

# Are your school meals accessible to children and young people with SEND?

Around **60%** of children with SEND cannot eat school meals due to dietary requirements or sensory processing difficulties. This short guide offers some tips.

## Tips

- Ensure all pupils, including those with SEND, feel welcome and comfortable during mealtimes. This will mean different things to different children and so do check directly with them, to ensure their needs and requirements are met.
- Some children with a physical disability or due to their size/balance issues will struggle to sit on lunchtime seating e.g. round stools attached to a table, especially if their feet are not in contact with the floor. Sitting unsupported and unstable will limit their motivation to sit to eat. Providing some children with alternative seating, e.g. table and chairs nearby, will help, and possibly using foot blocks under feet to provide a stable sitting position. If you are concerned about a pupil's position at mealtimes, contact the Advisory Teacher or the child's Occupational Therapist, if they have one, for a seating assessment.
- Recognise that children and young people with SEND may have diverse needs, including sensory sensitivities, dietary restrictions, or difficulties with self-feeding. Use of resources such as caring cutlery, Dycem mats under food plates/bowls, lipped plates/bowls may help to support independence (all available online).
- Modify the food, mealtime environment, or routines to support students with SEND. Some pupils will struggle with the sensory environment in a busy, loud dining hall and may need access to a quieter eating area.
- Pupils with some medical/physical conditions will need longer to eat than their peers and due to fatigue may need support from an adult to finish their meal.
- Ensure that all school meals, including those for students with SEND, meet the required nutritional standards in the [School Food Standards](#).
- Work closely with parents and relevant professionals (e.g., dietitians) to understand individual needs and develop appropriate meal plans.
- Establish clear and consistent mealtime routines to help pupils with SEND feel secure, prepared and understood.



- Ensure that staff are trained to support pupils with SEND during mealtimes, including identifying potential needs and providing appropriate assistance, encouraging independence where possible e.g. support pupils to cut up food and open pots rather than always doing it for them.
- Regularly review and evaluate the school's approach to SEND and school meals to ensure it is meeting the needs of all pupils and also regularly check in with each child to ensure the approach is still supporting them.
- Please regularly encourage parents and carers to check if they are eligible for free school meals for their child/ren. They can check this and [apply here](#).

### **For children with SEND in receipt of Free School Meals:**

[Department for Education Free School Meal Guidance March 2024](#). The guidance now includes a section on making reasonable adjustments for disabled children, such as by offering a food voucher. It describes the duty to make reasonable adjustments as “anticipatory”. Schools should be actively looking at which disabled pupils might be missing out on their school lunch and offering an alternative.

The guidance also now includes a section on children with an education package called [education otherwise than at school \(EOTAS\)](#). This makes clear that local authorities should provide free school meals to eligible children unable to attend school due to their special educational needs and who have an EOTAS package.

### **Illustrative examples of reasonable adjustments (not exhaustive)** (from the [Department for Education Free School Meal Guidance March 2024](#).)

*1) A child has Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID) and therefore will only eat a particular type of sandwich. The child is therefore unable to access free school meals that the school provides which comply with the relevant food standards. The school, having engaged with the parent/carers and the child, determines that a suitable reasonable adjustment would be to provide the particular type of sandwich that the child eats on a daily basis so that the child doesn't go hungry.*

For the above, if you take a similar approach, aim to measure the impact for the particular child and review/change the approach if necessary.

*2) A child has Autism which results in sensory processing difficulties leading to a restricted diet. As a result, the child is unable to access free school meals which comply with the relevant food standards. The school, having engaged with the parent/carers and the child, determines that a suitable reasonable adjustment would be to issue food vouchers to the child's parents so they can provide a packed lunch that the child will eat.*

We are also keen to hear from Swindon schools and so if you have any case studies, or additional tips for other schools; we'd love to hear from you:

[swindonhealthyschools@swindon.gov.uk](mailto:swindonhealthyschools@swindon.gov.uk)