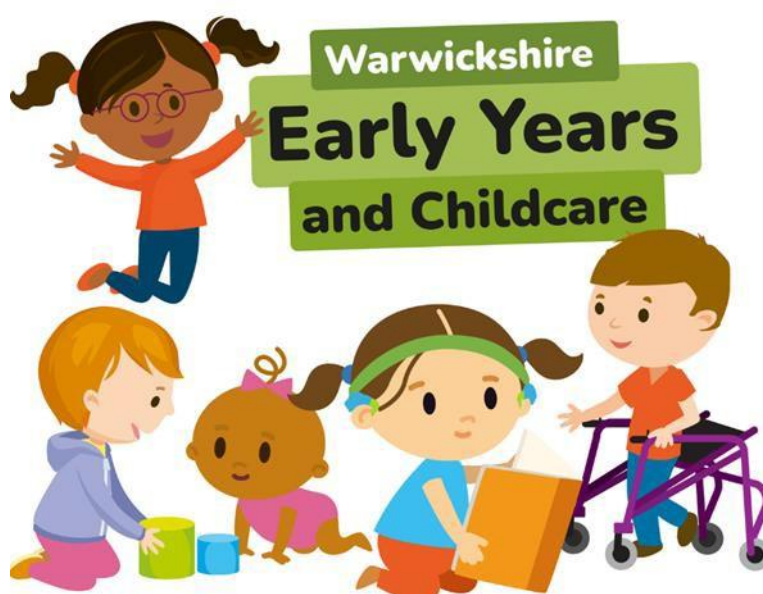


Warwickshire Early Years Quality Inclusion SEND and Safeguarding Team

Lunchbox guidance for Early Years Settings



This guide is designed to support your setting's policies and procedures around Safer Eating and Healthy Eating.

Providing a nutritious lunch is essential to supporting young children's energy levels, learning, and overall development. Whether a setting has many children bringing packed lunches or only a few, it is important to work collaboratively with families to promote the importance of healthy food choices. To support this, settings may wish to offer resources containing practical tips and information that can be shared with parents and carers. These resources aim to strengthen relationships with families and empower them to make informed, affordable, and enjoyable lunchbox choices that meet their child's individual needs.

It is crucial that each setting develops a clear and well-communicated food and nutrition policy. This ensures consistency in practice, supports staff in promoting healthy eating, and helps families understand the expectations around packed lunches. A clear policy also provides a framework for addressing concerns in a supportive and inclusive way.

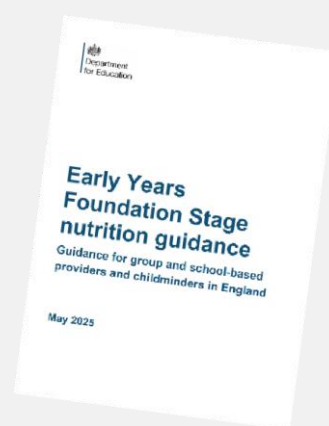
When guiding families who choose to provide packed lunches, or in settings where packed lunches are the primary source of food, it is vital that the approach aligns with [the Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS 2026\)](#) and the [DFE Nutrition Guidance 2025](#).

The following statement from the EYFS 2026 guidance should inform policy and practice:

Food brought in from home Families may wish to provide food from home and some children may need to bring their own meals and snacks for medical or cultural reasons. Having a food and nutrition policy in place and communicating this to parents and/or carers can help them to understand your regulatory obligation to provide healthy, balanced, and nutritious food to children and encourage healthier food choices for packed lunches. It is important to ensure that food provided from home aligns with the healthy options offered by the setting, so that children receive consistent messages about nutrition.

Guidance and support available

- [Lunchbox ideas and recipes – Healthier Families - NHS](#) *
- [Are You Packing A Healthy Lunch A5 Leaflet ENGLISH.pdf](#)
- [packed-lunches-guidance.pdf](#) *
- [Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance](#)



*** Please note:** The guides provided offer general packed-lunch advice. When using them for early years children, including sharing these resources with families, you should consider the child's individual **weaning stage** and ensure that all food choices and textures are consistent with **current national safety guidelines**.

The importance of policy and procedures

To support children's health and wellbeing, it is essential that early year's settings provide clear and consistent guidance around food brought from home. Developing a lunchbox policy that aligns with the [Department for Education's \(DfE\) Nutrition Guidance](#) and the [Early Years Foundation Stage \(EYFS\) Statutory Framework](#) ensures that all children have access to balanced, nutritious meals during their time in the setting. This policy should be clearly communicated to all staff and shared with parents and carers as part of the induction process. It is important that staff understand the policy fully and implement it consistently across the setting to promote a shared approach to healthy eating and support positive outcomes for all children.

Within this policy early years providers may wish to provide a detailed list of acceptable food items for packed lunches, and also explain why certain foods are not permitted, such as those high in sugar, fat, salt, or ultra-processed ingredients, rather than simply stating they are not allowed. It may also be helpful to include examples of nutritious, balanced options that are easy for young children to eat independently, along with guidance upon portion sizes.

Within your policy you may also wish to:

- Offer advice on safe food preparation, such as cutting grapes and cherry tomatoes in ways to reduce choking risks.
- Include clear guidance on how dietary needs and allergens will be managed and provide details of the measures which will be in place to ensure all staff are aware of individual requirements and are proactive in preventing cross-contamination.
- Suggest how food items are packed and outline the importance of parents providing easy-to-open containers that promote children's independence.
- Request that all lunchboxes and containers are clearly marked with their child's name.
- Outline how ongoing discussions with parents and/or carers about the stage their child is at in regard to introducing solid foods and textures the child is familiar with will take place.
- Outline how partnerships with parents will be established and maintained to ensure that:
 - Parents follow the lunchbox guidance provided by the setting and avoid restricted items.
 - Parents provide appropriate portion sizes with their child packed lunch



- Parents prepare and pack foods in a suitable way for each child's developmental needs.
 - Parents prepare food safely and hygienically at home
 - Parents avoid sending foods that require reheating or pose choking risks.
 - Parents communicate openly with staff about any concerns or changes in dietary needs.
 - Parents support healthy eating messages at home to reinforce consistency between home and setting.
- Outline how you value, respect and accommodate all cultural and religious dietary practices as a setting and how you encourage families to share relevant information with staff to ensure children's needs are met in a sensitive and inclusive manner.
 - Outline how staff will discreetly monitor lunchbox contents to ensure alignment with the policy.
 - Outline how hygiene standards are upheld at all times by thoroughly cleaning and sanitising tables, chairs, and surfaces before and after mealtimes, and by following safe practices when handling and serving food.

To keep all children safe from allergens such as nuts, dairy, or eggs, your lunchbox policy should be aligned with your safer eating practices and allergies and allergic reactions policy.

As part of your lunchbox policy and procedures you may consider:

- Implementing visual cues such as coloured placemats or plates to help staff easily identify children with allergies or specific dietary requirements.
- Choosing to have a peanut-free environment due to serious risk of anaphylactic shock for children with severe peanut allergies
- Ensuring staff are fully aware of individual children's dietary needs and prevent cross contamination.
- Communicating with parents about any food restrictions within your setting.
- Ensuring seating is monitored for children with allergies.
- Consider whether staff will sit with children who have allergies and, if appropriate, discuss food allergies with the children and the potential risks
- Informing parents that children's lunch boxes are checked prior to giving the contents to the children to ensure any risks from potential allergens or choking hazards are managed.

Implementing your policy within your setting

Lunchbox storage

To support food safety and promote children's independence, it is important to have a designated lunchbox storage area, that is clean, secure, and easily accessible. Where possible, refrigeration should be provided. If this is not available, parents should be encouraged to include ice packs or insulated lunch bags to help keep food cool and fresh throughout the day.

Clearly labelled storage solutions such as cubbies, baskets, or fridge trays marked with children's names or photos can help prevent mix-ups and encourage children to take responsibility for their own belongings.

If perishable items are brought in, they should be stored in clearly labelled sections within a fridge to maintain hygiene and food safety. These practices help ensure that food remains safe to eat and that children are supported in developing independence during mealtimes.



Hot meals and recipe cards

Some settings may choose to invite families to send hot meals that can be safely reheated on site. While this is not required, should a setting choose to allow meals to be sent that can be reheated, they must make sure the food is stored appropriately and reheated according to food safety guidelines. To support families, settings may choose to share simple “cook or prep at home” recipe cards, highlighting affordable, nutritious options, clear portion guidance, and allergen information, so parents can choose meals that work for their child and household routines.

No requirement for prepackaged food

Parents should not be asked to provide only prepackaged, shop bought lunch items such as ready-made sandwiches or branded snacks. Such requirements can not only create unnecessary financial pressure and inconvenience for families but may also limit access to home prepared, culturally appropriate foods. Instead setting should ensure that families



feel welcome to send balanced, homemade items alongside any shop bought foods they choose, provided they meet the setting's allergy and food safety policies.

Creating a positive and safe mealtime experience in you setting

Creating a designated, age-appropriate space for children to enjoy their lunch is essential for promoting comfort, safety, and positive social interaction.

Seating should be child-sized and arranged to encourage independence and conversation, with babies and younger children safely seated in highchairs or low chairs as appropriate. The eating area should be calm and free from unnecessary distractions to help children focus on their meals.

Ensure children have access to suitable cutlery such as spoons for yoghurts or forks for salads and keep a small supply of spares in case any are forgotten.

Using tablecloths or placemats can help define individual eating spaces, support hygiene, and make cleaning easier.

Provide clearly marked bins for waste disposal and consider introducing composting options to encourage environmental awareness and teach children about sorting waste. These practices not only support healthy eating habits but also foster independence and responsibility

Managing dietary needs and allergies

When managing dietary needs, take care to seat children and their lunchboxes in a way that prevents cross-contamination without labelling or singling them out. Encourage independence by having staff sit with children where possible to model positive eating behaviours, assist with opening containers, and support social interaction. Provide gentle, pressure-free encouragement for children to try new foods, offer help when needed, and promote appropriate portion sizes to foster healthy eating habits



Supervision

Whilst eating their packed lunch children must always be within sight and hearing of a member of staff, as choking can occur silently and without warning. To minimise risk, staff should position themselves to face the children during mealtimes, enabling them to observe eating behaviours, discourage food sharing, and respond swiftly to any signs of choking or unexpected allergic reactions.

It also is essential that at least one member of staff present holds a valid paediatric first aid certificate, obtained through a full course that meets the criteria outlined in Annex A of the EYFS 2026 Framework.



Drinks

To support healthy eating practices in your nursery, reassure parents that they do not need to include a drink with their child's packed lunch, as water is the most suitable option to accompany meals. Ensure fresh water is readily available at every mealtime.

You may also wish to inform parents that any other drinks brought in will not be given to their child, as their hydration needs will be fully met with the water provided.

Staff training

To ensure a safe and supportive mealtime environment, all staff involved in supervising children during mealtimes must be aware of and adhere to basic food hygiene and personal hygiene standards, as outlined in the setting's Healthy Workplace Policy and the Food Standards Agency guidance.

Staff supporting children at mealtimes should have completed relevant training in food allergies and intolerances, as well as food safety and hygiene. It is also essential that at least one staff member present during mealtimes holds a full 12-hour Paediatric First Aid (PFA) certificate, which includes training on choking and anaphylaxis—note that the shorter 6-hour Emergency PFA does not cover anaphylaxis.

Regular reviews of mealtime practices should be carried out, including team discussions and parent surveys, to ensure the ongoing effectiveness and consistency of the lunchbox approach.



Monitoring and communication

To support the implementation of the lunchbox policy, staff should discreetly observe the contents of children's lunchboxes to ensure they reflect the guidance provided. Where concerns arise regarding alignment with the policy, staff should engage with parents or carers in a respectful, supportive, and non-judgmental manner. As part of a whole setting approach, it is recommended that appropriate resources and guidance are made available to assist families in making informed food choices. Settings are also encouraged to invite ongoing feedback from families to ensure the policy remains inclusive, effective, and responsive to the diverse needs of the community.

Strengthening parent partnerships around packed lunches

Working in partnership with parents is key to ensuring children receive healthy, balanced, and nutritious lunch boxes while attending your setting. While having a lunch box policy can be a helpful starting point, it's important to recognise that families may need more than just written guidance. Building trust, offering practical support, and creating opportunities for shared learning can make a real difference.

Here are some top tips to help engage families and encourage positive lunch box practices:

- **Share visual ideas and inspiration:** Use pictures of balanced lunch boxes to inspire families. Visual examples help parents understand what a nutritious lunch might look like and offer practical ideas they can easily replicate. These ideas and inspiration can be shared via newsletters, social media, or displayed on your notice board.
- **Host parent and child lunch box workshops:** Interactive sessions where parents and children prepare lunch boxes together can be both fun and educational. These workshops promote positive food relationships and give families the confidence to try new ideas at home.
- **Signpost trusted websites:** Share links to reliable sources that offer nutritional advice and tasty, child-friendly lunch box ideas. This helps parents access accurate information in a convenient way. You could signpost parents to [NHS lunchbox ideas and recipes](#) and [Food for Life's packed lunches guidance](#).
- **Keep and share a snack-time food diary:** For children who are hesitant to try new foods, working with families to track what has been offered and accepted at snack time can be helpful. Parents can also share what's new in their child's lunch box, supporting a joined-up approach and helping to reduce food waste.
- **Create a lunch box planning template with average prices:** Recognise that some families may be concerned about the cost of providing a healthy lunch. A weekly planner with affordable lunch ideas and pricing from local supermarkets can offer



reassurance and practical support.

- **Celebrate success stories:** Highlight creative, low-cost lunch ideas from families in your setting. Sharing these in newsletters or displays can inspire others and foster a sense of community.
- **Encourage children's voice:** Include activities in your curriculum that explore healthy choices, food groups, and cultural diversity. Ask children what they'd like in their lunch box and share their ideas with parents to support child-led choices.



Top tips to share with parents

Planning and Prepare Lunchboxes Together –

Involving your child in the planning and making of what is in their lunch box will allow them to feel part of the choices made and hopefully leave them feeling excited about eating what they have made!



Make good use se of leftovers

- Leftovers from dinner can make excellent lunchbox additions. Cold pasta, rice dishes, or roasted vegetables can be just as tasty the next day and save time in the morning. (Just be aware of food hygiene, cooling times and also reheating information.)

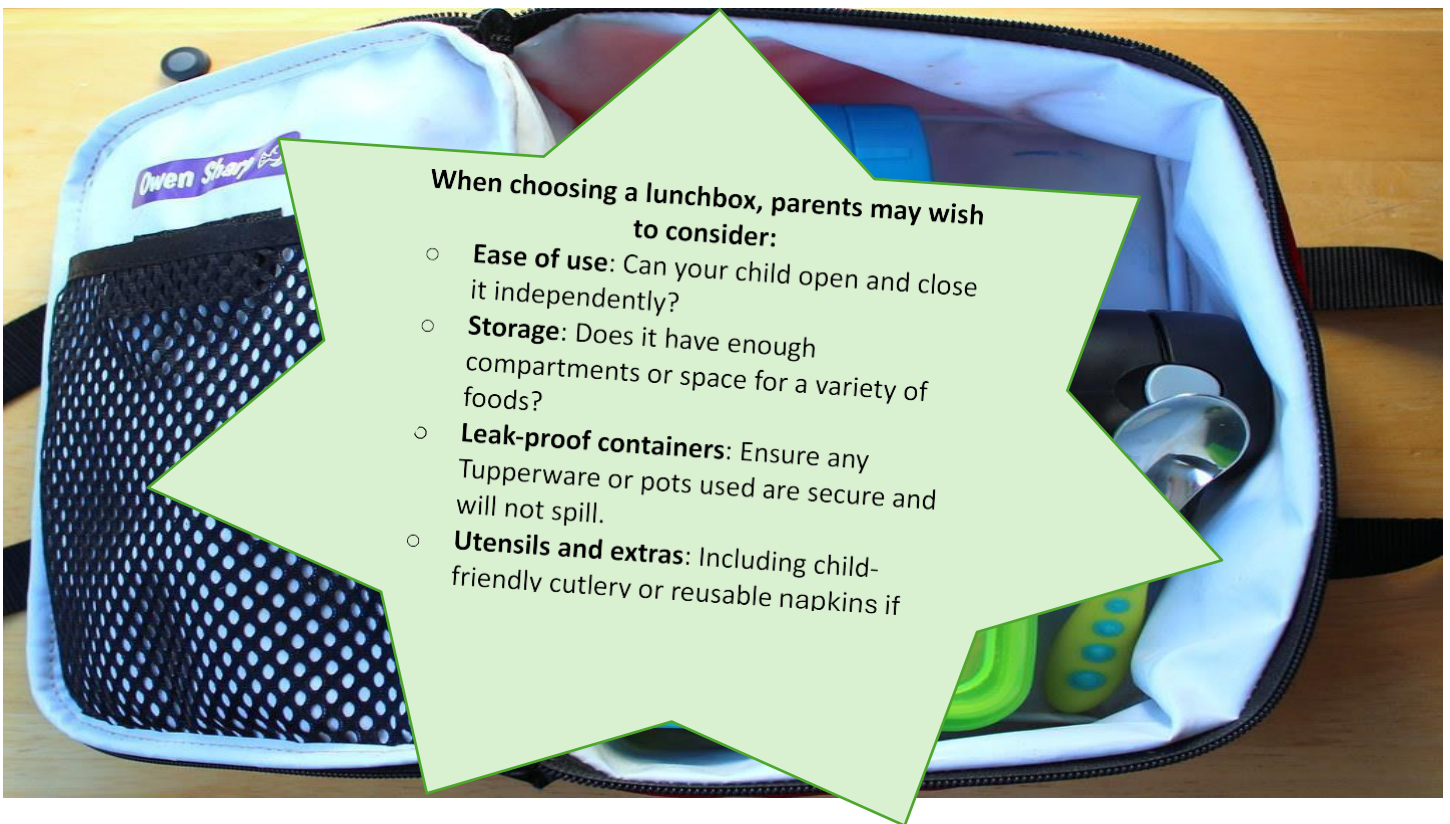


Try batch cooking and prepping in advance - Preparing food in batches for example chopping fruit, baking muffins, or making sandwiches can save time during the week. Items can be stored in the fridge or freezer so they're ready to go when needed. This also helps reduce stress on busy mornings and ensures your child always has something nutritious to take.





Choose a lunch box together - Let your child help pick out their lunchbox. Whether it is their favourite colour, character, or shape, having a say in the choice gives them a sense of ownership



When choosing a lunchbox, parents may wish to consider:

- **Ease of use:** Can your child open and close it independently?
- **Storage:** Does it have enough compartments or space for a variety of foods?
- **Leak-proof containers:** Ensure any Tupperware or pots used are secure and will not spill.
- **Utensils and extras:** Including child-friendly cutlery or reusable napkins if

Summary

In summary, this lunchbox guidance supports a whole setting approach to promoting healthy eating, safety, and independence during mealtimes. By aligning with national standards, ensuring staff are appropriately trained, and maintaining open communication with families, settings can create a consistent and supportive environment for all children. Regular reflection and collaboration with staff and parents will help ensure the policy remains effective, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of the children in your care.

Useful links

[DfE Early Years Nutritional Guidance: guidance for group and school-based providers and childminders in England](#)

[Foundation Years: food safety advice on choking hazards in the setting, including choking hazards food safety advice poster](#)

[DfE Help for Early Years Providers: Nutrition](#)

[DfE Help for Early Years Providers: Food Safety](#)

[DfE Help for Early Years Providers: Planning food activities with children](#)

[DfE Introducing Solid Foods – a roadmap](#)

[DfE Common Allergens in Food Table](#)

[NHS Guidance on ‘Fussy Eaters’](#)

[Best Start in Life: preparing food safely](#)

[NHS Guidance on ‘What food to avoid giving to babies and young children’](#)

[NHS Guidance on ‘Food Labels’](#)

[DfE Portion sizes for children aged 5 and under poster](#)

[DfE Easy substitution table poster](#)

[Best Start in Life: recipe and meal ideas](#)

Appendix Choking incident form

Choking Incident Report Form

Child Details			
Name:		Date of birth	
Room:		Key person	
Incident Details			
Date of Incident		Time of Incident:	
Location:			
Activity at Time of Incident			
Description of Incident			
What item/food caused the choking?			
How was the choking identified?			
Duration of choking episode			
Was the child able to breathe/talk/cough?			
Immediate Actions Taken			
First aid administered (e.g., back blows, abdominal thrusts):			
By whom:			
Was emergency medical help called? (Yes/No) - If yes, time called: - Time of arrival:			
Outcome of first aid			
Child's Condition After Incident			
Was the child monitored afterwards? (Yes/No)			
Duration of monitoring:			
Observations:			
Was the child sent home or returned to activity?			

Parent/Carer Notification			
Time parent/carers was informed:			
By whom:			
Method of communication (phone, in person, etc.):			
Parent/carers response:			
Follow-Up Actions			
Review of food/toy safety:			
Staff debrief or training needs identified:			
Changes to risk assessment or procedures			
Additional notes:			
Staff Involved			
Name(s) and role(s):			
Manager Review			
Reviewed by:		Date:	
Signature:			

