nipple in their mouth.

Tongue Lateralization

Place your fingertip on the center of baby's lower gums (where the bottom front teeth will emerge). Stroke to one side and do a little wiggle on the back of baby's gums (where their molars will emerge). The tongue will try to follow your finger. Notice how far the tip moves and whether the body of the tongue twists toward your finger. Slide your finger back across the gums to the other side and repeat.

How this helps

- Encourages the tongue to move where the stimulus is.
- Encourages tongue extension.
- Strengthens the tongue.

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