

Report reveals barriers to providing nutritious food in early-years childcare settings in UK

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Some UK nurseries are struggling to source healthy local food due to lack of funding and a workforce crisis, with some resorting to going to the local corner shop to buy lunches for children, according to the authors of [a new report](#).

The authors of the report are calling for more resources and support for nurseries and childminders so they can provide nutritious and locally produced food.

The report, by researchers at the University of York, food policy consultancy Bremner and Co and the charity The Food Foundation, looked at the provision of food in 16 early years [childcare](#) settings across Yorkshire.

Food donations

Based on interviews with childcare workers and public authority employees, the findings paint a mixed picture, with many settings struggling to procure local nutritious food and employ staff to prepare it. One childcare setting reported relying on food donations from a charity to be able to provide healthy meals.

The settings provided fruit and vegetables, but in several there was also evidence of sugary desserts, chocolates and heavy puddings. For example, one setting offered sugary mousse, chocolate cupcakes and rocky roads as desserts for three days across a two-week cycle.

The researchers found that larger settings affiliated with schools tended to be able to provide healthier meals and be more aligned with School Food Standards.

Child poverty

The report also highlights that Yorkshire has the second highest number of children under 16 living in absolute poverty (21.5%), yet only 5% of early years Yorkshire children were registered as eligible for free school meals (FSM) in childcare settings, compared with a national figure of 8%.

Participants interviewed for the report outlined how many settings feed children who are in obvious need, despite not falling within the eligibility criteria. One head teacher at a state-maintained nursery said, "For our FSM children, we'll make a jacket potato or a healthy sandwich. And then with those families who are struggling, we will make the food for them."

Pressing need

Children aged four years old and under can get up to 90% of their total daily calories from their childcare setting, and [tooth decay](#) and obesity rates show a pressing need to address diets in preschool-aged children, the researchers say.

In England, 21% of children are living with obesity by the time they start school, and in Yorkshire, this rises to 23%. Yorkshire also has the second highest incidence of dental caries in the UK, and there is a considerable increase in tooth decay between three and five years of age. In Sheffield, dental caries rise from 0.9% at age three years to 41% at age five years.

The researchers say there is an urgent need for increased investment and to review the nutrition guidance in early years settings.

Powerful opportunity

Co-author of the report, Professor Maria Bryant from the FixOurFood research group and the Hull York Medical School at the University of York, said, "Poor diets in preschoolers can contribute to obesity, which affects one in five children before school age, and dental issues, which are the leading cause of hospitalization for children under five.

"Early years childcare offers a powerful opportunity to instill healthy eating habits and develop a life-long positive relationship with food as a shared social experience. Our report calls for a united cross-party action to provide better support and resources for early years childcare and align food standards with those in schools, and for more research and resources to ensure [proper nutrition](#) at this critical age for children's growth and development."

Hannah Brinsden, Head of Policy at The Food Foundation, said, "Good nutrition in the early years of life is essential for the healthy development and long-term well-being of our children. It is imperative that all [political parties](#) commit to taking strong action to ensure our youngest children have access to nutritious foods including through supporting childcare settings to provide healthy food and through regulating the high volume of salt and sugar currently found in foods marketed for babies and toddlers."

Significant challenges

Dayna Brackley, Partner, Bremner & Co., added, "The early years sector is already grappling with a workforce and funding crisis, facing significant challenges in providing adequate nutrition to children under five. We need more political focus on early years nutrition, especially in light of childcare reform and a reported 33% rise in the number of hours

a 2-year-old will spend in childcare by 2028.

"Early years settings provide an ideal environment for encouraging healthy eating habits in young children. We should be supporting the sector to achieve this. This research highlights many of the barriers—funding, training, procurement and a lack of monitoring."

More information: [Food Procurement and Provision in Early Years Settings: A Yorkshire Case Study](#) (2024)

Provided by University of York

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