

Tips for Providing Varied and Cost-Effective Meals and Snacks

Offering nutritious, diverse and budget-friendly meals and snacks in early years settings is vital for supporting healthy growth and development and meeting children's varied preferences, all while keeping costs in check.

Here are some useful tips to help ensure your children enjoy balanced, nutritious and exciting meals without exceeding your budget.

Menu Planning

- ▶ Planning menus for meals and snacks in advance helps to reduce time and control costs.
- ▶ Standardising tried and tested popular recipes can also help to reduce time in sourcing ingredients and keeping track of allergens.
- ▶ The DfE has created eleven recipes suitable for a wide range of children, including those with special dietary requirements. Using the principles of these [recipes](#), you can cook once and feed all the children at the same time, saving time and money.



Shopping

- ▶ When shopping, do not overlook supermarket or 'value' brands, especially for staple foods, such as dried pasta, rice or canned tomatoes. There is not always much difference between value and premium ranges and some value brands can contain less added sugar and salt than premium brands.
- ▶ Beware of special discounts, such as 'buy one get one free' (BOGOF) deals. These can offer good value but only if they can be kept and used, such as tinned fruit or vegetables. It is important to remember that if buying tinned fruit and vegetables, settings should avoid fruit tinned in syrup and added salt and sugar in tinned vegetables and pulses for nutritional purposes.
- ▶ Explore local food sellers in your area, such as greengrocers, markets or butchers. Local food sellers sometimes offer cheaper options and you can buy the exact amount that you need, therefore reducing wastage.



Preparing Meals

- ▶ Batch cooking and freezing additional portions can be a cost-effective way to reduce time spent cooking, particularly for childminders catering for smaller numbers of children – try freezing surplus bread for another day. Remember to follow the [Food Standard Agency's](#) food guidelines when storing, freezing, defrosting and reheating foods.
- ▶ For smaller numbers of portions, consider using a slow cooker to cook main meals (such as stews, curries and soups) for a prepare-ahead option that makes the most of cheaper cuts of meat.
- ▶ Cooking from scratch can be more cost-effective (and healthier) than using ready-made/bought products. You could use ingredients like canned tomatoes, onions and herbs instead of jars of cooking sauce.



Fruit and Vegetables



- ▶ Choose fruits and vegetables in season where possible, to be at their tastiest and cheapest.
- ▶ Compare the price per weight between loose and pre-packed fruit and vegetables, sometimes the packed produce is cheaper, sometimes it's more expensive.
- ▶ Frozen or canned fruits and vegetables can be used as an alternative to fresh. Using frozen vegetables can help to minimise waste. Remember to choose canned vegetables without added sugar and salt and fruit canned in juice not syrup.
- ▶ Settings can consider growing fruits and vegetables to use; tomatoes, courgettes, runner beans and potatoes can all be grown in pots or bags and fresh herbs can be grown in pots on windowsills. This is a great way to start to teach children about growing food and may provide some ingredients to use as part of meals or snacks.
- ▶ Buying fruit and vegetables from local markets can be a cost-effective option and a great way to involve children.
- ▶ Experiment with making your own fruit yoghurt by blending chopped fresh, stewed, tinned or frozen fruits with plain yoghurt. You could also use up leftover fruit that you might normally throw away. Shop-bought fruit yoghurt can be high in sugar.

Meat and Fish



- ▶ Meat and fish are typically the most expensive food ingredients. Add pulses, such as beans, lentils and peas, to replace some of the meat or fish in casseroles and curries. These will help to reduce the amount of meat/fish you use and are also a great source of fibre.
- ▶ You may also consider buying a whole chicken if you are planning on using it for more than one meal, as this can be better value.
- ▶ If you have space in your freezer, buying frozen meat can often be cheaper. However, it is important that the defrosting guidance is followed carefully.
- ▶ Cheaper cuts of meat, such as braising steak, shin or shoulder, may need longer cooking to help break down the fibres, but can create a great tasting dish at a lower cost.
- ▶ Eggs and tinned fish are economical and remember that canned salmon counts as an oily fish in the same way that fresh salmon does. Try using canned salmon for more cost-effective fish cakes and fish pies.

Portion Sizes

- ▶ A portion size for a child aged one to five, is generally smaller than an adult portion. Portion size refers to one part of a meal. For example, one portion of vegetables alongside a portion of carbohydrates and a portion of protein could be one meal. There are no official guidelines on exactly how much food children need.
- ▶ Portions should be appropriate for a child's body size and appetite. For toddlers, portion size is usually roughly the size of their clenched fist. About half a piece of fruit (cut appropriately) or a tablespoon of vegetables is a good portion size for a snack.
- ▶ Monitor children's appetites and adjust portion sizes to make sure they get enough energy and nutrients. It can be helpful to start meals with small servings (they can always ask for more if they are still hungry). The DfE's help for early years providers website has a guide to portion sizes.

Minimise Food Waste

- ▶ Check the date and be clear on the difference between 'use by' dates (which are important for food safety) and 'best before' dates (which relate to product quality) to ensure you don't waste food unnecessarily.
- ▶ Store your food correctly to keep it fresher for longer. Follow best practice for food storage, such as keeping apples in the fridge and storing potatoes in a cool, dark place.
- ▶ Use leftover food wisely. Freeze any unused food in line with food safety advice.



Sustainability of Food

- ▶ Early years settings can help make a positive contribution to the economy and environment by considering how the food they use is grown, stored, prepared and used.
- ▶ Settings can also play an important role in teaching children about seasonality and sustainability (how food used meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs).
- ▶ Lower energy use and costs while cooking by consistently using lids on pans when boiling, preparing meals in bulk, or cooking multiple dishes at once.



Practical guidance on eating well sustainably for early years settings has been produced by [First Steps Nutrition Trust](#) and information on how to create more sustainable menus is available from [Soil Association Food for Life](#).

Food Safety Advice for Young Children

- ▶ Food should be stored, prepared and presented in a safe and hygienic environment. This is especially important when providing food for young children, as they may have a low resistance to food poisoning.
- ▶ All staff involved in preparing and handling food must receive training in food hygiene.
- ▶ It is also important that children are taught basic hygiene themselves, such as not sharing food or eating food that has fallen on the floor, washing their hands with soap and warm water before eating meals or snacks and after going to the toilet or handling animals.
- ▶ Infants and young children should never be left alone while they are eating, and staff should be familiar with paediatric first aid advice for children who are choking. Whilst children are eating there should always be a member of staff in the room with a valid paediatric first aid certificate. The criteria for effective Paediatric First Aid (PFA) training can be found in the [Early years foundation stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework](#).
- ▶ Ensure food is cooked until steaming hot to kill harmful bacteria and is then cooled sufficiently before giving it to infants and young children.
- ▶ Ensure infants and young children are seated safely in a highchair or appropriately sized low chair while they are eating and that they are closely supervised. Adults should be able to see children's faces whilst they are eating, including whilst preparing and serving food. Where possible, adults should sit facing children whilst they eat so that they can make sure children are eating in a way to prevent choking, they can prevent food sharing and be aware of any unexpected allergic reactions.
- ▶ Where possible there should be a designated eating space where distractions are minimised.



Please refer to the handout on [Food Safety in the Early Years](#) for further safety advice on mealtimes and preparation of different types of food.

School Food Standards

Compliance with the [School Food Standards](#) (regulatory body for the food and drink in settings) is mandatory for maintained schools, academies and free schools, as well as setting out requirements specific to maintained nursery schools and nursery units within primary schools. In addition to this, there are other requirements in the EYFS that go beyond the specific food groups and therefore settings must also take into account the EYFS [nutrition guidance](#).

For more information on the School Food regulations, please see the DfE's [School food standards: resources for schools guidance](#).



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