



Eat Well Early Years Award Guide 2026-27



The Eat Well Early Years Award

What is the Eat Well Early Years Award?

The Eat Well Early Years Award, delivered by Public Health South Tees, supports early years settings and childminders to embed good nutrition throughout their setting via a whole settings approach.

A whole setting approach means embedding health and wellbeing across the whole settings, including the food offered, the way children are educated about food and health, and making small changes to every day practices to ensure we support children to develop healthy habits right from the start.

The award framework has been developed in line with the 2025 nutrition guidance for early years settings, so by achieving the award, settings can show ofsted and parents that they are exceeding expectations.



Linking into the EYFS framework

How does healthy eating link to the EYFS framework?

Promoting healthy eating in early years settings is not just about food. It's crucial to children's development and links directly with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework.

1. Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Healthy eating habits contribute to children's well-being, self-regulation, and sense of self. Involving children in food choices and mealtimes supports independence and social interaction - all key aspects of personal, social, and emotional development.



Linking into the EYFS framework

2. Physical Development

Healthy eating directly supports physical growth and development. The EYFS highlights the importance of good health, including oral health and healthy food choices, as part of children's physical wellbeing.

Good nutrition is essential for energy, motor skill development, and readiness to learn. It provides the fuel they need to:

- Grow healthy bones and muscles.
- Maintain energy levels through the day.
- Build stamina for physical activity.
- Develop strength, coordination, and motor control - both fine and gross.



Linking into the EYFS framework

3. Communication and language

Mealtimes and cooking activities provide good opportunities for conversation, vocabulary development, and social communication.

Adults can model vocabulary related to food (e.g. crunchy, sour, soft), routines (first, next, all gone), and emotions (I like this, it's too hot, I'm full). These real life conversations help children develop both receptive and expressive language skills.

Children often feel empowered when given choices about food so encouraging them to talk about what they like or dislike can encourage expressive language and confidence.



Linking into the EYFS framework

4. Understanding the World

Learning about food - where it comes from, how it's prepared, and its impact on our bodies - helps children make sense of the world, as food is an integral part of every person's life.

Gardening, cooking, and cultural food exploration also deepen their understanding and appreciation of diversity.

5. Expressive arts and design

Food-related activities such as cooking, role play, or art can support creativity and imaginative play, helping children express themselves in varied ways.



Criteria overview

1

Menu and food policy

Serving good quality food is the foundation of a whole setting approach to healthy eating and wellbeing.

The Government's nutrition guidance for early years settings 2025 sets out clear expectations for nutritious meals and snacks and now expects settings to have a clear, written food policy in place.

Settings must meet 100% of this guidance to achieve the Eat Well Early Years Award. The Eat Well team is available to support you to do this.

Criteria overview

2

Supporting children to eat healthier

Early years settings should make it as easy as possible for children to eat healthy foods and ensure mealtimes provide a positive experience for children. This is just as important as the food that is served.

The Government's nutrition guidance for early years settings 2025, which now expects settings to:

- Create a positive mealtime experience.
- Role model healthy eating behaviours.
- Encourage healthy habits.
- Avoid using food as a reward or punishment.

The Eat Well team will conduct a meal observation and support you and your staff to meet these expectations.

Criteria overview

3

Learning about food

In early years settings, learning about food should be fun, hands-on, and woven into everyday experiences.

A whole setting approach supports children to develop a positive relationship with food through sensory exploration, growing, cooking, and activity-based learning.

Staff play a key role in modelling healthy attitudes, using positive language, and encouraging curiosity to help build enjoyment of healthy eating from a young age.

Criteria overview

4

Sustainability and local food

Early years settings can promote sustainability by making thoughtful choices around food sourcing and waste.

Using local, seasonal food supports the environment, reduces food miles, and introduces children to where food comes from.

Settings can partner with local suppliers or farms, grow some of their own fruit and vegetables, and plan menus around seasonal availability. Reducing food waste, composting, and reusing packaging are simple, effective steps. Involving children in these actions help them understand the importance of caring for the planet.

Bronze criteria

To achieve the bronze award, settings must achieve the core bronze criteria.

- ↘ **The setting must be registered as a food business and have a minimum food hygiene rating of 4-5**
- ↘ **Setting menus meet the food and drink guidelines for early years**

In England, the Government provides guidance to ensure that children in early years settings receive nutritious, balanced meals that support their health and development. [The Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\) statutory framework](#) sets the standards that early years providers must meet to ensure that children learn, develop well and are kept healthy and safe.

As part of the Eat Well Early Years Award, we will support you to meet this guidance. When you submit your application for the award, you should attach a copy of your menu, including all main meals and snacks. The Eat Well team will review your menu against the Government's requirements and provide you with feedback.

You can use the Eat Better, Start Better toolkit to help you plan your menus. It provides sample menus, recipes, portion sizes, and practical tips tailored to early years.





The setting has a nutrition/healthy eating policy in place

Early years settings should have a nutrition/healthy eating policy in place that takes into account:

- staff meals and snacks provided by the setting
- meals and snacks brought in from home
- staff food and drinks
- learning through food
- food waste
- food at celebrations or events
- using food/drink as rewards

To achieve this criteria, a copy of your setting's policy should be submitted for assessment.

We have a [sample policy](#) that you can use to help you create your policy if you don't already have one.



└ The setting provides a positive dining environment

A positive dining environment helps children enjoy mealtimes, develop social skills, and build healthy eating habits. Early years settings can achieve this by:

- **Creating a calm, unhurried atmosphere** where children feel able to eat at their own pace.
- **Using child-friendly seating and age-appropriate cutlery** to support independence and comfort.
- **Encouraging social interaction** by sitting in small groups and involving staff in mealtimes as role models.
- **Promoting self-help skills**, such as setting the table, serving food, or pouring drinks.

Mealtimes should be as distraction free as possible to allow children to really focus on eating and mealtime conversations. Some things you should avoid are:

- 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 past
- Overly stimulating resources nearby

The e-learning module 'Embedding healthy eating into early years settings' goes into more detail about this. You can access this via the Public Health e-learning hub.

This criteria is assessed through a meal observation, which we will ask you to complete yourself, using [our template](#).





Staff engage with the children and encourage them to eat healthier foods

Engaging children in a fun, hands-on way helps build curiosity and confidence around healthy foods. Early years settings can support this by:

- **Involving children in food activities** like growing vegetables or cooking can help build interest around food
- Using sensory play to explore foods through touch, smell, sight, and taste without pressure to eat.
- **Offering healthy foods repeatedly in a positive way**, as children may need several exposures before accepting new foods.
- **Using positive role modelling**, with staff eating with children and showing enjoyment of healthy foods.
- **Making food fun and appealing**, through colourful displays, creative presentation, and playful names or stories.
- **Listening to children's preferences** and involving them in menu choices where possible, to give them a sense of control.

Resources:

- [Government guidance for sensory play](#)
- [Food a fact of life free resources](#)



The setting's management and cook(s) have completed the Eat Well e-learning modules relevant to their role

A key part of taking a whole setting approach is to ensure staff have been trained so that they understand their role in supporting children to be healthier.

The Public Health Learning Hub has a range of training available for staff. Please see the table below.

Staff	Required learning
Management	• Introduction to Eating Well • Embedding Healthy Eating in Early Years Settings • Providing Nutritious Food for Children in Early Years Settings
Kitchen staff	• Introduction to Eating Well • Embedding Healthy Eating in Early Years Settings • Providing Nutritious Food for Children in Early Years Settings



Core silver criteria

To achieve the silver award, settings must complete all core bronze and silver criteria.



The setting has a written packed lunch policy in place and shared with families.

Having a packed lunch policy in place helps to ensure that all children are getting a consistent standard of food and are receiving consistent messaging, whether the meals are provided by your setting or are brought from home.

The policy should offer clear guidance to families and promote nutritious choices. We have a [template policy](#) that you can use to develop your own.

To achieve this criteria, you must provide evidence that you have a packed lunch policy in place and that it has been shared with parents. For example, you can share parent communication logs or any information you have shared with them about healthy lunchboxes.





The setting has a display board or area, including healthy eating information and signposting for parents

A well designed healthy eating display board or information area is a practical and effective way to reinforce key messages around food and nutrition. It provides ongoing, visible support for families and will complement your setting's wider efforts to embed healthy eating in daily practice.

You can use seasonal or themed content, such as ideas for lunchboxes, hydration tips for hot weather, or healthy festive treats. It's best to update the content regularly to keep it relevant and engaging.

What you could include:

- A copy of your healthy eating policy and packed lunch guidelines.
- Simple visual guides, such as the [Eat Well Guide poster](#).
- [Seasonal healthy recipe ideas](#) and [snack suggestions suitable for young children](#).
- Information on food allergies, choking hazards, or [portion sizes](#).
- National campaigns and resources, e.g. [NHS Start for Life](#), [Healthy Eating Week](#) and Healthy Start promotional materials
- Signposting to local food banks and eco shops

You could even include picture books that explore healthy eating, gardening, and food from different cultures for parents to look at.





The setting avoids using food or drink as a reward

As part of a whole setting approach to healthy eating, you should avoid using food and drink – especially sugary snacks or treats – as a reward for good behaviour, achievement, or participation.

While offering a treat may seem like a quick way to motivate or comfort children, this practice can unintentionally encourage unhealthy relationships with food and can teach children to seek emotional comfort through food. Using sweets or snacks as rewards can also contradict the setting's nutrition guidance and confuse children.

Children are more likely to develop lasting positive behaviours when rewards are non-food based. Some positive alternatives include:

- Verbal praise and encouragement.
- Stickers, stamps, or certificates.
- Special responsibilities or helper roles.
- Extra playtime or story time.
- Acknowledging effort with parent communication, e.g. a home note or photo.

This can all reinforce that food is for nourishment, enjoyment, and shared experiences, not for control or reward.



Non-core criteria

To achieve the **gold award**, settings must complete a minimum of **seven of the non-core award criteria**. Settings can choose which non-core criteria they want to complete.

↘ The setting has seasonal menu changes, with two or more menus a year

Introducing seasonal menu changes reflects best practice in early years nutrition and supports a sustainable and varied diet.

By doing just a spring/summer menu and an autumn/winter menu, you'll be encouraging children to explore a wide variety of foods, tastes, and textures throughout the year. You can tie it into learning as well by involving children in growing, choosing, or learning about seasonal foods as part of the curriculum.

In-season ingredients are generally more affordable and accessible, which can help with managing your food budget.



The setting has at least one meat free day a week

Introducing a meat-free day each week is a small but meaningful change that supports children's health and also wider sustainability goals.

What are the benefits?

- **Nutritional variety** - offering plant based proteins, such as beans, lentils, chickpeas, eggs, and dairy helps children develop a taste for a wider range of foods and nutrients.
- **Supports sustainability** - reducing meat consumption, even once a week, helps reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Cost-effective** - meat-free meals can be budget friendly.
- **Inclusive for all** - having regular vegetarian options ensures children with cultural or dietary restrictions feel included.

What does this look like in practice?

Choose one day per week (e.g. Monday) to serve fully vegetarian meals across lunch and tea. Meals might include:

- vegetable lasagne
- lentil shepherds pie
- chickpea curry with rice
- frittata

You can use these meat free days as an opportunity for food-based learning - talk about where beans and vegetables come from, grow some herbs, or let children help prepare simple recipes.





The setting is signed up to the South Tees Welcome to Breastfeed scheme

The South Tees Welcome to Breastfeed Scheme is free to sign up to and supports families across South Tees to feel comfortable and confident to breastfeed in public.

By signing up, you are advertising to parents/carers and the public that you have taken steps to support people to breastfeed when they are in your setting, for example, you may have a room dedicated for parents to feed in.

For more information about the scheme and to sign up, visit:

Middlesbrough: <https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/health-and-wellbeing/welcome-to-breastfeed/businesses/>

Redcar and Cleveland: <https://www.redcar-cleveland.gov.uk/welcome-to-breastfeed/welcome-to-breastfeed-for-business>





The setting consults with children and parents on menu choices

Involving children and families in menu planning helps ensure that meals are enjoyable, culturally appropriate and tailored to children's preferences.

Why does consultation matter?

- **Builds ownership and trust** - parents feel more confident when they know what their children are eating and have had the chance to contribute ideas or raise concerns.
- **Supports cultural inclusivity** - families can share traditional recipes, helping children feel seen and included.
- **Encourages healthy curiosity** - children are more likely to try new foods when they've helped choose or discuss them in a positive way.
- **Improves acceptance of menus** - consulting helps identify popular meals, reduce food waste, and improve mealtime enjoyment.

How to consult effectively:

With children (in age-appropriate ways)

- Use picture cards or food tasting activities to explore likes and dislikes
- Ask questions like "What was your favourite lunch this week?"



With parents/carers:

- Share draft menus each season and invite comments or suggestions.
- Use short surveys or suggestion boxes to gather feedback on meals, portion sizes, or dietary needs.
- Offer sample recipes or host tasting sessions during open days or parent workshops.

You should be clear about the setting's commitment to nutrition standards, so consultations are within healthy boundaries.

Example Questions:

1. How happy are you with the meals provided at our setting?
2. Do you feel the meals are healthy and balanced?
3. What meals or snacks does your child particularly enjoy?
4. Are there any foods your child dislikes or avoids?
5. Would you like to see any of the following on the menu more often? (vegetarian meals/foods from different cultures/fresh fruit and vegetables/lighter snacks/other)
6. Do you have any favourite family meals or recipes you'd like to share?





The setting limits the provision of cakes and biscuits, and any other high fat and sugar items in events, meetings, and fundraising activities

To ensure consistency in healthy eating messaging, it's important to limit the provision of cakes, biscuits, and other high fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS) foods at any events. These occasions often present opportunities for treats, which is fine in moderation, but excessive availability can undermine your healthy eating messages. These events can still be enjoyable without unhealthy foods.

Reducing sugary and fatty snacks also helps prevent dental decay, obesity, and other health issues.

Practical ways to limit these:

- Encourage healthier alternatives, such as fresh fruit platters, vegetable sticks and dips, homemade lower sugar bakes, or non-food activities and prizes.
- Set clear guidelines for foods brought in by parents (e.g. restricting birthday cakes being brought in)
- Include healthy options alongside any treats, to ensure they are occasional rather than the norm.
- Only serve water, milk, or diluted fruit juice instead of sugary drinks.
- Explore fundraising ideas that don't involve food sales, e.g. sponsored walks, craft sales, or charity games)

You should include a section in your food policy detailing your setting's limitations.





The setting promotes their healthier food and Eat Well Award on their website and social media channels

You should actively showcase your commitment to healthy eating by promoting what you're doing as part of the Eat Well Award on your website and social media platforms.

Benefits of online promotion:

- Builds trust with current and prospective parents by highlighting your focus on nutrition and wellbeing.
- Raises awareness about healthy eating.
- Engages parents and carers by sharing updates, tips, and healthy eating success stories.

Effective promotion strategies:

- Create a dedicated page or section of your website, including your healthy eating policies, menus, and your Eat Well Award commitment.
- Share regular social media posts featuring healthy meals, children's food activities, seasonal menu changes, and progress updates.
- Display the Eat Well South Tees social media banner and window stickers.





The setting provides opportunities for children to grow food

Growing food offers a valuable, hands-on learning experience. It encourages children to connect with where their food comes from and build positive attitudes towards fruit and vegetables.

Not only is it good for their learning, digging, planting, and watering provide physical activity and fine motor skill development. Caring for the plants can also teach children responsibility and patience.

The Royal Horticultural Society has some fantastic [resources for growing in early years settings](#), linking into the EYFS curriculum:





The setting monitors and records food waste and takes action to reduce it

Reducing food waste is an important part of promoting sustainable and healthy eating practices in early years settings. By monitoring and recording food waste regularly, settings can identify patterns and take action to minimise waste.

How to monitor food waste:

- Use a simple recording sheet to note what foods and amounts are thrown away during meals and snacks.
- Encourage staff to observe and record any specific reasons for waste, such as portion size, disliked ingredients, or serving methods.
- Involve children where possible by discussing waste and encouraging them to take only what they can eat.

Taking action to reduce food waste:

- Adjust menus and portion sizes based on food waste data and feedback from children and parents/carers.
- Offer smaller portions with the option of seconds if children are still hungry.
- Compost food scraps where possible.
- Review and improve storage and preparation practices to avoid spoilage.





The setting provides re-usable crockery and utensils, and only uses recyclable varieties on occasion

Minimising single-use plastics is a key part of promoting sustainability. You should prioritise using reusable crockery and utensils wherever possible, and only use disposable, recyclable items occasionally, e.g. for a picnic.

Alongside being environmentally friendly, this is more cost friendly over time as although initial investment is required, reusable items prevent ongoing purchase of disposables.

When disposable items are needed, choose compostable or recyclable materials to minimise waste.



Contact Information

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