

Dropping or Throwing Items at Mealtime

All young children love to drop and throw their toys, utensils, and other objects. In this way, children learn about their world in the following ways:

- **Gravity** - It always falls down!
- **Communication** - Whining/crying, gesturing, or using words to let someone know they want the object back
- **Patience** - Waiting for the object to be returned, and
- **Independence** - Retrieving or searching for the object if physically possible.

It can also be a way to learn concepts such as loud and soft and to learn about how adults may react... this last may be particularly appealing to children with visual impairment who may delight in the noise made by a metal object like a spoon hitting the floor. It is not unusual to see this behavior at mealtime, when your child may be in a high chair or other seating. **Numerous developmental checklists indicate that this is typical behavior between the ages of eighteen months to three years.** If your child is engaging in this behavior, think about when it is happening, and what the possible reasons are.

If you think your child is dropping/throwing items as part of the expected developmental process, no specific intervention is needed as children usually learn other ways to interact with objects over time. Provide opportunities for your child to practice throwing at other times and reward/praise him/her for other types of play at mealtime.

Other reasons your child may drop or throw items at mealtime may **include trying to communicate with you, or demonstrate a behavior that is certain to get your attention.** If you think this may be what is going on, these interventions may be helpful:

- If this is happening primarily at mealtime while your child is in a high chair or other seating, sit with your child as much as possible. This provides the opportunity to provide praise for NOT throwing and to intervene to avoid the throwing of larger items such as a plate.
- In the beginning of the meal, talk about the food you have given them, show them where the choices are through touch, and suggest using the utensil for one food. "You have turkey, blueberries, and applesauce today (pause to show the child each item). You can use your spoon with the applesauce, if you like."

- Praise/reinforce your child verbally for using play other than throwing/dropping. For example, if your child's spoon is dropped/placed on the tray rather than thrown, comment, "Yay, your spoon is ON THE TRAY". This can be helpful even if the placement on the tray was random or unintentional.
- Verbally tell your child what she can do other than throwing a utensil or other object. For example, "You can STIR with your spoon."
- Try to avoid unintentionally reinforcing dropping/throwing by laughing or otherwise giving the undesirable behavior attention. Decide how many times you will pick up dropped items before you will end the mealtime.
- Experience with young children with visual impairment tells us that it can be helpful to initially have your child pick up her cup from the tray or table rather than handing it to them from 'the air'. Children are more likely to return the cup to the place they first found it.
- Provide small portions so the child is less likely to play with food and then throw it. Providing smaller portions also provides the opportunity for your child to use his/her communication skills to ask for 'more food' with gestures, sounds, or words.
- Provide a consistent mealtime routine of putting items 'in' by offering a 'Finish Bin' for your child to assist you in clean up at the end of the meal. Use a metal bowl or tray to provide maximum interest or sing a song while putting the items in. Even if your child is not able to independently participate, she can listen as she helps to put her mealtime items in the bin when the meal is complete.
- Throwing or dropping may be your child's way of saying, "I'm done!" If this is true, tell the child "I think that you are done" and complete your mealtime routine.
- Practice in other playtimes by throwing toys into a large bin. Select larger bins that increase the chance of your child's success and bins that provide auditory feedback such as a laundry baskets with mylar paper inside or a large metal bowl.
- Provide play opportunities such as ball games where it is acceptable to throw and drop the item. Acknowledge your child's interest in throwing and confirm that this is the best time to play this way.
- If the throwing is sometimes a result of frustration or anger, provide your child with other ways to show those emotions. Depending on your child's age and skills, these could include pillows to squeeze/throw, clay to knead, fidgets, etc. Label the child's feelings in a responsive way. You may want to say, "I can tell that you are angry or frustrated. Let's put away our meal and do something to make you feel better"