

Making the most of mealtimes

Meals are social occasions, during which children can learn table manners and practice their language skills. Some suggestions to make the most of mealtimes are listed below.

- Try to sit with the children during meals and snacks and talk to them.
- Involve children in preparing food and serving themselves, as appropriate, in a safe environment and allow them to help laying and clearing the tables.
- Encourage children to try all foods offered to them, but never force a child to eat.
- Use mealtimes as an opportunity to provide education about healthy eating and food in general, for example the seasons, growing cycles and other cultures. If you are eating with the children, it is important that your food and drink choices show a good example.
- Finger foods of all kinds, particularly fruit and vegetables, will encourage children under two years of age to feed themselves and try new foods.
- Child-sized utensils, crockery, tables and chairs may make it easier for children to serve themselves and learn to eat independently.
- Make sure there is sufficient time for all children to finish their meal or snack.
- Encourage good table manners.
- Avoid distractions such as television during meals and snacks.
- Ensure that parents/guardians are kept informed about meals and snacks offered.

Fussy eaters

It is quite normal for an infant or child to refuse a food occasionally. However if a child continually refuses food, the parent or guardian should be informed. If a child refuses a snack or meal, gently encourage them to eat. If they refuse to eat even after gentle encouragement, the following suggestions may be helpful.

- Remove the food without making a fuss or passing judgement and offer food at the next meal or snack time
- Keeping your attitude friendly and relaxed will help children to feel that eating is a pleasurable way to satisfy hunger rather than a battleground.
- Small helpings may be better accepted. Second helpings can then be offered if appropriate.
- Do not try to bribe children into eating food they do not want with the reward of a pudding or sweet snack.
- It may be useful to adopt the approach that a food refused is 'not liked today'. If a food is refused, try it again a few days later; changing the form a food is given in may make it more acceptable.
- Consider possible reasons for the food refusal, such as drinking continually throughout the day, or frequent large snacks between meals, as both of these can reduce the appetite for main meals.
- Never force a child to eat.

Physical activity for children



- Physical activity contributes to a healthy appetite, which will help to ensure that children get all the nutrients they need.
- Physical activity builds up muscle strength and overall fitness, as well as developing physical skills such as balance, coordination and climbing skills.
- Exposure to summer sunlight in outdoor play helps to ensure an adequate supply of vitamin D.
- Childcare facilities should have guidelines on how long children can remain outdoors and on the use of sunscreens and protective clothing such as sun hats.
- Outdoor play provides great opportunities for learning, for example children can learn about the environment around them. Playing with other children can develop their social skills and help build their confidence.
- Children who develop an active lifestyle when they are young are more likely to maintain a healthy active lifestyle as they get older. This is important as an active lifestyle helps to reduce the risk of ill health in adulthood.



Rewards and celebrations

Rewards for good behaviour and the celebration of special events, such as birthdays, often involve sugary foods and drinks. The frequent consumption of sugary foods and drinks can adversely affect general and oral health, therefore they should be limited.

Encouraging good behaviour

Children should be given encouragement for good behaviour. This can be in the form of smiles or praise, or simply giving the child attention. This form of positive encouragement is preferable to the practice of giving items such as sweets, chocolates, small toys etc.

Parties and special occasions

You may want to:

- develop a policy about how you will celebrate special events and birthdays;
- consider what is appropriate for parents to provide - encourage healthier food choices;
- focus on the sense of the occasion rather than simply the supply of party food;
- hold a theme party based on current favourite TV, video or cartoon characters;
- encourage children to 'dress up' or wear party hats;
- make a play cake from play dough, paper maché, cardboard;
- offer some ideas for healthier party food, for example:
 - sandwiches cut into fancy shapes;
 - finger-sized pieces of pizza and quiche;
 - cocktail sausages;
 - plain unsalted, unsugared popcorn;
 - birthday cake (a plain cake filled with fromage frais and fresh or tinned fruit);
 - fruit punch (diluted pure fruit juice with chopped fruit added);
 - finger pieces of fruit and raw vegetables.



Food safety

Food provided to the under fives should be stored, prepared and presented in a safe and hygienic environment. Extra care is needed for infants and young children as they may have a lower resistance to food poisoning.

Listed below are some general points on food safety.

- Always wash hands with soap and warm water before touching food and always after touching the dustbin, pets, dirty nappies or going to the toilet.
- Keep your kitchen clean and dry. Wash utensils and worktops between preparation stages.
- Don't use the same knife or chopping boards for raw meat, cooked food and fresh

vegetables without washing them between times. Ideally keep separate chopping boards for raw meats and other foods.

- Take chilled or frozen food home as quickly as possible.
- Keep your fridge/freezer at the correct temperature - get a fridge thermometer.
- Cook food thoroughly.
- Do not eat or serve raw eggs.
- Store raw and cooked food separately.
- Check use-by dates and always use food within the recommended period.
- Do not reheat food more than once.
- Keep pets out of the kitchen.



These points have been taken from the booklet *Food Safety*, which provides more information on the safe handling and storage of food. It can be obtained free of charge by contacting:

Food Sense
London
SE99 7TT
Tel: 020 8694 8862

For more detailed information and advice on food hygiene issues including current legislation, it is recommended that you contact the Environmental Health Department at your local Council.

Preparing a nutrition policy

Developing a nutrition policy will help to demonstrate a childcare provider's commitment to the children in their care. It will also provide an opportunity to ensure that the recommendations and advice about healthy eating are agreed between the childcare provider and parents or guardians.

Writing a nutrition policy is not as difficult as it may sound. Many childcare settings already have a lot of 'unwritten' rules about food and eating. The advantage of writing them down as a 'policy' is that everyone has a chance to agree these ideas and in addition they provide information to new parents about the approach to healthy eating taken by the childcare facility. A policy should not be seen as something that is fixed, but as open to regular review.

Some suggestions about the type of information that could be included in such a policy are given below.

Introductory statement of commitment

(Name of) Nursery/Playgroup aims to offer high quality childcare. We recognise the need to encourage healthy eating habits from an early age, as this will help children to reach their full potential in terms of growth and development.

Meals

- Well-balanced and nutritious meals are provided for the children. A variety of foods is selected from each of the four main food groups every day:
 - bread, cereals, rice, pasta and potatoes;
 - fruit and vegetables;
 - milk and dairy foods;
 - meat, fish and alternatives.
- All puddings provided are based on fruit and/or milk.
- Fresh fruit is always available.
- Processed meat products such as sausages, burgers, chicken nuggets and fish bites are served at a maximum of one main meal each week. If these are provided, healthier cooking methods are used, eg they are oven cooked or grilled rather than fried.
- Special therapeutic dietary needs are respected. Parents are requested to give nursery staff a copy of the diet sheet provided by a State Registered Dietitian.
- Mealtimes are used as an opportunity to encourage good social habits. For example, whenever possible children and adults eat together.
- Cultural dietary habits are respected. Parents or carers are requested to provide details of foods eaten (and not eaten) by the child.



Snacks and drinks

- When snacks are given between meals they are healthy and nutritious and help provide children with the energy and nutrients they need.
- Sweets and fizzy drinks are not routinely offered.
- Where possible snacks are sugar-free to avoid causing damage to teeth. Fresh fruit is an ideal snack choice.
- Whole milk or water is provided for children as a drink between meals.
- If on occasions juices and squashes are given, these are well diluted (one part juice or squash to eight parts water) and given only at mealtimes, to avoid causing damage to teeth.

Rewards and special occasions

- Praise and attention are used to help develop children's self esteem and to act as a positive reward for good behaviour.
- If other forms of reward are used, they support and do not conflict with healthy eating principles. For example, sweets and fizzy drinks are not given as rewards.
- Celebration of birthdays and other special occasions, eg Easter, Chinese New Year etc, focus on the sense of occasion rather than simply the provision of rich, sugary food and drinks.

Activities

- Healthy eating is promoted through a range of activities for the children including play, stories, music, outings, cookery etc.
- The nursery participates in special campaigns and initiatives such as healthy eating campaigns, healthy snacks awards etc.

Nutrition checklist

This checklist has been prepared to assess the food provision for children in full day care receiving a main meal and two snacks. It is assumed that a nutritionally balanced evening meal will be provided in the child's own home.

FOOD TARGETS	Yes	No	Comments
Breakfast (if provided)			
<p>Bread or toast is always available.</p> <p>Cereals are always available. <i>Unsweetened breakfast cereals are preferred, eg porridge, Weetabix, Cornflakes, Rice Krispies.</i></p> <p>Suitable breakfast choices are provided for infants.</p>			
Milk and milk products			
<p>Whole milk is used routinely - allow 300mls (1/2 pint) per child each day.</p> <p>One additional portion of milk-based food is provided each day, eg 25g (1oz) of hard cheese or 125g carton of yogurt or a bowl of milk pudding.</p> <p>Breast milk or infant formula are provided as the main drink for infants under 12 months.</p>			
Meat, fish and alternatives			
<p>At least four out of five midday main meals provided are based on the following foods: beef, lamb, pork, liver, kidney, ham, poultry, fish, fish fingers, egg,* cheese,* beans,* lentils,* Quorn*, Tofu*, TVP*. <i>*Suitable for vegetarians.</i></p> <p>Red meat should be included twice a week. Mince is acceptable as red meat.</p> <p>Suitable main meal choices are provided for infants.</p> <p>A maximum of one midday main meal per week contains processed foods: sausages, burgers, mini pizzas, sausage rolls, vol-au-vents, fish/chicken nuggets.</p> <p>Cultural and religious preferences are catered for where appropriate.</p>			

FOOD TARGETS	Yes	No	Comments
Starchy foods			
<p>A variety of these foods is included: bread, potatoes, rice, pasta.</p> <p>At least one portion is included at every meal.</p> <p>Extra servings are available according to appetite.</p> <p>Fresh potatoes are served in preference to instant when mashed potatoes are served.</p> <p>Chips OR roast potatoes are served a maximum of once per week.</p>			
Fruit and vegetables (fresh, frozen, tinned)			
<p>A total of 3 servings are provided per child each day (<i>it is assumed that 2 further portions are provided in the child's own home</i>).</p> <p><i>A child's portion is smaller than an adult's, eg 1/2 piece fresh fruit, 1 tbsp vegetable.</i></p> <p>A variety of types is included.</p> <p>A vitamin C rich fruit is included daily, eg orange, kiwi fruit.</p>			
Puddings			
<p>Puddings served at main meals are milk or fruit based (preferably both).</p> <p>Milk pudding is provided at least three days per week, eg custard, semolina, rice, instant whipped dessert, yogurt. <i>'Ready to eat' custard or rice are suitable choices.</i></p> <p>Fruit is also included in the dessert at least three days per week. <i>Fruit-based desserts include fruit crumble, fruit sponge, fruit tart, fruit jelly, stewed fruit.</i></p> <p>A variety of puddings is included over the menu cycle.</p>			

FOOD TARGETS	Yes	No	Comments
Snacks between meals			
<p>Morning and afternoon snacks are served at set times.</p> <p>Recommended snacks include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>bread*, toast*, scone*, pancake*, bread crumpet*, bread muffin*</i>; • <i>sandwiches (eg meat, cheese, egg, fish)</i>; • <i>fresh fruit</i>; • <i>raw vegetables</i>; • <i>cheese</i>; • <i>natural yogurt, unsweetened fromage frais</i>; • <i>low sugar cereal and milk</i> <p><i>*These are served without jam, honey, marmalade, chocolate spread.</i></p> <p>Suitable snacks are served for infants.</p>			
Drinks between meals			
<p>These are sugar free.</p> <p><i>Water and milk are the most suitable drinks at all times.</i></p> <p>Unsweetened pure fruit juices, if used, are well diluted and are only given with a main meal.</p>			
Spreads			
<p>Low fat spreads are not used.</p>			
Salt			
<p>No salt added is at the table.</p> <p>The minimum possible amount of salt is used in cooking.</p> <p>If stock cubes are used, salt is not added in cooking.</p>			

Contacts for more information

All enquiries in the first instance should be directed to the Early Years Team in your local area.

Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust

Social Services Department
Gosford Place
The Mall
Armagh
BT61 9AR
Tel: 028 3752 2262

Lurgan Health and Social Services
100 Sloan Street
Lurgan
BT66 8NT
Tel: 028 3832 7824

Portadown Health and Social Services
Tavanagh Avenue
Portadown
BT62 3BU
Tel: 028 3839 3328

Causeway Health and Social Services Trust

Riverside House
28 Portstewart Road
Coleraine
BT52 1RN
Tel: 028 7035 8158

Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust

Warren Children's Centre
61 Woodland Park
Lisburn
BT28 1LQ
Tel: 028 9260 7528

Craigavon and Banbridge Health and Social Services Trust

Banbridge Health and Social Services
Scarva Street
Banbridge
BT32 3AD
Tel: 028 4066 2866

Children's and Disability Services
81 Market Street
Downpatrick
BT30 6LZ
Tel: 028 4461 3511

Foyle Health and Social Services Trust

Brownlow Health and Social Services
1 Legahory Centre
Brownlow
Craigavon
BT65 5BE
Tel: 028 3834 3011

10 Gransha Park
Clooney Road
Londonderry
BT47 6TG
Tel: 028 7186 5122



Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust

Audley Centre
27 Ballymoney Road
Ballymena
BT43 5BS
Tel: 028 2564 1207

Ellis Street
Carrickfergus
BT38 8AZ
Tel: 028 9331 5112

Sperrin House
43 Queen's Avenue
Magheraflet
BT45 6BX
Tel: 028 7930 1700

Newry & Mourne Health and Social Services Trust

Butterfield House
24 Monaghan Street
Newry
BT35 6AA
Tel: 028 3025 0808

North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust

Lawther Building
16 Cupar Street
Belfast
BT13 2LJ
Tel: 028 9032 0840

South & East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust

Glen Villa
Knockbracken Healthcare Park
Saintfield Road
Belfast
BT8 8BH
Tel: 028 9056 5555

Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust

Community Services
Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital
Omagh
BT79 0NS
Tel: 028 8225 5020

Community Services
1 Coleshill Road
Enniskillen
BT74 7HG
Tel: 028 6634 4000

Ulster Community and Hospitals Trust

Family and Childcare Services
Dunlop Unit 57-58
4 Balloo Drive
Bangor
BT19 7QY
Tel: 028 9127 0672

Acknowledgements

The Health Promotion Agency (HPA) would like to acknowledge the significant contribution of the following, who assisted in the drafting of this document:

Alison Armstrong, Chief Community Dietitian, North and West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust;

Ann Barrett, Community Dietitian, Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust;

Rose Day, Community Dietitian, United Hospitals Health and Social Services Trust;

Rosemary Read, Community Dietitian, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust;

Patti Speedy, Senior Health Promotion Officer (Dental), Eastern Health and Social Services Board;

Maria Tynan, Community Dietitian, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust.

The HPA would also like to thank the many individuals and organisations who provided advice and comments including:

Hazel Alexander-Law, Health Visitor, Down Lisburn Health and Social Services Trust;

Claire Colgan, Health Visitor, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust;

Liz Cushnie, Social Worker, Craigavon and Banbridge Health and Social Services Trust;

Josephine Doherty, Social Worker, Foyle Health and Social Services Trust;

Helen Farrell, Health Visitor, Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust;

Hilary Friel, Paediatric Dietitian, Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;

Ann Gault, Social Worker, Causeway Health and Social Services Trust;

Ann Gormley, Dental Therapist, Sperrin Lakeland Health and Social Care Trust;

Patricia Ann Hodge, Health Visitor, Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust;

Una Irwin, Health Visitor, South and East Belfast Health and Social Services Trust;

Julia Kirk, Dental Services Manager, Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust.

Donna McLaughlin, Proprietor, Little Treasures Day Nursery, Limavady;

Dympna McLaughlin, Oral Health Promotion Coordinator, Area Community Dental Service, Armagh and Dungannon Health and Social Services Trust.

Solveig Noble, Assistant Director, Community Dental Service, Homefirst Health and Social Services Trust;

Dr Maura O'Neill, Health Promotion Officer, Westcare Business Services;

Mary Orange, Health Visitor, Foyle Health and Social Services Trust.