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# Food for thought

A survey of healthy eating in registered childcare

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**Better  
education  
and care**

As a result of the increased interest in the quality of food provided for children in schools and childcare, Ofsted has looked at whether children in the paid daily care of others receive good quality meals and whether they learn at an early age the benefits of a healthy diet. This report is based on analysis of a short survey of 'healthy eating' carried out at 110 settings across England during the last two weeks of February.

**Of particular interest to:**

Early years childcare providers, parents, carers, local authorities, the DfES.

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## Executive summary

There is a great deal of public interest at present in the quality of food offered by schools, following the work started by Schools Food Trust, set up by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). This interest has spread into the quality of food for children in childcare. Academic research in 2003–04 by the University of Leeds suggested that the nutritional values of food offered to children in childcare was poor, putting children's health at risk.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of this increased interest, Ofsted has looked at whether children in the paid daily care of others receive good quality meals and whether they learn at an early age the benefits of a healthy diet. This report is based on analysis of a short survey of 'healthy eating' carried out at 110 settings across England during the last two weeks of February. This survey took place at the same time as the normal inspections. Whilst this survey provides a general indicative view, it may not be fully representative of the sector as a whole.

The large majority of registered childcarers who were visited had a good knowledge of healthy eating and provided a nutritious and balanced diet for young children in their care; only seven childcarers were required to improve on what they offer.

This report highlights the good practice found across a range of childcare settings by including examples from the inspectors' visits to the settings.

## Key findings

- ❑ The majority of childcarers visited in this survey were satisfactory or better in providing a healthy balanced diet for children.
- ❑ Most childminders and day-care providers placed an emphasis on home-cooked nutritious food using fresh ingredients.
- ❑ The better providers helped children understand the value of healthy food and encouraged them to try different foods.
- ❑ Good providers worked with parents to plan meals that met parental preferences and children's individual needs.

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<sup>1</sup> The research was a relatively small study in West Yorkshire in 2003–04. Although not representative of current practice across the country, the research provided insights into some practical issues of providing a healthy diet for children. For example, it suggested that most childcare providers recognised their responsibility for promoting children's health and were convinced of the importance of early diet in long-term health. However, they lacked accessible practical guidance on what makes a diet healthy, and many were concerned about parents' lack of interest in promoting healthy eating.

- ❑ Not all providers took enough care in recording allergies and food preferences and communicating these to staff.

## Recommendations

Providers should:

- gather details about parental and children’s preferences and individual children’s dietary requirements; and make sure everyone involved in caring for children knows about these
- plan menus carefully to give children a varied, balanced and nutritious diet, using expert advice if possible
- promote healthy eating by helping children and their parents to understand the importance of a healthy diet
- pay attention to the presentation of food so that children are encouraged to try new things.

## Evaluation

### Results from the February survey

1. The February survey involved visiting 110 settings, of which 64 were childminders and 46 day-care providers.
2. Of the providers visited, 45 childminders provided a full meal service of breakfast, lunch and tea for children, with most also offering parents the option of providing their own food; 27 day-care providers also provided a full meal service. Those who did not were either not open all day, or ran two sessions with a lunch break where children could bring a packed lunch from home. Most of those providing a full meal service had different arrangements for babies, with parents providing bottled milk or food.
3. Inspectors judged that most providers included in the survey offered a healthy and balanced diet for children.

**Figure 1: Quality of healthy and balanced diet for children where offered by providers** (percentage of providers).



4. Across the 110 settings visited in this survey, inspectors raised only two actions and five recommendations for settings that were weak in providing a healthy diet for children. Ofsted raises actions where provision does not meet the *National standards for under 8s day care and childminding* minimum government standards, below which no provider may fall. Inspectors make recommendations where provision meets the National Standards but can be improved.<sup>2</sup>

5. The two actions related to providing children with regular drinks and nutritious snacks and establishing procedures for staff to ensure that they will be familiar with children's individual dietary needs; three recommendations were about making drinks easily accessible to children; and two were about improving the range and choice of nutritious snacks and encouraging children to make healthy food choices.

6. Twenty-one of the 27 day-care providers visited, who provided full meals, made all meals on site using their own cook. Only six providers used off-site contractors to supply meals. One of the main themes from the survey is that both childminders and day-care providers placed an emphasis on home-cooked, nutritious food, taking account of parental wishes and the individual needs of the children who attend.

*The provider gathers and records detailed information about individual children's dietary needs from parents. These records are then displayed in the kitchen and dining room to ensure that all staff are fully aware of children's individual needs. This list includes special diets such as no dairy products, as well as parental preferences for what children eat. This information is constantly updated and reviewed through daily discussions with parents and home/nursery diaries. Parents are also asked to carry out a full review of their children's records every term to ensure staff are always fully up-to-date with children's dietary needs. (Day nursery)*

### **Childcarers' knowledge of healthy eating**

7. Most of the settings, whether childminders or day-care providers, displayed good knowledge about healthy eating. Most providers talked of using low levels of salt, sugar and fats in meals. They limited or did not use processed foods. They knew what constitutes balanced and nutritious meals.

*Healthy eating is providing children with meals that contain no additives; a balanced meal with vegetables, protein and carbohydrates; food with little or no salt and sugar. (Childminder)*

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<sup>2</sup> The *National standards for under 8s day care and childminding* are published by the Department for Education and Skills and may be found on its website [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk).

*Food and nutrition are key to our children's development and we aim to provide a balanced diet containing the five food groups. Children must be offered healthy choices that are inviting and interesting. (A large day-care chain)*

8. Forty-four of the childcarers surveyed placed a high importance on the quality of food for children, including babies and those who are weaning.

*The quality of food provided for children, and its high nutritional value, are given priority within the setting... Outside contractors were chosen on their ability to provide home cooked produce. An additional outside company provides weaning foods produced with organic ingredients. Processed food is not served. (Day nursery)*

9. The survey found that 11 providers understood what makes healthy and nutritious snacks and meals but did not always use this knowledge, offering sweets, crisps and biscuits, and even trips to fast food chains as treats or for snacks.

*The weekly snack rota shows fruit, cheese, crackers and biscuits. During 'fruit week' the children can choose each day from four different fruits but during 'biscuit week' the children do not have healthy options. (Pre-school)*

### **Planning menus**

10. A very large majority of the full day-care providers and childminders that provided a full meal service have a planned programme of meals. Three have used nutritionists and other food experts to help devise a healthy eating programme.

*We use our own menus and recipes working with a famous children's cookery writer in producing healthy menus. (Day-care chain)*

*All menus are prepared eight weeks in advance with a nine week rotation of food. The cook provides specific meals for children who have special diets. (Day nursery)*

11. The childminders visited were equally committed to planning balanced menus using good quality products.

*I have a box of organic food delivered each week and cook meals based on the ingredients in this. Organic food is a very important part of what I give children.*

12. Many of the providers referred to the way in which they had adapted their practice over the last few years to give children five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. This was particularly true among sessional care providers where snacks previously involved biscuits rather than fruit.

*The group used to offer toast as a snack, but now uses wholemeal bread and broadened the choice to offer different fruits, bread sticks and crackers. (Pre-school)*

13. Preparation of food was equally important.

*I never buy processed food. All meals and snacks, including fish fingers and chicken nuggets, are home made. (Childminder)*

*The childminder provides meals cooked from fresh organic ingredients, ensuring vegetables retain their nutritional value through use of a steamer.*

*We offer different sources of carbohydrates – bread, potatoes and pasta, with cooked meals, including protein, and no sweet desserts. If children attend all day they have three portions of fruit and vegetables with the main meal. (Day nursery)*

14. Involving children in the planning and preparing of food gave them a good understanding of healthy eating.

*Menus are devised with the children, who also help to prepare the snacks. Snacks always include protein, carbohydrates and fruit. (Out of school club)*

15. The weaker providers did not plan well enough to be sure of a balance in what they provided.

*I do not plan a menu but buy things I know the children will enjoy. Although I have no set menu I tell parents what I intend to provide and they are satisfied. (Childminder)*

16. Occasionally providers did not provide healthy options.

*No vegetables were included with the midday meal, and pudding was an unhealthy option... The menus are currently under review, to include fresh fruit with every meal.*

17. Two of the six providers who used external contractors did not consistently provide healthy food.

*The menus are prepared by the outside contractor on a four week cycle. The menu is varied, although staff are concerned about the number of times processed food appears, like sausages and meatballs. (Day nursery)*



*The contractor changes menus every two months. Fruit and vegetables appear two or three times a week on the lunch menu... the 'fresh' fruit on today's menu came from a tin. (Day-care chain)*

### **Promotion of healthy eating**

18. Staff working in the settings visited were increasingly aware of the importance of developing children's understanding of healthy eating. Good providers not only provided nutritious menus, but explained to the children the benefits of a healthy diet and lifestyle.

*In the role play 'shop', the practitioner encouraged children to choose fruit rather than crisps and discussed why it was a healthier choice, talking about the bright colours, sweet taste and juice, as well as what fruit does for the skin and general health. (Pre-school)*

19. Twelve settings visited took part in healthy eating initiatives, for example the 'Heartbeat Award' to promote a healthy environment, healthy food choices, and physical exercise. Providers at 19 settings made specific reference to children eating five portions of fruit and vegetables a day, and had a variety of ways to help children achieve this.

*Children complete a chart to show they have had five portions a day and include any food they might have had at school. (Childminder)*

20. Most providers had strategies for encouraging children to try new foods.

*Children enjoy making fruit kebabs and fruit salads. They talk about the different flavours, textures and colours of the fruit and delight in eating the end result. (Childminder)*

Staff in the weaker settings did not talk enough to children about healthy eating. Even where they provided a healthy diet, some tried to disguise vegetables in pasta sauces and casseroles rather than encouraging children to recognise and eat them. Six providers offered sweets as a reward for trying fruit and vegetables, or gave an unhealthy option as a treat. This gave the children very mixed messages about food.

### **Working with parents**

21. The good settings worked with parents to plan healthy meals, taking into account parental preferences and the child's individual preferences.

*Parents' views are sought and they are fully consulted about the food provided for their children... Detailed information is recorded about special diets and allergies, as well as parental preferences such as no sugary foods... they are fully involved in making decisions about the type, level and frequency of different foods introduced to their children for the first time. (Day nursery)*

22. Nine providers spoke specifically about working with parents to help children overcome eating difficulties.

*One child would only eat crackers and crisps. The childminder asked the parent if she could provide the same lunch as she was preparing for other children. The parent agreed, and with time and perseverance the child tried many new foods and ate a well balanced range of food.*

23. Most providers sought parents' permission before trying different foods with children. They recorded food intake carefully, particularly for babies, and consulted parents about when to wean children.

*Babies' food and drink intake is fully recorded and daily discussions with parents ensure they are fully involved in making decisions over the type, level and frequency of different foods introduced to young children for the first time... Parents can choose to select a series of specially prepared organic weaning foods for their child or select particular brands of baby rice. (Day nursery)*

24. Good providers worked with parents to educate them in healthy eating for children, especially where parents provided snacks or meals for children.

*Parents are given leaflets about healthy eating and staff talk to them if they include inappropriate food in packed lunches. (Pre-school)*

25. The weaker providers recognised difficulties with some parental choices, but did not feel able to tackle parents, or did not think it their responsibility to do so.

*I don't feel I can dictate what parents put in lunch boxes. (Childminder)*

### **Individual dietary needs**

26. All of the providers collected information from parents in advance about children's dietary needs, especially in relation to allergies.

*I get detailed information on their registration forms. For example, I have one child who is allergic to dairy/chocolate and citrus (they give him bad migraines). I provide soya milk and spread, and give him apple juice rather than orange. (Childminder)*

27. All but one of the 27 day nurseries offering a full meal service had careful systems to ensure that the cook and staff understand children's individual needs and did not prepare or serve inappropriate food.

*The outside contractor will meet all necessary special dietary needs and wraps this food separately...relief staff and students are not allowed to serve food.*

28. The good providers knew and understood the difference between special diets for health reasons and parental preferences. They regularly reviewed and updated information from parents to make sure they knew of any changes related to children's diets.

*Children's special diets and allergies are discussed with parents and recorded on children's record sheets. The childminder has a clear understanding of the difference between special diets followed due to health issues and parental preference. She works closely with parents to ensure she is fully informed of the details of allergies and the possible health consequences. She adapts her weekly food menus to meet these needs and keeps parents informed to ensure the correct diet is provided.*

29. Good providers also tried to help all children feel included.

*Meals are prepared so all children feel included rather than different, for example casseroles without meat for vegetarians. (Day nursery)*

30. Although all of the settings asked parents to provide information on dietary needs, the weaker providers were poor at recording and using this information, and updating it regularly. They also did not ensure all staff working with the children were aware of their allergies. Clearly, for those children with food intolerances or allergies, the poor communication and recording of dietary information may put these children at risk.

*There was no evidence of children's dietary needs... The children's register and emergency contact list were the only documents on site. (Out of school care)*

*Staff working with one child with a listed nut allergy were unaware of her allergy and unclear of signs and symptoms ... the manager stated, 'Well they should know, I'm sure I told them.' (Day nursery)*

### **Attractiveness of food**

31. Helping children to see what they are eating is important. Most providers helped children try new food or enjoy what they ate by making food look attractive and helping children to see what they eat. The providers talked about the importance of making food look appealing, such as cutting food into manageable sizes, like vegetable sticks, and serving the right size portions with contrasts in texture and colour.

*I place food individually on plates and make sure it is not mixed with other food on plates so children can see clearly what they are being offered. I*

*never disguise any food. I usually place a salad of tomatoes, lettuce and cucumber on one side of the plate and a jacket potato on the other side so children can see what they are eating. I arrange prepared fruit as attractively as I can on plates to encourage children to eat it.*  
(Childminder)

32. Involving children in food preparation often made food more attractive and encouraged them to try foods they might otherwise have refused.

*I encourage children to participate in the preparation of snacks. They get involved in the choosing of the fruit and the preparation. I believe this encourages them to eat well. When we made soup the children also got to taste the raw vegetables before they went into the pan.* (Childminder)

*Children make their own pizzas with faces on them, using broccoli, cherry tomatoes and ham strips. They dig up potatoes and pick tomatoes from the garden ... we then make jacket potatoes with them and use the tomatoes on pizzas.* (Childminder)

33. Good providers talked about making meal times a social occasion and paid attention to the colour and size of plates and cutlery. They encouraged children to try new food by giving them attractively arranged choices, or presenting food in interesting shapes.

*During meal times, food is served attractively with the table set with appropriate cutlery. Fruit is cut into small slices and served attractively on a plate during food tasting sessions.* (Day nursery)

34. The weaker providers did not put enough thought into how to make healthy foods look attractive.

*It's hard to make snacks attractive as they come in hungry, and they just go for it.* (Out of school club)

## **Conclusion**

35. This short survey, although not representative of the whole childcare sector, presents a positive picture of the quality of food given to children in registered childcare. The majority of childcarers visited in this survey had a good knowledge of healthy eating, provided a nutritious and balanced diet for young children in their care; and promoted healthy eating to parents and children. Very few providers were asked to improve on what they offer.

## Notes

This survey was carried out by asking a series of additional questions about healthy eating during normal inspections of the quality of childcare at 110 settings across England. Ofsted inspects registered childcarers at least once in every three years.

All inspections about the quality of care include a judgement about whether providers meet National Standard 8: food and drink, a minimum standard below which no provider may fall. Where providers do not meet one or more of the National Standards, inspectors raise an action or take other enforcement measures to bring about compliance. In addition, inspectors may also raise recommendations where providers meet the National Standards but can improve on what they do. Although this survey found four day-care providers inadequate in the additional questions asked on healthy eating, two of these providers met the minimum requirement of National Standard 8 and had recommendations rather than actions.