

# 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?

Children aged 5 and under have different nutritional requirements to adults as they are undergoing a period of rapid growth in the muscles, body tissues and the development of the brain. As children grow and develop, they need important nutrients to be strong and healthy. When providing food and drink in the setting the following points should be considered:-

- Children's appetites may vary, not only from day to day, but also from one meal to the next.
- Young children are very active and have high energy (calorie) and nutrient needs in proportion to their small body size.
- Children have smaller stomachs than adults so it is important to consider portion size when plating food.
- Every day, children need three meals plus snacks.
- Children should be encouraged to drink adequate amounts of fluids.
- A frequent intake of sugar and sugary foods and drinks between meals causes tooth decay. Snacks and drinks taken between meals should be sugar-free.
- Foods and drinks containing sugar should only be given occasionally and should be limited to mealtimes. Sugar may also appear on labels as sucrose, glucose, syrup, fructose or dextrose.
- Puddings should be nutritious and based on milk and/or fruit (fresh, stewed or tinned).
- Avoid low fat or diet products, as young children need the extra calories from fat to grow and develop properly. Full fat spreads and whole milk dairy products are recommended.
- A diet high in fibre is not suitable for young children. It can fill them up without providing all the nutrients they require. Foods of varying fibre content should be offered, eg both white and wholemeal breads and pasta; a variety of breakfast cereals, eg Corn Flakes, Rice Krispies, Weetabix, porridge, etc. Children between the ages of two and five should gradually be encouraged to increase their intake of higher fibre foods.
- Dry, unprocessed bran should never be used as it can reduce the absorption of important nutrients and can cause bloating, wind and loss of appetite.
- Do not add salt to food either in cooking or at the table, as babies' kidneys are not fully developed. Too much salt is linked with high blood pressure later in life and may encourage a preference for salty food, which is difficult to change. Salty snacks such as crisps should

be avoided for babies and young children, and given only very occasionally for older children.

- Whole nuts are unsuitable for children under the age of five years because of the risk of choking. It is recommended that peanuts and products containing them, eg peanut butter, are not provided within the childcare setting. This is to protect children who may be at risk of nut allergy.
- It is recommended that grapes and cherry tomatoes are sliced or halved lengthways or prevent choking

### **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/careers 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

[Help for early years providers : Nutrition](#)