



The Simple Guide to Early Years Nutrition



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Lindsay Gilbert from Foodtalk

We're lucky enough to have sat down with pediatric dietitian Lindsay Gilbert from Foodtalk in the process of making this guide. You'll find Lindsay's expert insight littered throughout the guide, and you can find the full interview over on [our blog](#).

Foodtalk themselves are a not-for-profit organisation comprising of three paediatric dietitians passionate about reducing health inequalities relating to diet and nutrition. They specialise in community nutrition interventions designed to promote good eating habits in the early years.

Even better, they've just released a brilliant board game that you can use to help train your staff on the most vital early nutrition knowledge. You can buy it online over [here](#).

foodtalk
Nourishing healthy communities



Why Early Nutrition Matters

Early Years Nutrition is important. Almost **10% of children enter their reception year as obese**. Dental cavities, cases of type II diabetes and iron deficiency are all on the rise. It's more crucial than ever that we prioritise the nutrition of the children in our care.

The power you have to positively impact children's nutrition are neatly summed up in the 'Eat Better. Start Better' guidelines published by the government in 2017 as:

- Ensuring that children get the right amount of energy (calories) and nutrients needed while they are growing rapidly.
- Ensuring that they do not consume too much energy (calories), which may lead to children becoming overweight or obese.
- Encourage them to eat a wide variety of foods and develop good dietary habits to take with them into later childhood and beyond.

96% of the three and four-year-old population in this country access some sort of pre-school care. What children learn about food and mealtimes in the early years, especially if they're not learning it at home, becomes incredibly important.

My first dietetic manager used to tell me 'what's learnt first lasts the longest', and that's always stuck with me.



The EYFS



While the 'Eat Better. Start Better' guidelines go into great depth on how to provide the most nutritious environment for your little ones, it's important to understand your statutory responsibilities too. Remember that anything in the EYFS can be inspected by Ofsted when they visit.

Here are some key takeaways from the EYFS Statutory Framework:

- If you provide food and drink, it must be healthy, balanced and nutritious.
- You must know every child's dietary requirements, preferences and allergies before they start.
- Fresh drinking water must be available and accessible at all times.
- You have to have an area suitable for hygienic preparation of food and otherwise be well equipped to provide healthy food and drink.
- You must be satisfied that whoever provides the food and drink are competent and everyone involved is properly trained in food hygiene.
- You must make parents aware what food and drink is available.



No Food Is Bad Food



Our expert paediatric dietitian Lindsay says one of the crucial elements of a healthy attitude towards food is understanding that no food is good or bad by itself.

Instead, the focus is on whether a food should be enjoyed as an everyday food or a food that should be enjoyed occasionally. “Your diet can be good or bad, but no food is good or bad by itself,” she says.

According to Lindsay, everyday foods are things like:

- Starchy foods
- Iron-rich protein food
- Calcium-rich dairy foods
- Fruit and vegetables

On the other side of the coin, we have things like sweets, crisps, and chocolates. These foods shouldn't be denied outright, but instead positioned as foods we can enjoy once every now and again.

To suggest these foods are bad is promote bad attitudes towards food in general. “We want children to enjoy their food without feeling guilty, all while learning about everyday foods and non-everyday foods,” says Lindsay.

Healthy Attitudes That Matter

The thing about early years nutrition is that it's about more than just what's on the plate.

The environment that we create around food and the healthy attitudes that we teach to children are just as important. Things like:

- The enjoyment of eating
- Eating as a sociable activity
- Eating a variety of foods
- The importance of sitting down to eat and drink
- Not feeling guilty about our food
- The importance of food as part of our daily routine
- Listening to our bodies and understanding when we're full or hungry
- Eating in a pleasant environment

These are all crucial ideas that children need to understand if we want them to grow up hungry for a healthier and happier relationship with food.

A lot of adults don't have a great relationship with food themselves, and so many children grow up in households where less healthy attitudes towards food can be passed on. So we need to provide an environment that supports children to learn healthy mealtime habits and to eat well.



The Mealtime Environment

In the early years, we already know the power of a quality learning environment. But do we approach our mealtime environments with the same care?

Many settings have a hectic mealtime environment, and that can have a disastrous effect on children's attitudes towards food. Here's how you can put that right.

1. Encourage intuitive eating

Children need to learn to recognise and respect their instincts on when they are hungry and when they are full. This is crucial for managing proper portion control and preventing issues across the full spectrum of eating disorders. Some things to focus on include:

- Not forcing children to eat when they don't want to
- Not denying children more food when they're hungry
- Giving plenty of time for children to eat at their own pace
- Stopping the use of food as a reward or punishment (more on this later)



Staff can often give portions that are far too big. So educating everyone on a typical portion size for a toddler can be a good starting point. That can be a big eye-opener, because often staff are worried about children going hungry, and associate big portions with love and care.

2. Distraction-free mealtime

Mealtimes should be a time when children focus on what's at hand. That means the eating primarily, but it also means making time for open and engaging conversations that let children practice their listening and speaking.

Some things you should avoid in your mealtime environment:

- Background noise like music or other children playing loudly nearby
- Adults moving up and down between the tables all the time
- Constant traffic of children coming to and fro
- Overly stimulating or engaging resources nearby
- Poor layout meaning that every departure from the table disrupts other children

3. Trying new foods

Expanding a child's interest in food and opening up certain healthy choices is an important part of your role at mealtime.

Keep with a variety of textures, tastes, temperatures, size, and colour, and make sure that any unfamiliar choices are included alongside some more familiar options. Even if the kids aren't that interested the first time, offering the new food as a choice regularly will help it to become more familiar and palatable without forcing it on anyone.



4. Model behaviour

Children are sometimes naturally fearful of trying new foods due to some early evolutionary instincts.

This can be overcome by ensuring that adults are trying new things around them and not showing any sort of fearful behaviour themselves. That means that wherever possible, adults should be eating amongst the children and modelling positive behaviour.



Staff may not always be present at mealtimes and even if they are, they may not eat the same food as the children. Unfortunately, they can sometimes act negatively around certain foods, saying 'I don't like that' or refusing to touch certain things. It's easy to forget that what you say and how you act can impact a lot on the children. Staff need to be positive role models too.

5. Stop the rewards

Using food as a reward or a punishment is **widely understood to be a pretty bad move.**

By using punishment and reward, you're stopping children from learning how to self-regulate their own food consumption or understand when they're hungry and full.

By doing so, the children can learn to ignore when they are full, which can lead directly to overeating later in life. It also sets the little ones on the path to emotional eating, where you associate eating with feeling good to a damaging extent.



6. Make it warm, bright and comforting

Hygiene makes things tricky in mealtime environments, but you should do whatever you can to make sure yours is as cosy as it can be.

Sterile plastic sheets everywhere can make children feel uncomfortable and being overly concerned about mess can stop children from engaging with their food.

7. Playful Eating

Food is a sensory experience for children, and while using cutlery is good for motor control, you shouldn't be afraid to let the kids get stuck in with their fingers sometimes too.

Rushing to clean up every spill can lead to a stressful, sterilised space where the children are discouraged from being adventurous with their food, and can specifically cause some sensory issues such as creating an aversion to slimy foods.

8. An inclusive seating arrangement

When thinking about the layout of your mealtime environment, try to create small groups where all children can take part and be heard. If you can, have one adult per group so that they can help to lead the conversation, answer questions, and model behaviour.

The babies shouldn't be left out either! Have the highchairs facing one another so that the children can look at and engage with one another while they're eating.



How to Get Children More Involved

When it comes to nutrition and healthy eating, it's easy to feel a bit...stagnant. You might be happy with your mealtime environment and the nutrition you're providing, but not quite getting the interest from the little ones that you want.

Here's some ideas to freshen up your approach and encourage a healthy relationship with eating for every child.

1. Go straight to the source

It would be easy in this day and age for children to think their food simply comes from the plastic packaging they see it in at the supermarket. But understanding where our food comes from is key to developing healthy, sustainable attitudes towards food.

From around June in the UK, you could pick berries with the children, or take a trip to a dairy farm to teach children where their milk and butter comes from. If your setting has some outside space, consider planting fruit and vegetables - it's always so much more exciting to eat things that you've grown yourself!



2. Give them the freedom to choose

Giving children freedom over their lunch is a great way to encourage more intuitive eating. Every now and again, why not offer a base meal, like pasta, rice or whole grain wraps for lunch, and then let the children (and the staff!) choose what else they want?

You could try healthy sauces, chopped tomatoes, cheese, sweetcorn, salsa... This approach can be great for those little tots who change up their preferences faster than you can keep up with!

Choices can also be given at snack time - how about arranging a fruit or veg platter where the children can make their own healthy choices?

3. Dip it

One way to make fruit and vegetables more appealing is to experiment with condiments and dips with your children. How about chopping up some carrots, peppers and cucumber for children to dip in something?

Hummus, guacamole, salsa, yogurt-based dressing... the healthy dip choices are endless.



4. Get them involved

If children are involved in the 'prepping' of their food, they will be more invested in the process and will be more likely to eat whatever you decide to make.

Providing the right safety precautions are taken, children could help blend some houmous or chop vegetables for dipping. In the summer, frozen fruit ice lollies are a great (and easy) way to get children involved with making their own food.

The kids can also help to plate up the food, set the tables up, take everything over to the table or serve their own food

You could even try basing some activities around your children's favourite healthy food. They could cook this in their play-kitchen, or get creative and create their favourite meal in the crafts area.

5. Sprinkle some sugar

Young children are particularly vulnerable to tooth decay, because their enamel is weaker than that of adult teeth. Tooth decay is caused by having sugary food and drinks too often. That's why sweet treats should only be an occasional food at nursery.

However, there's an important difference between the natural sugars we find in fruit and milk and the free sugars that are present in juices, cakes, and biscuits. Natural sugar is far better for little teeth, and brings with it important vitamins and minerals. So when it comes to desserts, it's a safe bet to base them on fruit and dairy, and try to reduce the amount of free sugar that you add.



Expert Advice from Lindsay Gilbert

You'll have seen some of Lindsay's advice already throughout the guide, but it's time to go into more detail. Here's Lindsay's advice on dealing with some of the biggest nutrition challenges.

Policy comes first

Your healthy eating and nutrition policy should absolutely be the starting point. That's where you set out your setting's whole ethos and approach. It's so much easier if you have the conversation at the beginning because everyone knows where they stand and no-one is offended because you've already explained your policy and why you have that in place.

Leadership counts

I've worked with settings that shone because they had a passionate practitioner who was given time to work on their food policy and menus and encouraged to work closely with the chef and manager to implement them. In other situations that passion has been there but the proper time wasn't given and it didn't work out.



Find a flagbearer

Start by asking yourself what skills you already have in your team. Do an audit and find out what the gaps are too. By doing so, you can get an understanding of how many of your Level 2 practitioners have received any nutrition training, how recently your level 3s have updated their knowledge, and who has a passion for it in general.

Intolerances and allergies

You need to make sure that your policy has clear guidelines about how your setting manages special diets. For example, requesting an Allergy Action Plan can be particularly helpful.

If a parent approaches you with various dietary requirements, you could point them towards a registered dietitian to make sure that they have the right support to ensure their child's diet remains balanced. It's important that foods aren't being omitted unnecessarily.

Snack Time

I know some settings are advised not to break for snacks. But free flow snacking can be chaotic and may result in some children taking too much whilst others may miss out altogether.

We worked with a nursery where a specific snack table and chairs were set up at snack time. Children were aware that they could choose whether to come and sit down and eat their snack or not, leaving them in charge of their own play and appetite.



10 Healthy Recipes to Cook Together

We've already mentioned how effective it can be to get children involved in the cooking, so why not finish off with ten great recipes that are perfect for doing just that.

Sound interesting?
Click on the name to go straight to the full recipe.



1. Yoghurt Muesli Pots



In a nutshell: Toast some muesli and present your little ones with bowls full of different kinds of yoghurt, fresh berries and nuts.

They will definitely enjoy being able to match and mix their favourite choices and create beautiful layers while they're at it.

2. Frozen Rainbow Fruit Kebabs



In a nutshell: This delicious recipe doubles up as a wonderful EYFS-focused activity too.

You can extend the activity by printing cards with fruits in different orders for kids to recreate in real life (identifying patterns) while threading the fruits on the skewers (fine motor skills).

3. Easy Banana Bread Recipe for Toddlers



In a nutshell: Ultimately, you just mix a bunch of ingredients together here, leave it in an oven for 40 mins and you've got yourself a cake! Magic.

Simple it might be, but you can still use a lot of new words to describe the process, like stir, mix, fold, half, full, preheat, add, and bake.

4. Super Healthy Homemade Dips



In a nutshell: We might be cheating a bit here – kids probably shouldn't be allowed anywhere near the food processor or blender that most of these delish dips require.

But what they can do is cut fruits and veggies and arrange them on plates or even use forks to mash up the ingredients.



5. Healthy Choc Pops



In a nutshell: This is a healthier alternative to the classic cookie balls. Yes, it involves a food processor or a blender again but only for a small part.

After all, someone still has to use their motor skills and roll the dough into cute, little balls and then stick them on some ice cream sticks to create the choc pops!

6. The Ultimate Healthy Cut-Out Sugar Cookies



In a nutshell: While whisking all the ingredients together can be a lot of fun on its own, the best part of making cut-out cookies is, well...the cutting out part.

Rolling the dough engages a lot of those important little muscles making it a great gross motor skill exercise too.

7. Cucumber Sushi



In a nutshell: This fish and seaweed free 'sushi' makes a perfect, nutritious snack for pickier taste buds.

Slice up the cucumbers and let the little chefs hollow out the centre with a melon baller or a spoon before stuffing with rolls of cheese, meat, and carrots. Enjoy!

8. Frozen Yoghurt Banana Pops



In a nutshell: This recipe creates a particularly playful experience as you get to set up a whole station with three stands.

One for cutting bananas in half and sticking them on ice lolly sticks, one for rolling them in yoghurt and one for dipping the bananas in all kinds of nuts and berries (or sprinkles if the kids are in for a sweet treat). Great for practicing turn-taking!

9. Sweet Spinach Muffins



In a nutshell: Hulk Muffins, Green Goblins, Monster Muffins or Frog Muffins, whatever you want to call these you definitely don't have to worry about the taste.

Spooning the batter into the cupcake liners is a good opportunity to introduce children to how different ingredients like baking powder and soda affect the baking results.

10. Rainbow Tortilla Wrap



In a nutshell: This recipe is simple, colourful, healthy and involves a whole buffet of different ingredients which kids can choose from.

Plus, it's not a bad skill to learn for later life. You'd be surprised how few people around the Family office lunch table can perform this very simple task.



Further Reading

- [Eat Better Start Better Practical Guide by Action for Children](#) – Formerly from the Children’s Food Trust, this pack includes guidelines, fact sheets, allergen information, policy help and more. It’s got some particularly helpful visuals on portion sizes.
- [Eat Better, Start Better for the Early Years by The Children’s Food Trust](#) - This page has everything you might need to improve nutrition at your setting. From guidelines, to menu checking and training advice.
- [Promoting and Supporting Healthy Eating in Early Years Settings](#) - A 4-page fact sheet with self-reflection questions to ask yourself in order to improve your early years setting.
- [Eating Well in the Early Years by First Steps Nutrition](#) - 6+ wonderfully visual, descriptive guides on packed lunches, vegan centred nutrition, recipe books, guides on how to eat more sustainability and more. Truly world-class information, available to download for free.
- [Eat Better Start Better Online Training Resources by Let’s Get Cooking](#) – The online training resources that accompany the Eat Better, Start Better guidelines.
- [Example Menus For Early Years by Public Health England](#) – Sample menus which you can use, adapt or learn from. All menus comply closely with the government dietary recommendations.
- [The FoodTalk Game by Foodtalk](#) – The brilliant game from Foodtalk that we already mentioned, perfect for any early years setting looking to level up their practitioner’s knowledge in a fun, easy-to-use format.
- [Making Mealtimes Positive by Putting Children First](#) – This two pager from Australia is full of wonderful ideas to build a more positive mealtime environment, with helpful adaptations for different ages.
- [Basford Day Nursery Case Study by Children’s Food Trust](#) – This case study about how one nursery dealt with fussy eaters is full of great ideas if you’re facing the same problems in your setting.
- [Mealtime Environment Course by Healthy & Active Preschoolers](#) – This online course is from the US, but plenty of the learning will be relevant to the UK too. It’s around an hour and half and free to take.
- [Building Mealtime Environments and Relationships by The University of Idaho](#) – This meticulously researched guide is a great resource for more in depth thinking about what an ideal mealtime environment looks like.
- [Nutrition Matters For The Early Years: Guidance For Feeding Under Fives in the Childcare Setting by Public Health Agency \(NI\)](#) - This guidance document from the Northern Irish Public Health Agency has some wonderful advice on portions, nutrition and more.

