

	Busybugs Nursery		
	Meal times	Page	1 of 3
		Issued	17.11.25

We ensure staff eat with our children and act as positive role models during meal and / or snack times.

The mandatory minimum staff to children’s ratios in early years settings allows you to give all children the attention they need to encourage them to eat and drink well and to make meal and snack times a learning opportunity.

It is important that staff always act as positive role models at meal and snack times, for example, by eating healthy foods and using positive and encouraging language and expressions (verbal and gestural) while sitting and eating with children.

Only offer snacks over a limited time period and always supervise the children. The relationship between young children and their parents or carers at mealtimes is important for them to develop a healthy approach to eating.

Responding in an authoritative and sensitive way and being attentive to children’s needs and cues will help ensure they eat the types and amounts of food they need to grow well and be healthy.

Children should be encouraged to serve themselves at mealtimes as this can help them develop independence and to learn social skills and interaction with others. There is also evidence that this helps children develop an ability to notice when they are full.

Babies and children need guidance rather than control when eating. This involves:

- Recognising babies’ and toddlers’ hunger and fullness cues.
- Feeding responsively so that children preserve their ability to sense and respect their fullness and hunger cues.
- Avoiding pressurising or coercing children to eat.
- Avoiding giving external cues and encouraging children to listen to their internal cues.
- Avoiding restricting certain foods as this makes them more desirable.

It is counterproductive to complain if food is not eaten – it has been shown that negativity decreases rather than increases the chances that that food will be eaten again. Positive social interactions and comments about food during a meal have been shown to enhance the adoption of healthy eating habits.

Tips for managing meal times for one- to five-year-olds

Meal and snack times offer an opportunity to extend children’s social and language skills. Children can learn from others about table manners and practise their speaking and listening skills. To encourage this, avoid distractions during meal times. Act as a good role model in the foods and drinks you choose for yourself.

Modelling and presentation

To promote good table manners and encourage healthy eating habits, it is encouraged that the staff provide positive role models to the children. This is well documented as being an essential part of children development.

	Busybugs Nursery		
	Meal times	Page	2 of 3
		Issued	17.11.25

This could be done by:

- Staff eating with good table manners, e.g., using both knife and fork.
- Staff remaining at the table throughout the whole meal, where possible.
- Staff encouraging children to serve second helpings and modelling how to do this without spillage.
- Staff acknowledging that food was really delicious, but that licking plates isn't the correct thing to do (for example by saying: "yes that was yummy, but we don't lick plates at nursery").
- Positive expressions while eating.

Positive feedback and encouragement

Children may need encouragement to eat with verbal and non-verbal cues. The tone of voice is very important. For example:

- Instead of saying "eat some vegetables" to a child who isn't eating them, praise the child who has (and in turn this will encourage the other child).
- If a child eats one pea, praise them. Tell them "Wasn't that yummy/nice" and encourage them to eat more.
- Praise children when they have eaten at least two thirds of their meal.
- Praise them when they do something you asked them to do – getting a clean fork, having a second helping, etc.
- Smiles and nods can replace a thousand words and take little effort.

We present our food attractively and encourage children to develop an interest and enjoyment of food through stimulating their senses.

Because children do not have an inborn ability to select a balanced and nutritious diet, it is important to introduce a good variety of foods to help increase the likelihood of children being willing to eat a wide variety of foods as they grow older. To encourage them to do this it is important to stimulate the senses by considering the following:

- Good presentation of food is vital to encourage the children to eat. Food needs to be introduced in a positive and appealing manner.
- Introduce the food verbally to the children (pointing at the foods) so they know what they are getting.
- Comment on the smell, appearance and texture of the food in a positive way.
- Choose combinations of colours to make the food attractive.
- Try to include a combination of different textures such as crispy, crunchy, chewy, smooth and soft foods.
- Tastes should be varied, but meals containing too many different or new flavours may not be accepted by the children.



- Encourage children to appreciate delicious cooking smells, such as baking bread, roasting peppers, frying onions and making toast.
- Offer a variety of finger foods to encourage variation of textures and colours.