

Lunchtime, Snack and Hydration

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Policy statement

Our provision regards snack and meal times as an important part of our day. Eating represents a social time for children and adults and helps children to learn about healthy eating. We promote healthy eating. At snack and meal times, we aim to provide nutritious food, which meets the children's individual dietary needs.

Procedures

We follow these procedures to promote healthy eating in our setting.

- Before a child starts to attend the setting, we find out from parents their children's dietary needs and preferences, including any allergies. (See the Managing Children who are Sick, Infectious or with Allergies policy.)
- We record information about each child's dietary needs in her/his registration record and parents sign the record to signify that it is correct.
- We regularly consult with parents to ensure that our records of their children's dietary needs - including any allergies - are up-to-date. Parents sign the up-dated record to signify that it is correct.
- We display current information about individual children's dietary needs so that all staff and volunteers are fully informed about them.
- We implement systems to ensure that children receive only food and drink that is consistent with their dietary needs and preferences as well as their parents' wishes.
- We provide nutritious food for all meals and snacks, avoiding large quantities of saturated fat, sugar and salt and artificial additives, preservatives and colourings.
- We include foods from the diet of each of the children's cultural backgrounds, providing children with familiar foods and introducing them to new ones.
- We take care not to provide food containing nuts or nut products and are especially vigilant where we have a child who has a known allergy to nuts.
- We don't give children under 5 small, round food items. Just because it is food doesn't mean it is safe. Small round food items such as Grapes, blueberries and similar are just the right size and consistency to perfectly block the airway because of their cylindrical shape, stopping any air getting through. These types of food must be chopped lengthways or into quarters.
- Through discussion with parents and research reading by staff, we obtain information about the dietary rules of the religious groups to which children and their parents belong, and of vegetarians and vegans, and about food allergies. We take account of this information in the provision of food and drinks.
- We require staff to show sensitivity in providing for children's diets and allergies. Staff do not use a child's diet or allergy as a label for the child or make a child feel singled out because of her/his diet or allergy.
- We organise snack times so that they are social occasions in which children and staff participate.
- We use snack times to help children to develop independence through making choices, serving food and drink and feeding themselves.
- We provide children with utensils that are appropriate for their ages and stages of development and that take account of the eating practices in their cultures.
- We have fresh drinking water constantly available for the children. We inform the children about how to obtain the water and that they can ask for water at any time during the day.
- We inform parents who provide food for their children about the storage facilities available in the setting.

- We give parents who provide food for their children information about suitable containers for food.
- In order to protect children with food allergies, we discourage children from sharing and swapping their food with one another.
- For children who drink milk, we provide whole pasteurised milk.

Packed lunches

We:

- inform parents of our policy on healthy eating;
- encourage parents to provide sandwiches with a healthy filling, fruit, and milk based desserts such as yoghurt or crème fraîche. We discourage sweet drinks and can provide children with water or diluted fresh fruit juice;
- discourage packed lunch contents that consist largely of crisps, processed foods, sweet drinks and sweet products such as cakes or biscuits. We reserve the right to return this food to the parent as a last resort;
- ensure where possible staff sit with children at lunchtime so that the mealtime is a social occasion.

Food Poisoning

- We notify Ofsted of any food poisoning affecting two or more children looked after on the premises as soon as is reasonably practicable, but in any event within 14 days of the incident.

Legal framework

- Regulation (EC) 853/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council on the hygiene of foodstuffs

Further guidance

- Safer Food, Better Business (Food Standards Agency 2008)

Nursery School Lunchtime & Hydration Policy

Introduction & Rationale

Our approach to mealtimes, hydration, and snack routines supports children's overall development, wellbeing, and independence through trauma-informed, physically attuned, and developmentally appropriate practice. In line with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), Ofsted research, the BUSS model, therapeutic feeding principles, and public-health guidance, we recognise that for children to learn, regulate, and thrive, their basic physiological needs must be met predictably and sensitively.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights that children are unable to reach higher-level cognitive processes—such as problem-solving, reasoning, memory, and focus—until their basic needs, including nutrition, hydration, safety, rest, and emotional security, are consistently met. By ensuring that children arrive fed or receive breakfast on arrival, have access to balanced meals and snacks, and develop an understanding of how to meet their body's needs, we establish the foundations for healthy brain development and meaningful engagement in learning.

Why We Use This Approach

Our approach to mealtimes is grounded in the understanding that many children, particularly in early years, require scaffolded support to develop the physical and emotional regulation necessary to eat, sit, and engage positively with others. The BUSS model underlines the importance of core strength, postural control, and sensorimotor readiness before expecting children to remain seated and participate effectively. Trauma-informed practice teaches us those behaviours around food, such as refusal, rushing, hoarding, or distress, may stem from past adverse experiences. Therefore, our approach is patient, empathetic, and adaptive to each child's unique developmental pathway.

High-quality early education acknowledges that learning occurs across the whole day. Mealtimes and routines—such as snack, lunch, and hydration checks—offer rich opportunities for social interaction, communication, early maths and science concepts, and physical development. Predictable routines support regulation and a sense of safety, which are essential for healthy eating patterns and positive relationships with food.

Front Loading and Food as Fuel

The nursery school actively uses a 'front-loading' approach to nutrition, ensuring that children receive food early in the day and before periods of high learning demand. By offering breakfast on arrival and balanced morning snacks, children access food as fuel for both the brain and body. This supports stable energy levels, reduces hunger-related dysregulation, and strengthens children's ability to concentrate, manage emotions, sustain attention, and engage positively in learning and social interaction. Front loading is recognised as a key protective factor in supporting executive functioning, behaviour, and emotional regulation, particularly for children who may experience food insecurity or difficulty with transitions. (Adolphus, Lawton & Dye, 2013. 2016; Lundqvist et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2024; Heiland et al., 2024)

Hydration, Health, and Children's Understanding of Their Bodies

Hydration is understood as a core component of children's wellbeing, directly influencing cognitive development, concentration, mood, memory, and physical functioning. Children are taught about the importance of drinking water regularly, and staff support them in recognising bodily cues such as thirst, energy levels, and toileting patterns.

We discuss hydration with children in an age-appropriate way, including the use of a urine-colour chart to help them identify whether they are drinking enough. This routine is guided by NHS and ERIC recommendations and forms part of children's early health education. Hydration is linked not only to brain health but also to bowel regulation and toileting comfort; staff actively encourage drinking water throughout the day to support healthy bladder and bowel habits.

Benefits of Our Lunchtime & Hydration Approach

- Children develop independence and self-help skills through serving, pouring, and cleaning up.
- Consistent routines provide emotional security and support healthy eating.
- Children learn social skills such as turn-taking and conversational norms.
- Physical development, posture, core strength, and motor skills are supported.
- Hydration routines normalise self-care and promote healthy toileting.
- Adults can closely monitor allergies, choking risks, distress signals, and developmental needs.
- Mealtimes reflect inclusion, diversity, and respect for individual needs.

Vision

Mealtimes, hydration routines, and snack sessions are seen as vital learning opportunities that promote children's emotional wellbeing, physical development, and social learning. Our approach aligns with EYFS, Ofsted expectations, trauma-informed care, and the BUSS model, ensuring each child feels safe, empowered, and ready to learn.

Guiding Principles

- Children's bodies must be physically ready for mealtimes, supported by BUSS-aligned routines.
- Emotional safety is central, with trauma-informed care guiding all interactions.
- Hydration is embedded into daily routines and monitored with child-friendly tools.
- Mealtimes and snacks are social, educational experiences.
- Independence is developed progressively, respecting children's developmental readiness.
- Cultural, dietary, medical, and sensory needs are respected and catered for.

Seating & Postural Progression

Our seating stages ensure that all children are supported physically and developmentally:

Stage 1 (Age 2–2.5): Step 1: Chair with fixed/ tray. Step 2: Tray table + back support – *Secure start with adult help*

Stage 2 (Age 2.5–3.5): Step 3: Independent 'L' sitting with tray table – *Core strengthening and early self-feeding*

Stage 3 (Age 3.5–4): Step 4: Low chair, feet flat at table – *Self-control, social participation*

Stage 4 (Age 4–5): Step 5: Low stool, independent balance at table – *Independence and peer responsibility*

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Step 2: Tray table + back support – secure start with adult help

Stage 2 (Age 2.5–3.5):

Step 3: Independent 'L' sitting with tray table – core strengthening and early self-feeding

Stage 3 (Age 3.5–4):

Step 4: Low chair, feet flat at table – self-control and social participation

Stage 4 (Age 4–5):

Step 5: Low stool, independent balance at table – independence and peer responsibility

Stage 1: Beginning Independence (Approx. Age 2–2.5)

Seating:

- Step 1 – Small chair with fixed tray
- Step 2 – Tray table and back support to encourage 'L' sitting

Children at this stage will:

- Sit at the tray with adult support
- Use a spoon to self-feed with encouragement
- Carry a placemat or small cup/bottle to the tray
- Choose between two food options
- Pour a small amount of water from a child-sized jug (with help)
- Wipe their face or table with guidance

Focus:

Physical support + simple participation = safe, secure start.

Assessment indicators:

A child should move on when they can remain seated comfortably with minimal support, maintain an 'L' shape at the hips, and show early control in self-feeding. If a child frequently slides to the side, slumps, or cannot maintain a stable seated position—even with support—they should remain at this stage until their core stability improves.

Stage 2: Emerging Skills (Approx. Age 2.5–3.5)**Seating:**

- Step 3 – Sit in 'L' position independently to strengthen core at tray table

Children at this stage will:

- Sit upright with increasing postural stability
- Use a spoon and begin using a fork
- Help lay the table with adult prompting
- Pour water with fewer spills
- Clean small spills with a cloth
- Serve themselves simple foods (e.g., fruit slices, bread)
- Scrape their plate into the bin or washing-up area

Focus:

Strengthening core stability to allow functional independence at the table.

Assessment indicators:

A child is ready to progress when they can maintain an 'L' sitting position without wriggling, sliding, or leaning heavily on the tray table for support. If a child frequently wriggles, fidgets excessively, or shifts position to stabilise themselves, this may indicate that they need to remain in—or return to—the supported 'L' position until their core strength increases.

Stage 3: Developing Confidence (Approx. Age 3.5–4)**Seating:**

- Step 4 – Low chair with feet flat on the floor for good posture

Children at this stage will:

- Sit independently with a stable posture
- Use a fork and spoon with control
- Set the table for peers using a visual guide
- Serve themselves from their packed lunch box
- Pour drinks for others with confidence
- Fold napkins or clean their place after eating
- Take on a simple "helping" mealtime role

Focus:

Full participation with self-control and developing social responsibility.

Assessment indicators:

Move children on when they can sit with both feet flat on the floor, sustain good posture without leaning or slumping, and engage in mealtime activities without losing balance. If a child frequently wriggles, stands up, kneels on the chair, or struggles to stay upright, they may need to return to an 'L' sitting stage to rebuild postural control.

Stage 4: Independent Routine (Approx. Age 4–5)

Seating:

- Step 5 – Low stool, maintaining balance and poise at the table

Children at this stage will:

- Sit on the stool without support, maintaining balance
- Use a knife and fork for soft foods
- Take responsibility for the full mealtime routine (set, serve, eat, tidy)
- Monitor peers and offer support (e.g., “Would you like more water?”)
- Begin reflecting on personal needs (“What do I need for lunch today?”)

Focus:

Grace, courtesy, and fully independent self-care.

Assessment indicators:

A child is ready for this level when they can sit on a stool with stable balance and controlled movements during mealtime. If a child perches, rocks, frequently loses balance, or cannot stay safely seated, they may need to return to a low chair for additional postural support before trying the stool again.

Mealtime Practice

Environment

- Calm, well-lit, low-distraction space
- Familiar routines and visual cues
- Trays, tables and seating arranged to allow eye-level engagement
- Adults positioned to monitor safety and emotional cues

Adult Role

- Sit with children and model language-rich positive interactions
- Encourage self-help skills and independence
- Respect children’s choices and emotional needs
- Support allergies and dietary requirements with clear procedures
- Keep children within sight and hearing at all times

Social Learning

- Support turn-taking, manners, and conversation
- Encourage self-service and celebration of food diversity
- Notice and respond sensitively to children's emotional states

Snack Time: Nutrition, Regulation, and Skill Development

Snack time plays a vital role in children's physical regulation and readiness for learning. Each day follows a specific menu that is balanced and thoughtfully planned. While fruit provides natural sugars and nutrients, for some children this alone is not sufficient to maintain stable energy levels. To avoid blood-sugar spikes and dips—which can affect mood, attention, and participation—snacks also include carbohydrates and proteins for sustained nourishment.

Snack routines mirror therapeutic feeding principles. Children are offered opportunities to develop independence skills such as spreading, cutting, pouring, and serving. These tasks strengthen fine motor control, hand function, coordination, and confidence, aligning with the sensorimotor principles embedded in the BUSS approach.

To ensure no child begins the day hungry and to support regulatory needs, children also receive toast on arrival at nursery. This reinforces a secure, predictable routine and supports Maslow's physiological and safety needs before learning activities begin.

Hydration Routine

- Children access water throughout the day, with reminders and modelling.
- Staff support children in recognising thirst and body signals.
- Children check the colour of their urine using a simple chart, based on NHS and ERIC guidance.
- Discussions around hydration reinforce brain development, bowel health, energy regulation, and toileting comfort.

Trauma-Informed Considerations

- Predictable routines and consistent adults reduce anxiety.
- Behaviour around food is met with empathy and understanding.
- No punishment, coercion, or reward is used in relation to food or drinking.
- Adults observe cues and respond sensitively to distress or refusal.

Health & Safety

- A paediatric first aider is always present.
- Allergy and choking prevention procedures are rigorously followed.
- Children must be seated for eating.

- Children remain within sight and hearing at all times.
- Dietary and medical needs are regularly updated and monitored.

Record Keeping

- All incidents, concerns, or significant food refusals are logged.
- Allergy plans checked daily.
- Seating progression, independence progress, and hydration needs monitored.

Statutory and Best Practice References

- EYFS 2024
- DfE Early Years Foundation Stage Nutrition Guidance
- Ofsted Research & Findings
- Trauma-Informed Care Frameworks
- BUSS Model
- Public Health England Guidelines
- NHS and ERIC guidance on hydration and toileting

Regulation Readiness - Food

To develop key skills for sitting at a meal

Steps	Expectations/Outcomes	Progress Driver Links
1	Safe Participation – Sit with support on a small chair with a fixed or raised tray and begin exploring self-feeding with a spoon. Make simple choices (e.g., cup or snack) while receiving calm, consistent adult support. Engage in early hydration routines, being offered water regularly and observing adults modelling pouring, trying new foods, and following routines. Experience a predictable mealtime routine that builds emotional security and develop listening and attention through simple verbal prompts. Children are offered toast or breakfast on arrival to support regulation, and snacks are simple, soft, and accessible to promote early success in self-feeding.	A child should move on when they can: Remain seated comfortably with minimal support Maintain an 'L' shape at the hips Show early control in self-feeding A child should remain at this stage if they: Frequently slide to the side Slump or lose alignment Cannot maintain a stable seated position, even with support Show signs that core stability still needs to develop
2	Emerging Independence – Sit independently in an 'L' position, strengthening core muscles, and begin using a fork while assisting with simple serving tasks. Develop understanding of routine language (e.g., "wipe hands," "pour water") and pour drinks with some support, carrying utensils or cups as confidence grows. Learn to wipe small spills and tidy their place, and take part in simple hydration checks using the urine-colour chart with adult guidance. Follow short, two-step instructions and use simple phrases or gestures to express wants and choices. Engage in balanced snacks that include fruit and a carbohydrate/protein option, and develop early independence skills such as spreading, dipping, or selecting items from a shared platter.	A child should move on when they can: Maintain an 'L' sitting position independently Sit without wriggling or excessive movement Avoid sliding or shifting out of position Sit without leaning heavily on the tray table for support A child should remain at this stage if they: Frequently wriggle or fidget to stay balanced Slide, slump, or shift position repeatedly Need to stabilise themselves by leaning on the tray table Show signs that core strength still needs to develop
3	Developing Confidence – Sit with stable posture on a low chair, feet flat on the floor, and serve themselves from shared dishes with guidance. Set the table for peers using prompts or visual aids and take part in social conversation and shared mealtime roles. Carry out hydration checks with increasing independence, recognising the urine-colour chart and linking this to drinking more water, and begin to understand body cues such as thirst or fullness. Increase self-regulation through calm transitions, initiate conversations, respond appropriately, and begin simple problem-solving (e.g., turn-taking or requesting items). Take part in preparing snack by spreading or cutting soft foods and helping lay out items, recognising that balanced snack choices provide energy and trying combinations such as fruit with protein or carbohydrates to build healthy eating habits.	A child should move on when they can: Sit with both feet flat on the floor Maintain good posture without leaning or slumping Engage in mealtime activities without losing balance A child should remain at this stage if they: Frequently wriggle or shift position to stay steady Stand up or kneel on the chair Struggle to stay upright throughout the meal Show signs that they need further postural control or may benefit from returning to an 'L' sitting stage

4	Independent Routine – Sit independently on a low chair, maintaining good posture, and use a knife and fork for soft foods. Take full ownership of the mealtime routine (set, serve, eat, clear) and offer help to peers, such as pouring water or passing food. Reflect on choices, including portion size and food preferences. Independently check hydration using the colour chart and respond by drinking more when needed, understanding how balanced snacks support focus and energy. Sustain attention throughout the mealtime, use full sentences to communicate, and prepare more complex snack items such as spreading toast or cutting soft fruit. Make considered choices based on hunger, previous intake, and awareness of their body's needs.	A child should move on when they can: Sit independently with good posture Use a knife, fork and spoon confidently Manage their full mealtime routine Check hydration and respond appropriately A child should remain at this stage if they: Struggle to sit upright independently or swing on bottom. Need regular help with the mealtime routine Cannot check or act on hydration cues Find it hard to stay focused or communicate needs
5	Readiness for School and Lifelong Habits – Demonstrate independence, confidence, and responsibility at mealtimes, consistently practising manners, patience, and turn-taking. Show awareness of others' needs and dietary preferences and contribute positively to a group mealtime culture. Demonstrate a secure understanding of hydration by recognising when to drink and checking urine colour independently, and make thoughtful, healthy food and snack choices based on hunger cues and developing nutritional awareness. Leave the table confidently and transition smoothly to the next activity, showing flexibility in social and sensory situations. Engage in extended conversation and group interactions, prepare snack for peers, and apply lifelong habits of healthy eating, hydration, and positive social engagement around food.	A child should move on when they can: Sit on a stool with stable balance Maintain controlled movements during mealtime Stay safely seated without additional support A child should remain at this stage if they: Perch or rock on the stool Frequently lose balance Struggle to stay safely seated Need further postural support and may benefit from returning to a low chair
Lunchtimes are intentionally structured to support holistic development. Children will learn and experience as they grow in confidence, ability, and independence at mealtimes. This progression also directly supports the development of executive functioning skills (e.g. working memory, self-regulation, attention shifting) and communication skills (e.g. expressive language, turn-taking, listening and responding). In addition, children learn the importance of food as a fuel and fluids to hydrate.		

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