



FOOD & NUTRITION

for Childcare settings

Section 5

Encouraging children to eat well

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Your impact on children's eating habits



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We have learned together and the younger staff and students have been taught to understand the values of healthy eating and promote them.

Parents have commented that their children are a lot more open to trying new foods and more likely to eat fruits and veg as opposed to junk food.

”

(FS setting Cardiff)

Carers in childcare settings can support children to develop good eating habits and help them to try a wide variety of nutritious foods. This can impact positively on their health and development and help to embed these habits

as they get older. Childcare settings that have undertaken training on nutrition, developed new menus and tried new ideas with children have noticed a positive impact.

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I went home and told my Daddy that I had my favourite dinner today, it was special pasta.

Child

I like how the children have a range of 'adult meals' to help them grow with a varied taste range.

Parent

I feel strongly about children's diets, it's important for their growth and development. The new menu is full of different colours and textures which the children enjoy eating and exploring.

Dietitian

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Top tips

Things you can do to help children develop good eating habits



Here are some ideas to have happy healthy mealtimes with younger children in your setting:

- 1 It helps to have meal times at a similar time every day.** Planning snack and meal times helps with structure and routine. It allows time to build up an appetite so children won't be too hungry or too tired.
- 2 Offer variety – a few different things to eat on their plate to encourage them to eat.** Don't refer to foods as good or bad.
- 3 Make meals colourful and interesting so they are appealing – see menu plans and ideas.**
- 4 The space you provide should be clean, warm and bright and free from distractions.**
- 5 Provide the right portion sizes for younger children.** See the food pictures and use small portions on small plates, children can be put off by large portions.
- 6 Let toddlers feed themselves.** Give toddlers finger foods (cut food into strips or fingers) and let them use their hands rather than a spoon or fork. In the early days of learning to eat, children will find this easier to manage.
- 7 Praise them for eating – even if they only manage a little, but only use rewards that are not food based.**
- 8 Children may not eat the same amount each time.** Just like you, some days they will be hungry and other times they will be less hungry.
- 9 Involve children of all ages in helping to prepare snacks and laying the table.** This can also have much wider benefits by encouraging communication, literacy and numeracy.
- 10 Give them the same food in a different way.** A child may refuse cooked carrots but enjoy raw carrots cut into sticks.
- 11 Ignore the fussing as much as you can.** If you give children lots of attention when they are being choosy or not eating, it may encourage them to keep behaving that way. Instead give them lots of attention and praise when they are eating well or trying new foods.
- 12 Take away uneaten food without comment** at the end of a meal.
- 13 Check on how many drinks such as milk or juices they have at home,** as this may be filling them up. Also snacking – too much of the wrong sort of snacks can lead to food refusal at meal times.
- 14 Watch for an 'off' day becoming an 'off' week.** Children's appetites are not constant. If you are concerned, it may be important to write down what a child eats during the week and report back to parents / carers.

Remember that you can also have a positive impact by sitting and eating with children and talking with them about food preferences and choices. Children will observe staff eating the same healthy foods and can mimic this.



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Eating should be a sociable occasion, and mealtimes provide a good opportunity to include infants in setting routines.

Allow plenty of time for eating, especially in the beginning and allow infants to eat at their own pace and stop eating when they are full.



Familiarity is important – children like what they know and eat what they like. Food preferences are becoming established between 1–3 years and will start to influence their food selection.

Make meal times happy and relaxed. Staff should sit with and talk to children and be a good role model.



Let children help to prepare and serve themselves and have limited choices – do you want broccoli or green beans and let them decide how much to eat.

”



Choosy (fussy) eaters

It can be very frustrating when a child refuses to eat certain foods or refuses to eat at all. Children may take a few bites then push their plate away. It's perfectly normal for toddlers to do this. If children are active, growing and thriving and not ill, then they are likely to be getting enough to eat. Food refusal is often a way of showing independence and is a normal part of growing up.

Babies and children learn by imitating. Good food choices and eating habits shown by parents and carers will encourage children to try new foods and enjoy eating. Remember also that they may try new foods several times before they start to like it, so always try again after a break.

For introducing new foods to infants from 6 months, see Section 3.



Manners and mess

It is normal for young children to be messy when they are learning to feed themselves. As they get older, their muscles and coordination will improve, and mealtimes will be less messy. Children love to play with their food and this is one of the ways they learn. Letting young children play with their food, even if they make a mess, helps them to be better and healthier eaters when they're older.

Handle spills and mess in a calm way – young children's skills are still developing, so this is likely to happen.

Serving age appropriate portion sizes is also important in helping children to achieve and maintain a healthy weight but children should be able to help themselves with balanced nutritious foods at meals times and be self limiting (see Section 4).

The British Dietetic Association, Paediatric specialist group, has written a range of booklets which provide advice to parents and carers on a range of food related issues, including for children who aren't eating well and choosy eaters, see resources in Section 7.



Second helpings

It is important that children have a voice and feel they can ask for more if hungry, it is also important to keep an eye on those who may be eating too much. If food provided is nutritious and healthy there is less risk of having excess calories if having a bit more to eat.

Second helpings may be appropriate for some children but it is important to look at why. Are your portions sizes correct for their age? Are they particularly hungry, or just want more food? This needs careful communication with families.



Rolling snack provision

Many settings will offer a rolling snack provision with small groups of children having a snack at any one time. If you have large numbers of children, this may be a more flexible way of meeting all needs. If you notice some children are hungrier they may go first and others later. Staff can sit with children while they eat and promote a good model for healthy eating.

Remember to ensure that food preparation and hygiene practices are followed at all times.

Practice point

Remember drinks

If children don't drink enough, they can develop constipation which will affect their appetite. But if they have had too many drinks, for example, sweetened drinks at home this can fill them up and reduce their appetite. Water and milk are the recommended drinks to have. See Section 4.

Children with additional learning needs

Psychological and behavioural issues

Being anxious, upset or over tired can discourage all children from eating. Also anxiety in parents or carers at meal times can also lead to faddy eating.

Always aim for:

- A calm, fun and relaxed eating environment.
- Involving children in the mealtime e.g. setting up and preparing food can encourage them to eat.
- Making food look colourful and attractive will encourage children to try it.
- Limiting distractions at meal times, as much as possible.

Children with additional learning needs such as those on the autism spectrum may show obsessional or repetitive behaviour linked to food and drink. This has to be managed carefully and sensitively and may require specific foods or meals to be provided that are not on the main menu. In such situations a good relationship with the child and parent or carer is important and may require health professional input if the overall nutritional intake is poor. Some autistic children are also treated with a specific diet.

Children may need additional support at meal times to ensure adequate intake.

Constipation and anaemia (low iron) have been linked to poor appetite in children with additional learning needs.

Children may also have physical health problems that cause difficulties with eating, chewing or swallowing. They may be advised to have a texture modified diet if they have swallowing difficulties. The way in which the food is modified will depend on the swallowing difficulty and can vary from a smooth thin puree to a mashed consistency. You should have advice from health professionals, a dietitian

and / or speech and language therapist to be able to provide the correct consistency that is safe for the individual child.

But also look for any signs there may be a problem

It is particularly important to observe signs of changes in eating behaviour, and report any concerns. Also look out for children that may be very hungry as they may not be having enough elsewhere.

If there is concern for a child who is above or below a healthy weight, then this can be a sensitive topic to raise with parents. Refer to the information on the Every Child website and if families continue to have concerns, recommend they speak with their health care professional e.g. health visitor.

<https://everychildwales.co.uk/>



Birthdays and celebrations

Birthdays and celebrations, which includes national 'days' and charity 'days' are an important part of childcare settings and can become frequent, within larger settings.

Best practice will offer alternative ways to celebrate such occasions, without relying on e.g. traditional cakes, sweet items and pastries. This can include the following examples:

- healthy choices for party foods and snacks with pretend cakes with real candles
- king and queen for the day

- monthly healthy picnic for all birthdays
- birthday chair only for the birthday child on that day
- traditional food from different countries often provides healthier choices.

Information on birthdays and food brought in can be provided to parents in your food and drink policy – see Section 7.



Packed lunches and food brought in from home

If you are a setting that accepts food brought in from home for lunch, or snacks, then it is important to inform them of your approach to food in the setting and how it links with learning about healthy food. Putting information in your food policy can help with this.

A packed lunch should provide the same amount of energy and nutrients as a main meal for children of these ages, and should follow the key principles of eating well for this age group.

See the parent guide for information on packed lunches. And also refer to:

Eating well: Packed lunches for 1-4 year olds
www.firststepsnutrition.org/eating-well-early-years



Older children in out of school care

Involving older children in discussions about food provision and what they have to eat and drink in school and at home can help to maintain positive eating behaviour and support provision of nutritious healthy food.

Care and play workers in 'out of school' settings can access the Nutrition Skills for Life® training

from their local health boards – see Section 7. This will provide you with ideas for activities and topics that you can introduce in your setting.



Wrap around care

With the range of childcare settings on offer and the variety of working patterns, many young children and those after school may experience a number of different care settings during one day.

You may be a childcare setting that offers wrap around care offered before or after the funded early years education sessions and allows parents and carers to extend their children's hours, or you may offer out of school care at the beginning or end of a school day for younger and older children.

This means:

- careful communication needs to be passed on from one setting to another about the child – this is particularly important when

it comes to food and drink provision to make sure children have the right balance of foods and drink across the day

- care should be taken so that children do not go hungry, or have too much food or have the same type of meal in different settings
- opportunities should be made available for sharing information on the food and drink intake of children with those between settings and parents or carers.

The example scenarios shown in the following pages give an idea of the different daily patterns of childcare that young children may experience. This illustrates how important it is to note where and what a child may be eating across the day.

Example scenarios

Daily pattern for a child who is 3 years old

7.30 am	Breakfast at home before going to school nursery.	Parent should inform if not eaten well for any reason.
9 am – 11.30 am school nursery	Mid morning snack and drink at 10 am.	This will comply with healthy eating regulations.
11.30 – 5 pm childcare setting e.g day nursery	Arrives back at childcare setting at 12 pm – has lunch. Afternoon snack at 3 pm.	School nursery should inform childcare setting they have eaten snack and drink. Lunch provided from childcare setting menu. Snack and drink from snack menu.
Home 5 pm	Parent pick up at 5 pm to have tea at home.	Childcare setting inform of day's food intake and drink and any issues to note.

Daily pattern for a child who is 3 years old

8 am – 12 pm child minder	Breakfast with child minder. Mid morning snack and drink Lunch.	Child minder inform nursery if any food issues to note.
12.30 pm – 3 pm school nursery	Mid afternoon snack and drink at school nursery.	Comply with healthy eating regulations.
Child minder pick up at 3 pm – 6 pm	Small savoury tea or snack.	Comply with best practice guidance.
Home 6pm – 6.30 pm	Small tea with family.	Child minder to inform parent of day's food and drink intake.

8 am – 8.45 am Breakfast club in school	Breakfast in school meets healthy eating guidance.	Breakfast club to inform school if any specific issues.
9 am – 3.30 pm school	Milk to drink mid morning. Fruit or vegetables snack. Lunchtime school meal and drink. Water during day.	
3.30 pm – 5.30 pm after school club	Light meal or snack.	Comply with best practice guidance. Inform parents of food and drink provided.
Home 6 pm – 6.30 pm	Tea with family.	Informal catch up of type and variety of food eaten, with family.

Daily pattern for a 5 year old child attending school

Younger children

For younger children under 2 years, you are likely to be recording what food and drink intake they have had during the day, and what new foods they have tried and liked, to feedback this information to the parents or carers.

Older children

Where older children are attending different settings across one day, it is helpful to communicate between settings and with parents and carers the child's specific needs and food intake for the day.

See Appendix 1 – template food and drink intake diary.

Appendix 1

Example template – record of a day’s food intake for a child in your care

Name of child: Jane Smith

Summary of meal and drink requirements:

Arrives early has breakfast in setting

Leaves around 5pm, has tea at home

Specific dietary requirements:

Does not eat pork

Estimated average requirements for children					
	Time and type of meal Breakfast / snack / lunch / snack / tea	Food and drink offered	How much eaten	Drink requested / offered (150ml cups)	Amount drank
Arrival time	8am breakfast	Wheat bisks, x1 milk, half a banana and cup of milk	All the cereal Left the banana	1 cup of milk	all
Mid morning	10am snack	Bread sticks, and mixed vegetable sticks	Bread sticks and half the vegetable sticks	1 cup of water	all
Midday	12.30pm lunch	Cod in tomato and pepper sauce with cous cous and green beans Rice pudding and raspberries	Most of it	1 cup of water	all
Mid after-noon	3pm snack	Mixed seasonal fruit	All	1 cup of milk	all
Tea	NIL	Information provided: will have at home			

*Additional water drank during the day.

Appendix 2

Blank template – record of a day’s food intake for a child in your care

Name of child:

Summary of meal and drink requirements:

Specific dietary requirements:

Estimated average requirements for children					
	Time and type of meal Breakfast / snack / lunch / snack / tea	Food and drink offered	How much eaten	Drink requested / offered (150ml cups)	Amount drank
Arrival time					
Mid morning					
Midday					
Mid after-noon					
Tea					