

Children and Young People's Overview and Scrutiny Sub-Board

19 January 2026

What impact would it have on early years development if all 0 to 5s had free school meals in their childcare setting?

Cognitive Development

Providing all children aged 0–5 with free meals in their childcare setting would positively influence every aspect of early childhood development. Nutritious food in the early years supports healthy brain development, helping children build the foundations for learning, attention, memory, and problem solving.

Physical Growth and Healthy Eating Patterns

Consistent access to balanced meals supports physical growth, motor development, and the establishment of lifelong healthy eating patterns. Early exposure to nutritious foods increases the likelihood that children will continue to choose healthier options as they grow.

Social and Emotional Development

Shared mealtimes create positive routines that help children feel secure, build independence, and develop key social skills such as turn-taking, communication, and trying new foods in a supportive environment. Children who are well nourished are better able to regulate their emotions, interact positively with their peers, and participate fully in play and learning.

Reducing Inequalities

Universal free meals would reduce the risk of hunger, food poverty, and inconsistent food access, all of which can affect mood, behaviour, energy levels, and concentration. Providing the same meal to all children promotes inclusion, strengthens confidence and belonging, and ensures equal opportunities for development regardless of family circumstances.

Foundations for Long-Term Health and School Readiness

Ensuring that all 0–5-year-olds receive free meals in their childcare settings would strengthen physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. This approach supports school readiness and lays the foundation for improved long-term health and wellbeing.

Contributions to Good Level of Development (GLD) targets

Consistent nutritious meals strengthen the key developmental areas that underpin GLD, improving children's readiness to learn. By reducing inequalities and supporting physical, social, and emotional development, universal free meals increase the likelihood of children achieving GLD by the end of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Early Year Nutrition Guidance

EYFS Nutrition Guidance outlines how early years providers should offer healthy, balanced and nutritious meals for children aged 0–5, covering portion sizes, recommended food groups, sample menus and drinks guidance (milk and water only). From September 2025, providers must have regard to this guidance as part of their safeguarding and welfare requirements, ensuring consistent, evidence-based nutrition across early years settings in England.

Resources

[Early Years Food Coalition](#)

[Early Years Foundation Stage Nutrition Guidance](#)

[Influences on the Development of Children's Eating Behaviours:](#)

[TFF_Early years report_2025.pdf](#)

[The challenges of promoting food and nutrition for young children in early years' settings in England](#)

[Too Young to Count?](#)