

A quick guide to

free school meals



Let's get
COOKing

**CHILDREN'S
FOOD TRUST**
Eat Better Do Better

Contents

	Page
Why free school meals matter	03
Who qualifies for a free school meal?	04
The free school meal application journey	05
Social stigma and free school meals	06-07
The Pupil Premium	08
Free school meal top tips	09
The Children's Food Trust	10-11
Do you need more help with free school meals?	12



All images used are library images only and do not represent actual free school meal recipients.

Why free school meals matter

Free school meals are a statutory benefit available to children from families who receive other qualifying benefits and who have been through the relevant registration process. The opportunity to receive a free school meal is extremely important to a substantial number of children from low income families, for whom a school lunch may be the only balanced meal they will eat in a day.



Our research shows¹ that when children eat better, they do better. Whether families are paying for school meals or are entitled to them for free, children are more likely to concentrate in the classroom in the afternoon after eating healthy school lunches in a pleasant environment. This also improves their health and their learning about making better food choices.

Research² also shows that children eligible for free school meals are less likely to: do well at school,

continue into further education, or secure higher paid jobs. Therefore, ensuring that these children eat and gain the benefits of the free school meals they're entitled to, really will make a difference to their ability to learn and succeed.

Free school meals save parents' time and money, and provide much needed reassurance that their children are eating a healthy, balanced lunch every day. The government's introduction of the Pupil Premium and the extra school funding of £623 for every child registered for free school meals that it brings, underlines the importance that schools ensure each child that qualifies is actually signed up.

There should be no reason for children and families not to claim the free school meals to which they are entitled. The Children's Food Trust is here to work with and support schools, local authorities and families to increase the registration and the take up of free school meals across the country.

¹School Lunch and Learning Behaviour, 2010 – www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/research

²DFE: Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 2011

Who qualifies for a free school meal?

Parents living in England and Wales do not have to pay for their children's school lunches if they receive any of the following:

- » **Income Support**
- » **Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance**
- » **Income-related Employment and Support Allowance**
- » **Support under Part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999**
- » **The 'Guarantee' element of State Pension Credit**
- » **Child Tax Credit, provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit and have an annual income that does not exceed £16,190**

Parents that receive working tax credit are **not** entitled to claim free school meals for their children.

A child over the age of 16 in receipt of any of these qualifying benefits in their own right is also eligible to receive free school meals.



The free school meal application journey

The process of applying for free school meals is not the same throughout the country. Some local authorities offer online application and electronic benefit checks, others require parents to complete a paper form or apply by phone. We encourage schools to work with their local authority to provide clear information for parents and to make the process as easy and discreet as possible.

Initial enquiry

It is important to make free school meal information available to parents and carers throughout the year. Use posters in the reception area and make leaflets and application forms available in the school office. Provide links to your local authority's free school meals information on your school website and, if parents can apply online, make sure they know the web address to go to.

Application process

Have a named member of school staff as a free school meals 'expert' who can provide one-to-one guidance through the application process. This can help parents feel reassured, and give them the confidence to ask questions. This will be particularly helpful to parents and carers who don't have English as their first language. You may also find that some parents prefer not to discuss this sensitive issue with a member of school staff, so it is important that you provide contact details of your local authority or other relevant contact.

Notification

Once the local authority has informed a parent that their application has been approved, you should discreetly let the parent know that the information has also reached the school. At this stage, you can tell parents when their child will start having free school meals, and share the school menu with them so they know what lunch options their child has.

Claiming the meal

Once pupils are registered, it's really important that you encourage and support them to eat their free school meal. It is also important that schools fully understand how the application process works to be able to advise parents accordingly. For example, in some areas parents need to apply for free school meals only once – their application is automatically renewed each year as long as their circumstances remain the same. In other areas, parents have to re-apply every year.

Social stigma and free school meals

One of the major reasons that many children do not take the free school meals they are entitled to is social stigma. Children can feel embarrassed about receiving free school meals and may even worry about being bullied because of it. Parents may feel anxious about other people knowing that they are claiming benefits and so decide not to register for free school meals. However, there are steps that you can take to try and reduce the risk of stigma being a problem at your school. Have a look at our free school meal 'dos and don'ts' below.

Do provide all parents with as much information as possible about free school meals.

Do have a cashless canteen. A cashless system removes the need for cash transactions in the classroom or dining room. When pupils are not using cash to pay for their meals, it is easier for pupils taking free school meals to remain anonymous. For example, at primary schools, parents paying for school meals can send cheques to the school office in advance. In secondary schools, swipe cards and biometric systems can be implemented.

Do mark prices and meal deals clearly so free school meal pupils know exactly what meal options they have, to avoid confusion or embarrassment at the till.

Do offer nutritious and appetising meals that all children will want to eat.

Do offer parents an area where they can complete free school meals application forms in private or highlight how to apply on-line or on the phone if possible.



Don't provide pupils having free school meals with a special dinner ticket or token.

Don't have separate dishes marked for pupils having free school meals.

Don't ask children entitled to free school meals to queue or sit separately from other pupils.

Don't ask children entitled to free school meals to wait until all other children have been served.

Don't offer free school meal literature to parents in front of other parents.



The Pupil Premium

The government has introduced the Pupil Premium to help children from low income families reach their full potential and to achieve higher academic grades at school.

The government believes that Pupil Premium funding, which is in addition to the main school funding, is the best way to address current inequalities by ensuring that funding to tackle disadvantage reaches the pupils who need it most.

Under this funding arrangement³, schools currently receive **£623** for every pupil registered for free school meals, further reinforcing the need to make sure every child that qualifies is actually registered.



³Department for Education, 2012/13

Free school meal top tips

Every year, of all the parents entitled to claim free school meals for their children, thousands of them don't apply. At the same time, many children whose parents *have* applied still do not go on to take and eat their free school meals.

Here are some top tips on how to promote free school meals in your school.

1. Encourage school staff to eat with pupils. It can help to boost the confidence of shy or younger children and creates a positive atmosphere in the dining room.
2. Be flexible and offer a range of meals for everyone so that pupils eating free school meals can also enjoy non-set meal choices such as grab-and-go options.
3. Invite parents to taster sessions so they can sample your school meals for themselves. It's also a chance to show them any processes that you have in place, such as cashless payment.
4. Engage with religious and community groups about the issues that may be preventing parents from those groups from claiming for free school meals for their children. Work with these parents to help resolve any issues.
5. Consider a stay-on-site policy. This will help encourage those who are entitled to a free school meal to stay on site and eat their meal. Allowing secondary school pupils to leave school at lunchtime reduces this likelihood.



Do you need more help with free school meals?

Order a copy of our **Free School Meals Matter Toolkit**. It contains everything schools need to know about the Pupil Premium, tackling stigma, eligibility criteria, and a host of practical tips and resources including posters, parent letters, surveys and leaflets.



To find out more or to order your toolkit please visit: www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk/shop





The Children's Food Trust

The Children's Food Trust aims to reduce childhood obesity and improve educational performance through improving the food our children eat both in and out of school and in early years settings. We work directly with thousands of schools, millions of parents and local authorities across the country. We campaign on key issues in school food.

We run the UK's biggest network of cooking clubs and, under our previous name of the School Food Trust, we were directly responsible for developing and introducing the national food and nutrition guidelines in both schools and early years settings. We make a difference, and would be pleased to help you too.

Let's Get Cooking

Let's Get Cooking provides training, support and resources for setting up and running healthy cooking activities for people of all ages. Let's Get Cooking is a programme run by the Children's Food Trust.

www.letsgetcooking.org.uk

Contact us

Children's Food Trust, 3rd Floor, 1 East Parade, Sheffield S1 2ET

Tel: 0114 299 6901

Email: info@childrensfoodtrust.org.uk

Website: www.childrensfoodtrust.org.uk

Children's Food Trust registered charity number 1118995

Let's get
cooking

**CHILDREN'S
FOOD TRUST**
Eat Better Do Better