Food, Toddlers and Childcare

An evidence-based guide to toddler nutrition for healthcare professionals

Healthcare professionals are vital in helping parents ensure toddlers (1-3 years) have healthy, balanced diets both in and outside the home.

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Key Learnings

1. **A parent’s return to work is a critical time of change.**
   It raises the issue of managing meals with a crèche or childminder, and means parents may have to share the role of gatekeeper to a toddler’s food intake.

2. **Planning and preparation are vital.**
   Thinking ahead helps ensure continuity of healthy and balanced meals and drinks.

3. **Clear guidelines on food provision.**
   Clarity from the outset of a childminding arrangement will reduce confusion for childminders, parents and, most importantly, the toddler.

Food and childcare: The Bigger Picture

The average age for an infant to start regular non-parental childcare in Ireland is 6.5 months\(^1\). Non-parental childcare is most commonly provided by a relative (42%), usually a grandparent, followed by an unrelated childminder (31%) or a crèche (27%)\(^1\).

As a child grows beyond infancy, they are more likely to experience non-parental childcare, and with a free pre-school year now available, most toddlers in Ireland spend some time in a care setting outside the home. Toddlers who spend...
time regularly eating in an environment outside the home will have their eating patterns influenced to some degree by this environment.

The National Pre-school Nutrition Survey² reported that 60% of parents with children aged between one and five felt that their child could be eating more healthily. Barriers to providing a healthier diet were recorded.

Parents do feel concern regarding the meals and snacks provided to their toddler in their absence. It is recommended that parents are involved in meal planning for their toddler when they are in childcare, but evidence suggests that this does not consistently happen³.

In the National Pre-school Nutrition Survey, about 40% of parents stated that other people minding their toddler was a barrier to their toddler eating more healthily.

Healthcare professionals can help parents…

1. Continue to plan healthy meals on return to work.
2. Deal with food provision in pre-school services.
3. Plan for providing food for childcare.

Planning healthy meals on return to work: Shopping

When both parents of a toddler return to work, planning is the key to providing healthy and varied family meals and snacks. Parents should agree on a system of managing meals between them, to include the food shopping, food preparation and cooking.

• **Planning the food shopping.** Suggest a structured list. Keep a jotter and pen near the fridge or cooker and write down what groceries are needed as you move through the week. To save time, divide the page into columns to reflect the sections of the store (e.g. fruit and vegetable section, frozen aisle), and fill in the groceries needed for each section.

• **Shopping.** Advise parents to choose their shopping companions wisely! Toddlers often go through stages of being distracting during shopping, so it may be easier for one parent to do the weekly food shopping alone.

• **Shop at off-peak times.** Parents should consider shopping early in the morning, especially at the weekend, in order to avail of fresher produce and to have a more efficient shopping experience.

• **Shop online.** If a week has been especially hectic, doing the grocery shopping online can save on time, money and impulse purchases.
Planning healthy meals on return to work: **Cooking**

- **Keep it simple.** Family meals don’t have to be elaborate to be healthy and reasonably varied. Use a variety of seasonal vegetables and fruit to keep meals and snacks interesting.
- **Have a meal cycle.** A regular weekly or fortnightly cycle of meals makes planning and budgeting for meals easier.
- **Enlist helpers.** Try to get several family members involved in making meals. Teach toddlers to do simple things, such as setting their place at the table and bringing their dishes to the sink.

Planning healthy meals on return to work: **Thinking Ahead**

- **Cook once and eat twice.** When there is less time pressure, double the ingredients and cook an extra batch of a meal for freezing. Keep these meals for especially busy nights or weeks.
- **Make meals suitable for freezing.** Casseroles, soups and sauces all freeze very well. Store them in suitable lidded containers and label with the date of freezing.
- **Freeze safely.** Use all frozen meals within two months of freezing.

Food provision in pre-school services

Pre-school services include pre-schools, crèches, play groups, day nurseries, and any childminding service which looks after more than three children. Before deciding upon a childcare service, there are a number of questions a parent should ask:

**How often will food be provided?**

Pre-school services have guidelines for food provision. Under these guidelines, food should be provided to toddlers every three hours. The type of food provided depends on the number of hours spent in day care:

- **More than five hours (full-time day care).** Two meals and two snacks should be offered. One of the meals provided should be a hot meal.
- **Between three-and-a-half and five hours (part-time day care).** Two meals and one snack should be offered. The meals do not have to be hot meals.
- **Less than three-and-a-half hours (sessional day care).** One meal and one snack should be offered. The meal does not have to be a hot meal.
What type of food will be provided?

The menu of meals and snacks in a pre-school should aim to be:

- **Varied.** A healthy variety of meals and snacks should be provided. Menu cycles should at least be weekly, but preferably in cycles of two to four weeks.

- **Nutritious.** All pre-schools should be encouraged to provide suitable meals and snacks which meet guidelines to support healthy growth and development in toddlers. Suitable portions of foods which are high in protein, iron, calcium and vitamin D, and which have adequate amounts of fibre, should be provided.

- **Healthily cooked.** Where possible, main meals should be steamed, baked, roasted, stewed, poached and boiled. Seasonings such as salt, processed soups and sauces, and stock cubes should be avoided or used sparingly.

- **Age-appropriate.** Foods which are age-appropriate and of a suitable texture should be provided. Due to the choking risk they present, foods such as whole nuts, boiled and sticky sweets, and popcorn should not be available.

- **Accommodating.** A pre-school should accommodate special dietary needs, especially allergies. For example, a pre-school should be able to provide meal and snack options which are vegetarian, gluten-free, nut-free, and suitable for toddlers with diabetes.

How will food be provided?

Just as the type of food provided is important, the environment in which food is provided is also important. Meals and snacks should be provided to pre-school children:

- **Under supervision.** A suitably qualified carer should sit with the toddlers to ensure that they are eating safely and to help with feeding, if needed.

- **At a table.** Toddlers should eat at a table for all meals and snacks, with distractions kept to a minimum. They should also sit in groups to facilitate conversation and positive peer pressure to eat healthily.

- **On time.** To help establish a healthy routine of meals and snacks, and to prime toddlers to feel hungry at certain times, they should eat at similar times each day.

- **With healthy fluids.** A small amount of water or milk should accompany each meal and snack. However, toddlers should eat about half of their meal first, before fluids are provided. All fluids should be provided in a lidless beaker.

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**QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS**

Any allergies you report to your toddler’s pre-school must have been formally diagnosed by a suitably qualified medical professional.
• **With enough time to eat**. Toddlers should be given about 25 minutes to eat a meal and about 15 minutes to eat a snack. They are unlikely to eat much more beyond this time and should be given permission to leave the table if they wish.

Providing food for childcare

While care settings such as pre-schools usually provide food for toddlers in attendance, the arrangement with childminders, especially those minding fewer than three toddlers, can be more informal. If a parent has decided to provide some, or all, of their toddler’s meals while they are in childcare, they should have a relaxed conversation with their childminder to establish:

• **The food which will be provided.** Parents should clearly establish which meals and snacks, if any, they will provide. If a childminder is to provide all meals and snacks, parents should offer some ideas and advice on what works best for their toddler.

• **When food should be provided.** Parents should outline the normal feeding schedule for their toddler and should encourage it to continue.

• **Preferred food additions from a childminder.** If a toddler is having an unusually hungry day, or if a parent is running late, a childminder may need to provide some extra food. If this happens, parents should suggest simple snacks, such as fruit or crackers and yoghurt that they would be happy for their childminder to offer their toddler.

• **Acceptable fluids.** Parents should state what type and volume of fluids they are happy for their toddler to consume whilst with the childminder.

Suitable articles for parents on this topic are available at [www.toddlebox.ie/nutrition](http://www.toddlebox.ie/nutrition)


