

The Art of Crumbing

Crumbs can help sensitive and cautious children make food texture transitions. Many of these children like purees but are worried about lumps. They like wet foods but not crunchy foods, or actually like crunchy foods, but easily bite off too much and then have difficulty controlling the food. Let us look at the different ways crumbs can be used to help children gain confidence and enjoyment in these texture transitions.

Where to start?

Make crumbs out of a food that is safe for your child. Notice that crumbs can be prepared in many different consistencies from fine to rough, smooth to sharper, even to uneven, and meltable to more lingering. On a continuum of crumb textures, even some fine crumbs can be refined down to more of a powder.

How to prepare crumbs

Many crunchy foods can be crushed with your fingers with more crushing making finer crumbs and less crushing making rougher or more uneven crumbs. Using graham crackers as an example, a little crushing makes bigger and uneven crumbs, whereas lots of crushing makes much more even and finer crumbs. Putting the food in a coffee bean grinder or using a mortar and pestle can help you make powders, or very refined crumbs.

How much?

Your child will let you know how many crumbs are comfortable. Some children can have a crumb or two mixed in with a favorite puree and will notice it immediately. The "noticing" may be an interest, or tongue or jaw movement change, or could be negative in a gagging or vomiting response. Other children can have a good sized pinch of crumbs put on a spoonful of food and will be fine and react by moving tongue and jaw in much more developmentally appropriate ways. We encourage parents to follow the child's lead.....watch the responses. Start with a tiny amount and build to greater amounts as your child responds comfortably.

How can crumbs be used?

Crumbs can be mixed **into pureed foods** to add texture. They can be sprinkled **on the puree** so they touch the palate. A spoonful of a familiar puree **can be dipped** in a pile of crumbs so they enter the mouth on the tongue. The spoonful can be dipped in the crumbs on the side of the spoon so the crumbs enter one side of the mouth. Each of these different placements can help the child notice a different part of the mouth and make appropriate adaptive responses. Because the crumbs are small, the fear factor can be decreased (for children and their parents) and confidence can develop as the amount of crumbs increases.

Crumb flavors

Many people use dried cereals and crackers as the basis for crumbs. Cheerios®, for example, make a nice, firm crumb. Fruit Loops® make a similar crumb but have a tangier flavor and colors to inspire. Many children like saltier foods. We have used Saltine® or Ritz® crackers for children who enjoy less sweet and more salty crackers, but the possibilities are unlimited.

Flavors can be more bland or neutral or much stronger. A plain rice cracker may be more neutral whereas a cheese version of the same cracker may be more flavorful. A stronger flavorful choice many families enjoy might include the soy, garlic, ranch or "flaming hot" version of the chips or crackers. Sweeter crackers with stronger flavors might include a gingersnap or anise cookie.

Some families prefer less cracker, chips and cookie crumbs and choose healthier food crumbs. Dehydrated peas or corn can crumb nicely in fingers or in a coffee bean grinder. For increased food value, we have ground nuts in a coffee bean grinder and used them as a higher caloric option. Thinking creatively as you walk through the grocery store, you will find all kinds of food groups that inspire crumbing.

In the category of crumbs, we have also included sprinkles and seeds. The cake sprinkles come in a variety of colors, "meltability", and sizes and textures. They can be great "crumbs" to add on favorite wet foods. Though the sprinkles have little nutritional value, their colors and shapes can be very motivating for children. The seeds, such as sesame seeds add still another texture, and visual experience.

Crumb dipping

Children often enjoy the novelty of dipping one food in another. Crumbs can be a creative way to expand dip play. Dip a spoon in a favorite wet food and then the child can independently re-dip the spoon into a pile of crumbs. When a child has a taste or texture of crumbs that is enjoyed, we can use that enjoyment to mask a new wet food flavor.

Creative crumb projects

For older children who are gaining confidence just being around the smells and textures of food, crumbs can be used in art projects. Children can help us make the crumbs and use them as a way to color a picture. A "sticky-food" is a food that is wet and allows the crumbs to stick to a laminated coloring book picture. We often have children paint the "sticky food" on the picture with a finger or paint brush and then "color" the picture with the crumbs.....and possibly taste the food along the way.

And finally, we can use crumbs for "crumb kisses". The child helps us crush the crumbs, then licks a finger, and sticks it in the crumbs. Then we all put our fingers on our lips as a "crumb kiss" and look at our decorated lips in the mirror, making kissing faces. Children who are comfortable with the crumbs can eat them off the lips, and children who are less comfortable, can wipe off the lips.

Be creative and follow your child's lead as you help your child enjoy crumbing

