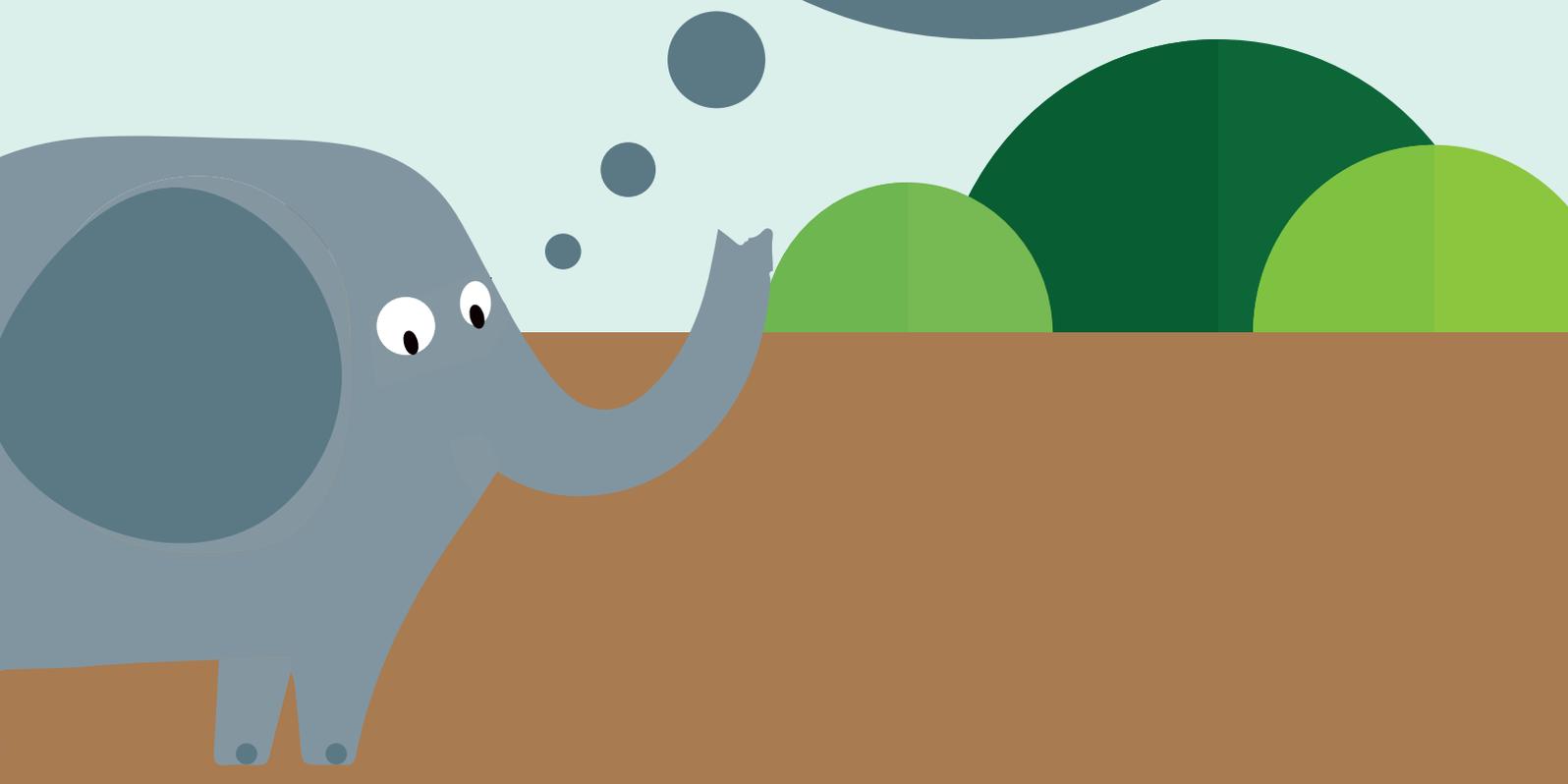


# Practice note

Keeping children safe:  
supporting positive  
mealtime experiences  
in early learning and  
childcare (ELC)



**This practice note is designed to provide support and guidance to ELC settings (including childminders and school-aged childcare) in the planning, preparation and provision of nutritious and healthy meals and snacks for children.**

A child's early experiences are crucial in shaping their future life outcomes and ELC settings work to ensure that children achieve their full potential, and are confident and successful learners.

Meal and snack times in ELC settings offer many rich opportunities for children to connect and engage in conversation with other children and staff. Snack times can contribute to children's learning, development, and health and wellbeing. The Getting it right for every child (Girfec) approach and the [SHANARRI wellbeing indicators](#) support settings to help families receive the right help at the right time. It encourages settings to think about children's health and wellbeing and give children the best start in life.

Meals and snacks should be nutritious and served in a relaxed, calm, pleasurable and safe environment. The environment, location and setting should be well planned and promote a sense of belonging and support social interactions.

These important times promote healthy eating behaviours that can last a lifetime. For some children, this may be the only nutritious meal they will receive that day.



Unicef also places importance on children experiencing quality mealtimes:



“Children need the right foods at the right time to grow and develop to their full potential.”

Unicef’s [Early childhood nutrition](#) programme

Allied health professionals, including dietitians, promote: “The early experiences children have of food and mealtimes play an important part in shaping later eating habits. Early years settings should ensure the children in their care have a positive eating experience and establish good eating practices that will shape their future health. Positive, high-quality mealtime experiences support all round child development and provide opportunities for children to develop key social skills.”

Through our scrutiny and assurance work, we have observed some particularly good practice during meal and snack times. However, we have also observed practice that requires improvement. The Care Inspectorate recognises that the expansion of ELC means that many children spend longer days in settings and therefore will receive more food in these settings. The Scottish Government has provided that every child accessing their funded ELC entitlement has access to a free meal each day and in some settings the provision of a meal is relatively new. The National Standard requires that settings providing funded ELC have a clear and comprehensive policy on the provision of nutritious healthy meals and snacks for children. This should be consistent with the national guidance [Setting the Table](#) and [The Eatwell Guide](#).

Preparation of food should be child focused, taking account of age and ability of babies and children to chew and digest food. It is very important that food size is checked to prevent the risk of choking. Temperatures and textures of food should also be checked and steps taken to ensure food is safe and suitable for all children. Although some foods are required to be cooked at a certain temperature, they must only be served to children when cooled and at an appropriate temperature.

Parents and children should be engaged in meal and snack planning, in relation to choices, dietary needs, likes and dislikes. This is in line with the Health and Social Care Standard 1.37: “My meals and snacks meet my cultural and dietary needs, beliefs and preferences.”

Partnership arrangements with parents in the planning and preparation of meal plans and home provided packed lunches will ensure that children’s dietary needs are met, and food is safe for children to eat.

# Listen to children's words, actions, and emotions. What are they telling you?

"I would like to help but adults are doing everything for me."

"I want an adult to sit with me, but they are busy tidying up."

"Is this food too hot for me?"

"I'm feeling full, but I was told I had to finish all of my food."



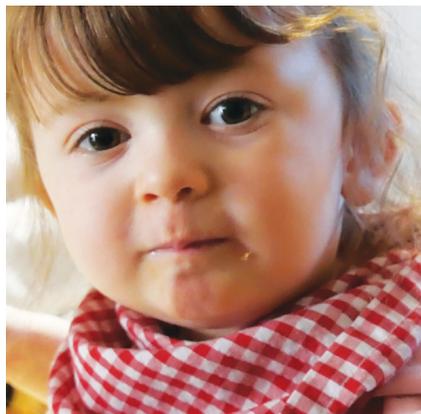
"I have allergies. Is this food safe for me?"

"I don't like this food, but I am feeling hungry."

"I need my food to be small enough for me to eat safely."

## Respond and Reflect

We want to share our learning so you can be confident you provide safe, nurturing, and supportive care. The two R's (**Respond** and **Reflect**) can help you to keep children safe.



## Respond to children

It is important to take account of children's voices in matters that affect them. Each child will experience the care and learning you provide differently. The following statements are to help you think about what experiences your children have at mealtimes.

- I am familiar with mealtime routines, such as washing my hands and sitting down to eat when the food is ready.
- I am given time to eat. I am never hurried to finish my food, even if I'm the last to leave the table.
- My meals are served in a relaxed and unhurried atmosphere, free from distractions.
- I have a special diet and all the adults know what I can eat.
- Adults know my likes and dislikes. I am given the opportunity to try new foods but it's ok if I don't.
- I have a familiar adult who is sensitive to my needs, sits with me during mealtimes to help keep me safe and chats with me about my interests.
- I am provided with opportunities to be responsible. I am included in things such as setting the table and clearing away.
- I am supported to be independent and do things for myself, for example I can pour my own drinks from a small jug.
- I can eat as much as I need and don't have to eat everything on my plate if I am full or don't like it.
- If I don't like the food, I am offered something else.
- My food is prepared for me so that I can chew and swallow safely.

## Reflect on practice

These questions are designed to help staff in the process of reflection and can be used in team meetings, staff groups or on an individual basis to reflect on the practice in your setting.

### Assessing the environment

- How do you ensure that mealtimes are safe and free from hazards?
- To what extent does the environment provide a nurturing and homely space for children during mealtimes?
- How do you ensure that the environment remains clean and hygienic for all children and adults?
- How does the environment and resources support children to develop independence? For example, has consideration been given to appropriately sized furniture to ensure children and adults are seated safely and comfortably? Are crockery, cutlery, and utensils of an appropriate size?

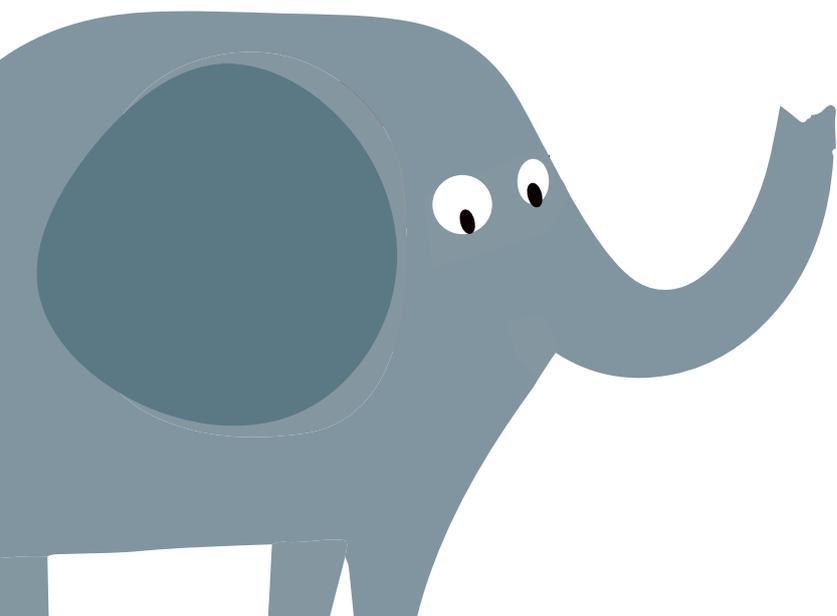
### Staff roles and responsibilities

- How do you know what your roles and responsibilities are for ensuring that mealtimes are a safe and sociable experience for everyone?
- How do you ensure that children are safe? For example, food is being served at the right temperature and there are no risks of choking?

- How do you ensure that you are aware of children's dietary needs and requirements including allergens and cultural needs?
- How sure are you that you can respond to any emergency incidents appropriately?
- How often do leaders observe mealtimes to ensure that children and adults enjoy eating together in an unhurried and relaxed atmosphere?
- How do you ensure that adults are deployed to support children effectively, making sure that they are safe, and mealtimes are a nurturing and social experience?
- What communication systems are in place to ensure that information is shared with everyone who needs to know in respect of dietary needs and requirements?

### **Knowing and understanding the children in your care**

- How can you be sure that you are responding to each child as an individual, with an understanding of where they are in their own developmental journey?
- How well do you adapt to the differing needs of each child to ensure that they are well supported?
- How are children supported to develop healthy eating habits and develop life skills, including independence and good manners?
- How do you involve children and their families in mealtime planning in your setting?
- How is healthy eating promoted between home and setting?
- How are all children supported to access snacks and meals throughout the day?
- How do you involve children in routines such as preparing for mealtimes and clearing away afterwards?



# Time to Reflect

## Scenario 1

My name is George, I am three years old, and I have just started nursery. I am still getting to know where everything is and becoming familiar with the adults who care for me. I am trying to make new friends.

Mealtimes in my home are quiet. So, I get worried when I go for lunch in this nursery as it is very busy and noisy. When we are getting ready for lunch there is always a lot to do. I still don't know what I have to do but my new friends help me. I sometimes get upset and I feel soothed when I have my comforter, but I'm not allowed to bring this with me at lunchtime. It makes me feel better when I am sitting beside an adult but that's not always possible when they are busy. Sometimes I can't eat my lunch because I feel so worried and that means I go home hungry.

Discuss this scenario:

- How do you think George is feeling when it is time to get prepared for lunch?
- How could you support George to get prepared for lunch?
- How could you ensure George has a more positive lunchtime experience?
- What could you do to ensure the environment is calm, relaxed and homely?
- How could you improve your practice to ensure all children are supported at mealtimes?
- What would you do to make sure that George doesn't go home hungry?



## Scenario 2

**My name is Freya. I am 14 months old and I enjoy going to my childminder's house. I have an allergy to milk, which makes me sick. I love snack time, but I am not allowed to choose my own snack because lots of foods have milk in them.**

My friends can choose from a variety of foods, but my snack is chosen for me by the adults. This means my snack is different from what my friends are having. I sometimes try to take what they're having but it's taken away from me. It would be nice to try different foods, but the adults tell me that I can't.

Discuss the scenario:

- How would you support Freya to understand why she can't have certain foods?
- How would you provide opportunities for Freya to experience a variety of foods?
- How do you ensure Freya's parents/carers are involved in their child's care?
- What strategies are in place to limit Freya's exposure to foods that are unsafe for her?
- How do you support Freya to be independent and have choice during mealtimes?



### Scenario 3

**My name is Logan and I am 8 years old. I love going to my after-school club. I have so much fun playing games and being with my friends.**

After a busy day at school, I am always hungry when I get to the club. It can take ages for us to have our snack as we must wait till all my friends and the adults arrive. We then need to wait in a long queue until it's our turn.

We mostly have toast, fruit and a drink which is good. The adults make snack for us, and we get to choose what we want to put on our toast. I pour my own drink and spread my own toast at home and when having lunch at school. I would like to be able to do this at my after-school club too, but the adults won't let us.

I like sitting at the table with my friends to eat snack and I feel safe there, but we eat ours when we are playing. Sometimes we run about, and I worry because my mum tells me that we shouldn't run because one of us could have an accident and choke.

Discuss the scenario:

- What changes could you make to the snack routine to ensure Logan does not have to wait so long?
- How could you support Logan to be more involved at snack time?
- What could you do to ensure Logan's independence is promoted?
- What could you do to ensure Logan is safe when eating snack?
- How could improve the snack time experience for all children?



## Key improvement resources

[A quality framework for daycare of children, childminding and school-aged childcare](#)

[Becoming Breastfeeding Friendly Scotland](#)

[Children & Young People's Commissioner, Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#)

[Environmental Rating Scales \(ITERS & ECERS\)](#)

[Food Matters](#)

[Food Safety](#)

[Food Standards](#)

[Getting it Right for Every Child](#)

[Good practice guidance: prevention and management of choking episodes in babies and children](#)

[Grow Cook Eat](#)

[Health and Social Care Standards](#)

[How Good is Our Early Learning and Childcare](#)

[Infection Prevention and Control](#)

[Involving Children and Young People](#)

[Keeping children safe-look, think, act campaign](#)

[Listening to Children](#)

[My Childminding Experience](#)

[My Childminding Journey](#)

[National Induction Resource](#)

[How to stop a child from choking \(NHS guidance\)](#)

[Applying Nurture as a Whold School Approach](#)

[Our Creative Journey](#)

[Parents as partners in their children's learning – toolkit](#)

[Realising the ambition: Being Me](#)

[Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents - Keeping Kids Safe](#)

[Scottish Social Services Council Codes of Practice](#)

[Self-evaluation for improvement](#)

[Setting the Table](#)

[Space to Grow](#)

[Space to grow: indoor/outdoor settings](#)

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