



The Gem Federation

Healthy Eating and Meal Time Inclusion in Early Years

We are committed to supporting all children, including those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), to develop healthy eating habits in a positive, inclusive environment. We recognise that children come to us with a range of dietary needs, sensory sensitivities, medical requirements, and food-related experiences. We work in partnership with families to support these needs in a way that promotes nutritional balance, mealtime confidence, and emotional wellbeing.

In line with the Equality Act 2010, we make reasonable adjustments to ensure that all children can access and participate in mealtimes in a way that is inclusive and respectful of individual needs and differences.

Individualised Support for Children with Additional Needs

Children with SEND or other additional needs may benefit from tailored approaches to eating. We work collaboratively with families and, where appropriate, external professionals to:

- Adapt food presentation, textures, or portion sizes to meet sensory, medical, or developmental needs.
- Use visual aids, consistent routines, and gentle encouragement to build confidence and reduce anxiety during mealtimes.
- Support gradual exposure to new foods while always respecting the child's pace, preferences, and comfort.
- Create a calm, supportive eating environment with positive adult modelling and peer encouragement.
- Ensure that mealtimes are never used as a source of pressure, control, or distress.

Working with Parents to Vary Children's Diets

We value open communication with parents and carers in helping children explore and accept a wider range of foods. To support this:

- We talk with families about their child's dietary habits, favourite foods, and any restrictions, allergies, or cultural preferences. We may encourage a packed lunch instead of a school meal for a short period of time.
- Familiar and preferred foods are highlighted from the school menu to help children feel safe and secure during mealtimes.
- New foods are introduced gradually and alongside familiar items (usually in a bowl), encouraging curiosity without pressure.
- We share strategies and updates with parents so that progress can be reinforced consistently at home and in the school setting.

Staged Approach to Introducing New Foods

We recognise that some children may be hesitant or anxious when trying new foods. Our approach is gentle, consistent, and child-led:

Stage 1: Familiarisation

- The child sees and smells the new food.
- No expectation to eat or touch - just exposure through observation.

Stage 2: Interaction

- The child is encouraged to touch, hold or play with the food.
- Visual aids and books about food may be used to support curiosity.

Stage 3: Tasting

- A tiny portion of the food is offered alongside familiar favourites.
- Praise is given for any level of interaction, not just eating.

Stage 4: Acceptance

- The food is offered regularly in small portions.
- Children are supported to increase comfort and preference at their own pace.

We never force children to eat. We aim to create a safe, relaxed environment where children build trust with food over time.

Staged Approach to Phasing Out Bottle Use

Prolonged bottle use can affect oral development, speech, and eating patterns. Our staged approach supports children in moving towards open or free-flow cups by working with families:

Stage 1: Awareness

- We talk with families about their child's current bottle use and establish shared goals.
- Books and visual cues used in the setting to introduce the idea of cups.

Stage 2: Introduction of Alternatives

- Children are encouraged to use open cups or beakers during the day, particularly at snack times.
- Adults model drinking from cups and offer praise for small steps.

Stage 3: Gradual Reduction

- Bottle use is reduced gradually (e.g. only at bedtime) with family agreement.
- Children are supported with transitions and comfort alternatives (e.g. stories, cuddles).

Stage 4: Consistency and Removal

- With parental support, the bottle is removed completely.
- Routines and comfort strategies are used to ease the transition and celebrate success.

We understand that every child develops at their own pace, and our role is to provide gentle encouragement and consistent routines to support their growth and independence.

Inclusion, Respect and Partnership

Our healthy eating and mealtime practices are rooted in inclusion, respect and child development principles. We are guided by:

- The SEND Code of Practice (2015)
- The Equality Act (2010)
- Our duty to promote children's health, wellbeing and independence

We will continue to work in close partnership with families, adapting where necessary, to ensure that every child feels safe, included, and confident at mealtimes.