

# 1 minute guide: Food and Drink

The EYFS states 'where children are provided with meals, snacks, and drinks, these must be healthy, balanced and nutritious'

## **Why is it important to provide healthy and nutritious food and drinks to children in the early years setting?**

Good nutrition is essential during childhood, as it is a time of rapid growth, development and activity. This is also a vital time for healthy tooth development and prevention of decay. General eating habits and patterns are formed in the first few years of life and can influence our health during childhood and adulthood. Poor nutrition during these years is associated with an increased risk of obesity, hypertension, diabetes and coronary heart disease. Childcare providers therefore have a key role to play in introducing children to a wide variety of foods and establishing a pattern of regular meals and healthy snacks.

Growing children need plenty of energy (calories) and nutrients, eg protein, fat, carbohydrates, vitamins and minerals. These needs can be met by including a variety of foods from each of the main food groups

## **How can you implement this in the setting?**

### **Plan Balanced Menus**

- Create weekly menus that include a variety of foods from the five main food groups.
- Include full-fat dairy and avoid low-fat or diet products for under-5s.
- Ensure meals are low in salt and free sugars.

### **Establish a Regular Eating Routine**

- Serve three meals and two snacks at consistent times each day.
- Encourage children to sit together during meals to promote social eating habits.

### **Promote Healthy Drinks**

- Offer water and milk throughout the day.
- Avoid sugary drinks and limit fruit juice to mealtimes (if offered at all).

### **Educate Through Play and Learning**

- Use storybooks, games, and role play to teach children about healthy foods.
- Involve children in growing vegetables, preparing snacks, or setting the table.

### **Involve Families**

- Share menus and healthy eating tips with parents and carers.
- Encourage consistency between home and setting by providing nutrition guidance.

### **Model Healthy Eating**

- Staff should model healthy eating behaviours by eating with the children and showing enthusiasm for nutritious foods.

### **Monitor and Adapt**

- Keep records of children's dietary needs, allergies, and preferences.
- Observe children's eating habits and adjust portion sizes or food types as needed.

## Ensure Safety

- Follow choking prevention guidelines (e.g. cut grapes lengthways).
- Avoid whole nuts and be allergy-aware, especially with peanuts.

## What should the setting do if parents brings unhealthy food and drinks to the setting?

A well-structured food and drink policy that has been developed in consultation with all staff, parents, carers and children is an effective way of ensuring that your settings children and their parents/carers receive consistent messages about healthy eating. Consider how you will share the policy with staff (team meetings, inductions) and parents (registration, display boards, email, online portals).

If parents provide packed lunches and drinks these should be healthy, balanced, and nutritious. Parents should be aware of the allergies within the setting and consider this when preparing a packed lunch for their child.

If packed lunches are provided and do not adhere to the settings procedure around healthy eating then a discussion with parents should take place to highlight the importance of healthy eating and the benefits of this for their child.

DfE Help for early years providers have resources, activities and support articles for childminders and practitioners working with children aged 0-5 years. There is some useful information around good nutrition in the early years, including Introducing solid foods, a healthy plate, allergies, menu planning, cost-effective healthy food and planning food activities with children

[Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance](#)

## Nutrition Guidance for Children Aged 5 and Under

Children in the early years are growing rapidly—physically, mentally, and emotionally. Their nutritional needs are different from adults and must be carefully met to support healthy development. When providing food and drink in early years settings, the following principles should be followed:

### Meals and Snacks

- Offer three balanced meals and two healthy snacks each day.
- Portion sizes should be appropriate for young children's smaller stomachs.
- Children's appetites can vary from day to day—this is normal.

### Energy and Growth

- Young children need energy-dense foods to support growth and activity.
- Use full-fat dairy products (e.g. whole milk, full-fat yogurt, cheese).
- Avoid low-fat or diet products, which do not provide enough energy for growth.

### Sugar and Dental Health

- Limit foods and drinks containing free sugars to mealtimes only.
- Snacks and drinks between meals should be sugar-free.
- Check labels for hidden sugars (e.g. sucrose, glucose, fructose, syrup, dextrose).

### Hydration

- Encourage children to drink plenty of fluids, especially water and milk.

### **Fibre and Digestive Health**

- A high-fibre diet is not suitable for young children.
- Offer a variety of fibre levels, such as white and wholemeal breads and cereals.
- Gradually increase fibre intake from age 2 to 5.
- Do not use dry bran, which can interfere with nutrient absorption and cause discomfort.

### **Salt and Additives**

- Do not add salt to food during cooking or at the table.
- Avoid salty snacks like crisps, especially for babies and toddlers.
- Excess salt can harm developing kidneys and lead to long-term health issues.

### **Choking and Allergy Risks**

- Do not give whole nuts to children under 5 due to choking risk.
- Avoid peanuts and peanut products in group settings to protect children with allergies.
- Always slice grapes and cherry tomatoes lengthways to prevent choking.

### **Nutritious Puddings**

- Serve puddings that are based on milk or fruit (fresh, stewed, or tinned in juice).
- Avoid desserts high in added sugar or low in nutritional value.

[PowerPoint Presentation](#)

[What to feed young children - NHS](#)

[Nutrition for toddlers and pre-schoolers](#)

[Lunchbox ideas and recipes – Healthier Families - NHS](#)