



Guide to Early Years Catering

The
Safer Food
Group

Feeding Early Development

The food preferences and eating habits that a child develops can play an important role in their health and development throughout their life. As brain and body grow, the right levels of nutrients and energy provided by a healthy diet make a significant positive impact and help reduce the likelihood of obesity in future years.



However, feeding our little ones a healthy diet is not just important for their bodies. Mealtimes give children a chance to learn about social interaction and understand the pleasure of sharing food with others. Eating within a group increases the likelihood of trying new tastes and textures, encouraged by seeing friends do the same. Learning to hold finger foods and use cutlery improves coordination, and talking about food gives a chance to practice communication skills.

So, the important role that Early Years settings play when providing a nutritious and interesting menu cannot be underestimated. Whilst a parent or carer may be keen to learn that their child has learned to skip or spoken a new word, this does not compare to the reassuring knowledge that they have eaten well, tried new foods and returned home with a growing interest in good food. The Safer Food Group Guide to Early Years Catering addresses the topics you need to consider when planning to cater within a childcare setting. It also signposts some invaluable resources that will help you put a plan in place to feed your little ones safely and healthily, providing the solid foundations for their futures.

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Nutrition and Menu Planning for Early Years Settings

Seven steps to menu planning

“Where children are provided with meals, snacks and drinks, they must be healthy, balanced and nutritious. Before a child is admitted to the setting the provider must also obtain information about any special dietary requirements, preferences and food allergies that the child has, and any special health requirements. Fresh drinking water must be available and accessible to children at all times. Providers must record and act on information from parents and carers about a child’s dietary needs.” Section 3.48 Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, March 2021.

Planning your menu helps you to ensure you can meet each child’s nutritional needs, by offering them a varied, balanced series of meals throughout their time with you. Spending time creating plans is a good investment — once written you can reuse year on year.

Public Health England have created this helpful seven step plan to creating healthy menus:

Seven steps to planning healthy meals, snack and drinks

Step 1

Plan menus for all the meals and snacks you provide for children. This will help you to check that food and drink provision across the day is balanced and includes variety, and also helps planning for shopping and food preparation.

Step 2

Plan menus lasting at least one week. In practice, a menu that covers between one and four weeks will give children lots of variety. Try to make sure that children who attend your setting on the same day each week are not always provided with the same meal.

Step 3

Plan each meal and snack menu to meet the guidance for each meal and snack provided. This means that children attending your setting for sessional care or who move between different settings will still meet their nutritional requirements overall.

Step 4

Plan menus to include a variety of foods, tastes, textures and colours. This will give children the opportunity to try a wide range of foods and make meals and snacks colourful and tasty.

Step 5

Make sure you cater for the cultural and dietary needs of all the children in your care. You can also plan your menus to enable children to experience food from different cultures.

Step 6

Introduce new menu cycles at least twice a year. This will incorporate seasonality and give children the chance to try different foods.

Step 7

Share menus for meals and snacks with parents. This can help parents to balance meals and snacks with the food they provide at home. For example, if children are having a light meal at teatime and you expect them to eat again at home, make sure that parents are aware of this.

Requirements for infants below 12 months and children between 1 and 5 years differ considerably from those of adults. We've already mentioned the importance of good nutrition in early years — menu planning allows us to consider the nutritional needs of the child and ensure these needs are met over a set time period.

When menu planning, think about the time frame you will typically see the child for. Do you see most children for 2 hours after school, every weekday? Or do most children visit your setting 8.30 — 5.00, three days a week? What meals and snacks will you need to provide throughout this time period, and what plan can you put in place to ensure you meet their nutritional needs — including offering a variety of different foods.

“
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”

Age-appropriate menus

As you will already know, energy and nutritional needs differ according to age and individual. As a guideline, these are some things to consider for each age group:

Infants aged 0-6 months

Until the age of 6 months, it is recommended that infants are fed breast or formula milk exclusively. There have been many studies that have proved the benefits of breastmilk to the ongoing health and development of infants, but this decision will be driven by families. Early Years settings should ensure that they have correct equipment and processes to keep and use both expressed breastmilk and formula milk hygienically and safely.

Infants aged 6-12 months

Between the ages of 6 and 12 months, food can be introduced alongside milk, to meet infants' increasing energy and nutrient needs. This is a great opportunity to offer a variety of tastes and textures. At this stage, the need (and want) for food will differ greatly between individuals, so it is important to be driven by the child, and not expect significant amounts of food to be eaten whilst each child is learning and experimenting with food.

Infants' first foods can include a range of foods from the four food groups (see 'The Four Food Groups' below), and can be provided blended, mashed and as a finger food:

Soft cooked vegetables such as parsnip, yam, butternut squash, carrot, broccoli, cauliflower.

Meat such as chicken, lamb.

Fish without bones.

Starchy foods such as potato, sweet potato, pasta, noodles, chapati, rice.

Hard-boiled eggs.

Pulses such as peas, beans and lentils.

Dairy products made from whole milk, such as unsweetened yoghurt, fromage frais, custard.

Fruit (soft, or cooked without adding sugar) such as apple, pear, peach, melon, banana.

Children aged 1 – 4 years

At this age, children have increasing energy and nutrient needs as their bodies continue to grow, develop and move. This is a great time to embed healthy eating habits, both by giving a healthy menu, but also by talking and teaching about food.

Despite their growing energy requirements, children of this age will still only manage relatively small meals, so it is important to introduce regular meals and healthy snacks. A wide variety of different foods is increasingly important at this age, in order to access all the nutrients they require. As they approach five years old, most children should be eating a diet that looks similar to that of an older child or adult as described by the Eatwell Guide — albeit in age-appropriate quantities.

It almost goes without saying that both main meals and snacks should avoid added sugar, salt, saturated fats and highly processed foods wherever possible. Creating good habits as tastebuds develop is a great opportunity to influence future health.



The Four Food Groups

The table below details the four food groups as defined by Public Health England. This table, created by Action for Children for their [Eat Better Start Better guide](#), shows the ideal balance of these four groups throughout a typical day (see guide for portion sizes). Public Health England and Action for Children have both created comprehensive guides to menu planning for early years settings — these include daily schedules for meals and snacks, 4 weekly menu plans and recipes to support the plans, as well as some great advice about helping fussy eaters, and the social aspects of eating. We've included the links to these fantastic resources at the end of this guide.

Food groups	Examples of food included	Main nutrients provided	Recommended servings
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	Bread, potatoes and sweet potatoes, starchy root vegetables, pasta, noodles, rice, other grains, breakfast cereals	Carbohydrate, fibre, B vitamins and iron	Four portions each day Provide a portion as part of each meal (breakfast, lunch and tea) and provide as part of at least one snack each day
Potatoes, bread, rice, pasta and other starchy carbohydrates	Fresh, frozen, canned, and dried fruit, vegetables, and pulses	Carotenes (a form of vitamin A), vitamin C, zinc, iron, and fibre	Five portions each day Provide a portion as part of each main meal (breakfast, lunch and tea) and with some snacks
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	Meat, poultry, fish, shellfish, eggs, meat alternatives, pulses, nuts	Protein, iron, zinc, omega 3 fatty acids, vitamins A and D	Two portions each day Provide a portion as part of lunch and tea (Two to three portions for vegetarian children)
Dairy and alternatives	Milk, cheese, yoghurt, fromage frais, custard, puddings made from milk	Protein, calcium, and vitamin A	Three portions each day provided as part of meals, snacks and drinks



Good Hydration

Alongside growing nutrition needs, children also need good hydration to keep them healthy. Plain water is the ideal option and getting young ones into the habit of drinking water sets them up for great future habits. The amount of water a child needs will vary depending on their age, size and level of activity. For children under 8 years of age, at least 4–6 glasses of water is recommended. Milk is a suitable alternative to offer instead of water once or twice a day.

Under 6 months, a baby is likely to be sufficiently hydrated by breast or formula milk, but if water is offered, it should be boiled first and given in a sterilised bottle, cup or spoon.

Food Safety

Advice relating to specific foods

Food Group	Advice
Fruit and vegetables	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• all fruit and vegetables should be washed thoroughly before being eaten or cooked for children.• to reduce the risk of choking:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• offer soft fruit and vegetables as finger foods to infants to begin with, and remove any skins.• remove any stones and pips before serving.• halve or quarter small fruit and vegetables like grapes and cherry tomatoes.• cut large fruits like melon, and hard fruit or vegetables like raw apple and carrot into slices instead of small chunks.
Beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat and other proteins	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• avoid shark, swordfish and marlin as the levels of mercury in these fish can affect a child's developing nervous system.• although it is recommended to provide oily fish in early years settings at least once every three weeks, don't provide it more than twice a week, as it can contain low levels of pollutants.• avoid raw shellfish to reduce the risk of food poisoning, and make sure any shellfish you use is thoroughly cooked.• avoid raw eggs, or food containing partially cooked eggs, for example uncooked cake mixture and runny boiled eggs. Avoid bought fresh pate (meat, fish or vegetable-based) to reduce the risk of food poisoning.• cut sausages into strips rather than chunks to reduce the risk of choking, and remove the skins for infants.• make sure fish dishes are free of bones to reduce the risk of choking.• do not give whole nuts to children under five years old, as they can choke on them.• nuts, especially peanuts, can cause severe allergic reactions in some children and all settings should have an allergy plan in place.
Dairy and alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• avoid unpasteurised milk, milk drinks and cheese, mould-ripened cheeses and soft blue-veined cheese, to reduce the risk of food poisoning.• children under the age of five years should not be given rice drinks, because of the level of arsenic they contain. There is no need to avoid rice cakes, as there are strict limits in place in Europe on the arsenic content in rice and rice products.• cut cheese into strips rather than chunks to reduce the risk of choking.
Other foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• avoid giving popcorn as a snack to infants to reduce the risk of choking.• avoid giving children jelly cubes from a packet as part of messy play activities to reduce the risk of choking.

Other foods and drinks to avoid for children under 5 years

- avoid honey for infants under one year, as it occasionally contains bacteria which can make them ill.
- avoid food and drinks containing the colours Tartrazine (E102), Quinoline yellow (E104), Sunset yellow (E110), Carmoisine (E122), Ponceau 4R (E124) or Allura red (E129) as they may have as adverse effect on activity and attention in children.
- avoid drinks with added caffeine or stimulants.
- avoid tea, coffee and alcohol.

Reproduced from Example menus for early years settings in England: part 1: Public Health England November 2017

Choking hazards

Some tragic cases of choking within Early Years settings have recently hit the headlines. Careful preparation and diligent supervision when feeding little ones is an absolute must. These guidelines, released by the Food Standards Agency (FSA), should be introduced to all Early Years staff as part of their induction. Display the poster in a prominent place wherever babies and children are fed, and check your team's understanding of the guidelines on a regular basis. To download copies of the poster, visit: https://foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Early-Years-Choking-Hazards-Poster_FINAL-21-Sept-2021.pdf

Early years food choking hazards

Below is a table of advice on key foods for care givers who are involved with preparing and serving food for babies and young children (under 5 years old).

Vegetable and fruits	Advice
Pips or stones in fruit	Always check beforehand and remove hard pips or stones from fruit.
Small fruits	Cut small round fruits like grapes, cherries, berries, strawberries and cherry tomatoes, into small pieces: cut lengthways and then again cut them in halves (quarters).
Large fruits and firm fruits	Cut large fruits like melon and firm fruits like apple into slices instead of small chunks. For very young children, consider grating or mashing firm fruits, or softening them up by steaming or simmering.
Vegetables	Cut vegetables like carrots, cucumber and celery into narrow batons. For very young children consider grating or mashing firm vegetables and legumes like butter beans, chickpeas and tofu, or softening them up by steaming or simmering.
Skin on fruit and vegetables	Consider removing the skin from fruit and vegetables, especially for very young children. Peeled fruit and vegetables can be swallowed more easily.
Cooking fruit and vegetables	Consider softening firm fruit and vegetables (such as carrots, broccoli, yam and apples) by steaming or simmering until soft. Serve cut into slices or narrow batons.
Meat and fish	Advice
Sausages and hot dogs	Cut sausages and hot dogs into short strips. Cut them in half and then lengthways or as thinly as possible. Peeling the skin off the sausages helps them to be swallowed more easily.
Meat or fish	Remove bones from meat or fish. Cut meat into strips as thinly as possible. Remove skin and fat from meat and fish, it will help the food pass smoothly down the throat.
Cheese	Advice
Grate or cut cheese	Grate or cut cheese into short strips. Cut lumps of cheese as narrow as possible.
Nuts and seeds	Advice
Chop or flake whole nuts	Chop or flake whole nuts, peanuts and seeds. Whole nuts should not be given to children under five years old.
Bread	Advice
White bread and other breads	White bread can form a ball shape with a dough-like texture at the back of a child's throat, if not chewed properly. Brown bread or toasted white bread are good alternatives. Cut bread, chapatis, naan bread and other breads into narrow strips.
Snacks and other foods	Advice
Popcorn	Do not give babies and young children popcorn.
Chewing gum and marshmallows	Do not give babies and young children chewing gum or marshmallows.
Peanut butter	Do not give babies and young children peanut butter on its own, only use as a spread..
Jelly cubes	Do not give babies and young children raw jelly cubes.
Boiled sweets and ice cubes	Do not give babies and young children boiled, hard, goeey, sticky or cough sweets, or ice cubes.
Raisins and other dried fruits	Do not give babies under the age of 1 whole raisins or dried fruits. Cut them into small pieces.

Food Hygiene

Preparing and Serving Food Safely

“There must be an area which is adequately equipped to provide healthy meals, snacks and drinks for children as necessary. There must be suitable facilities for the hygienic preparation of food for children, if necessary including suitable sterilisation equipment for babies’ food. Providers must be confident that those responsible for preparing and handling food are competent to do so. In group provision, all staff involved in preparing and handling food must receive training in food hygiene.” Section 3.48 Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage, March 2021.

Basic principle of food safety — the 4 Cs

Developing immune systems in children can make them particularly prone to illness. Food should nourish them and help them to thrive, rather than harm them so it is important to understand how to prevent food borne disease within your Early Years setting. The ‘4Cs’ below give an overview of the key principles that inform good food hygiene.

Cleaning

The spread of bacteria is a major cause of foodborne illnesses, whether via the food itself, utensils and surfaces, or human contact. Good cleaning routines are vital — and that includes handwashing. Take the opportunity to teach children good hand hygiene when they are preparing and eating food. [Here’s a video to help remind your team how to do it properly.](#)

In an Early Years setting, cleaning takes on extra importance, as any equipment, bottles and utensils required for feeding babies below 1 year should be sterilised, according to [NHS guidance](#).

Cooking

Cooking raw food helps us eliminate or seriously reduce any bacteria that is already present in our foods. If all safe storage processes have been followed before cooking, and food is cooked to the correct temperature for the right length of time, cooking should make high risk foods such as meat, fish and other protein rich foods safe to eat. As a general rule, foods should reach a temperature of 75 degrees Celsius for at least two minutes, but Food Hygiene training and FSA guidelines give greater detail on types of food and required core temperatures.

Chilling

Bacterial growth happens most rapidly in the temperature 'danger-zone' — between 8 degrees and 63 degrees Celsius. Therefore, it is very important to keep fresh foods out of this temperature range while storing. Keep fridge temperatures at 5 degrees Celsius or lower, and freezer temperatures below -18 degrees Celsius to prevent bacterial growth and food spoilage.

Cross-contamination

This is a key hazard to avoid. Cross contamination means spreading from one surface to another and can include contaminating one food with bacteria from another, or contaminating a food with an ingredient that should not be present — a dangerous problem especially when dealing with ingredients that cause allergies. We've already mentioned the importance of cleaning — a rigorous cleaning routine is key in the fight against cross contamination, as is good storage practice and using specified zones, utensils and equipment for raw and cooked food and identified allergens.



Food Safety Management System

To help you ensure that you follow the rules of good food hygiene, you'll need to put a food safety management system (otherwise known as a HACCP plan) in place. This sounds scary, but it's simply a written document that describes the processes you follow to keep your food safe to eat.

In a large setting, you might be provided with a HACCP plan to follow or be asked to create one yourself. If you need to create a HACCP plan and don't know where to start, have a look for a training course that tackles [HACCP planning for Early Years settings](#).

Alternatively, you might want to consider the [Safer Food, Better Business](#) tool created by the Food Standards Agency (FSA). This tool takes you through the various aspects of food safety you'll need to consider for your setting. You can download a set of forms to complete — keep these safe as you'll need to show them to your EHO if they visit to inspect your premises.

Safe storage of expressed breastmilk

Expressed breastmilk provided for infants in early years settings should be labelled, stored safely and used only for that child. Breastmilk should be stored in a sterilised container, and can be kept:

- in the fridge for up to five days at 4°C or lower
- for two weeks in the ice compartment of a fridge
- for up to six months in a freezer

If breastmilk is frozen, defrost in the fridge before giving it to a baby. Once defrosted, it should be used straight away, and must not be refrozen. The milk can be warmed to body temperature by placing the bottle in lukewarm water. Do not use a microwave to heat, as this can cause hot spots which can burn a baby's mouth. Once the baby has drunk from the bottle of milk, it should be used within an hour and anything left over thrown away.

Food Hygiene Training

The Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework states that “providers must be confident that those responsible for preparing and handling food are competent to do so. In group provision, all staff involved in preparing and handling food must receive training in food hygiene”.

It is important to provide the suitable level of training and supervision for staff preparing and serving food. In a large day care setting, with one or more members of staff responsible for preparing and serving food and supervising others as their core role, it may be appropriate for them to undertake a Level 3 (Intermediate) Food Hygiene qualification. On the other hand, a solo childminder preparing simple meals or a childcare assistant serving food may find a Level 2 (Basic) Food Hygiene qualification suits their needs. Some food safety training courses provide specific information for Early Years practitioners — [The Safer Food Group](#) has developed Early Years courses alongside industry experts and film elements of their courses in EY settings, to give learners a real insight into food hygiene topics within their environment.

Food Allergies in Early Years

It is estimated that between 6-8% of the early years population suffer from at least one allergy. When it comes to food allergies, reactions can prove fatal, so Early Years settings must put in place practical plans to ensure their children are not put at risk.

Dealing with food allergies in the under 5s presents unique challenges. These include inability of the youngest children to understand and help manage their own allergies, the possibility that an allergy has yet to be identified and the potential for children to swap plates, food or utensils. And to a certain extent, allergies can pose a greater challenge to childcare settings, as they cannot adopt a 'no allergen-free guarantee' policy. However, as with any food business, the key to managing allergies is undertaking a thorough risk assessment that creates practical solutions to all identified issues.

Once undertaken, a good risk assessment should enable you to create a suitable policy for your setting. This policy should set out details including:

- How you will obtain and store allergy information for new joiners
- Training all staff in good food allergen practice
- Training staff how to recognise and deal with symptoms of allergy, including anaphylactic shock, crisis management and first aid
- Any decision you make on keeping your setting free of specified allergens, including sharing of food provided by families
- The methods you will use to communicate your policy, menus and allergen to families and staff
- What food hygiene and cross-contamination prevention methods you will put in place to ensure that food can be guaranteed to be allergen free when required.
- How you will keep, store, correctly identify and use supplied medications.

As a business, Early Years settings are required to communicate the presence of any of the '14 listed allergens' in their food. A useful way to do this is to include details of where these allergens are present on weekly menus that can be accessed by families. Don't forget that children can have allergies to other ingredients not on this list.

Celery

Cereals containing gluten (including wheat, rye, barley and oats)

Crustaceans (including prawns, crab and lobster)

Eggs

Fish

Lupin

Milk

Molluscs (including squid, mussels, cockles, whelks and snails)

Mustard

Nuts

Peanuts

Sesame seeds

Soya beans

Sulphur dioxide/ sulphites (at levels above 10mg/kg)

Early Years training courses have been developed to help you ensure your team understand the importance of very careful practice when dealing with allergens. These include The Safer Food Group's [Level 2 Award in Food Allergy Awareness - Early Years](#), for those who prepare and serve food, and Level 3 Award in Food Allergy Management, for Supervisors and Managers required to undertake risk assessment and put suitable policies in places (available March 2022).

References and useful links

[Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage](#)

Published by gov.uk, March 21

[Safer Food, Better Business for Childminders](#)

Published by Food Standards Agency, January 2020

[Eat Better, Start Better](#)

Published by Action for Children, 2017

[Example Menus for early years settings in England part 1 – Example Menus](#)

Public Health England November 2017

[Example Menus for early years settings in England part 2 - Recipes](#)

Public Health England November 2017

[The Safer Food Group](#)

Food Safety Training for Early Years practitioners [14 Allergens Poster](#) The Safer Food Group 2022

The Safer Food Group Guide to Early Years Catering

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We would love you to use this resource to help plan your Early Years catering operation. If you intend to publish it as a resource on your website, please contact info@thesaferfoodgroup.com for permission.

The information within this leaflet is intended as guidance only, and is written according to current best practice February 2022. Please refer to the organisations and references included for latest information and guidance.