

My child is so messy when he eats. Is this normal? The answer to this question is very age dependent.

For babies, food exploration is very important for feeding development. For 6-month to 24-month-old children, messy eating is very much a part of the development of typical eating skills. If you are a tidy person, it's not easy to sit back and watch your baby cover everything with food. Ignore your desire to keep your baby from getting messy. Babies NEED to make a mess. It is very important for them to learn about the textures and the tastes of different foods. Children are very curious and have the desire to touch, lick and squeeze foods between their fingers before they will eat something, especially if it is new.

Food exploration teaches children about the sensory aspect of foods. During this messy exploration process, children are learning about all of the characteristics of the food that they are about to eat. They learn that yogurt will be soft and not need much chewing if any at all before swallowing. They learn that a grape will crunch and juice will squirt out. They may learn that goldfish crackers will be crunchy and then soften with saliva. The classic picture of the child with the bowl of spaghetti dumped all over his head says it all for this developmental stage of feeding. Do not inhibit your child's food exploration. Realize that all children need to go through this developmental stage to become healthy eating adults. Messy at this age is good so take cover and allow them to explore. This stage of feeding development actually plays a crucial part in the body's ability to regulate its own caloric intake. Interfering with this innate ability can lead to feeding problems or weight problems in later life.

School-age children that are messy eaters may be a sign of concern. Messy eating that occurs with school-age children may be due to low muscle tone, poor motor control or poor oral motor control. By four years of age, most children are able to follow simple table manners and should be neat enough to take to a casual restaurant or grandmother's house for dinner. Although your child may not have the maturity to chew with her mouth closed all of the time, you should not see food in the front of her mouth while chewing, food scattered all around the inside or outside of her mouth or food in her mouth after swallowing. Food should not fall out of a school-aged child's mouth and there should not be a huge mess all around your child's seat. These are the kids that you would never take through a drive through for fear of the condition of your car. If you always know which seat is your child's by the mess left after eating, your child may need some help. Your child may not have learned how to completely chew their food. They may have sloppy eating skills that can impact swallowing safety.

At Carolina Pediatric Dysphagia we see a lot of these children as they often choke in the school cafeteria and then get referred for a Feeding Evaluation. Often these children present with speech articulation (the ability to form words) difficulties decreasing speech intelligibility. Don't just suffer with the mess, get it addressed before it impacts your child's self esteem or ability to engage in social activities.