

# ABCDE of weight management

Advice for parents, carers and family  
of children with a learning disability



# Working with health professionals and school staff

There are a number of health professionals who are likely to be involved in the support of your child. It might be that school staff are best placed to give support when it comes to helping with behaviour or developing a visual timetable, but then this information then has to be passed to carers, other support workers at locations such as MENCAP or other respite providers, family members and anyone else working with the child.

We recommend organising a meeting with all those involved to make sure the information discussed can be provided to everyone.

Healthcare professionals may be able help advise on a realistic and healthy weight target.

Remember, every child is different, and your child's weight and growth journey may not be typical due to the complexities of issues that may impact on their eating and drinking. Children with complex disabilities are more likely to have weight management concerns and they may have more obstacles when trying to manage their weight.

For some children, the aim may be to maintain their weight so that they will have 'grown into their height'. Others may have to lose weight. A healthcare professional can provide you with guidance on the goals for your child.

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This booklet has been created by staff from the Children and Young People's Paediatric Dietetic team.

All information in this booklet has been checked and was correct at the time it was sent for printing.

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# Introduction

Helping a child with learning disabilities maintain a healthy weight can be challenging for a number of reasons, such as:

- Challenging behaviour at mealtimes
- Difficulty in accessing exercise
- Limited variety of foods (restrictive eating)
- Medication that may affect appetite

It is important to address any weight concerns early as the heavier your child, the greater their risk of developing other health conditions such as heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer, stroke and osteoarthritis. It can also have a negative impact on your child psychologically.

The advice in this booklet will focus on the five main areas to support your child to achieve and maintain a healthy weight. You may want to focus on one or two areas at a time as addressing all of these at once may feel overwhelming for both you and your child.



## ABCDE of weight management



**A** – Increase **Activity**



**B** – Manage **Behaviours** associated with meal or snack time



**C** – Reduce **Calories** from snacks



**D** – Change to low calorie **Drinks**



**E** – Base meals and portions on the **Eatwell plate**

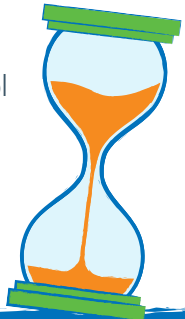
## A – Increase Activity

Here are some tips for introducing exercise:

1. Make it fun – choose activities your child enjoys; for example have a disco dancing session every evening with a disco light.
2. Involve peers – can any friends/siblings do the activity with your child? It may help motivate them.



3. Use a social story or other behavioural techniques to prepare your child for the activity however small it is.
4. Plan for safety – then try to relax and enjoy.
5. Allow your child to get it wrong – it's okay. If you are prepared that it might not go to plan and control your expectations, then the next time they might get on better. Don't give up at the first pitfall.
6. Reduce time spent sitting in front of a screen – use timers and social stories to help limit this.



7. Build activity into daily life – start with small errands, e.g., park further away so you need to walk a little bit extra, or include children in household tasks, such as helping in the garden or washing the car.
8. Prepare for all the seasons – keep going even if it is dark or wet, just wrap up warm or put on waterproofs.
9. Visit the ABLEize website for ideas on how to get active:

**[ableize.com/Disabled-Groups-and-Clubs-by-County](http://ableize.com/Disabled-Groups-and-Clubs-by-County)**



Being as active as possible as a family and for your child as an individual is an important way to help them be healthy. Try to think about activities that your child will enjoy and speak to their teacher about any potential opportunities to join in with after-school activities.

To help with planning and motivation, we have included a column for activity in the weekly plan at the end of this booklet.

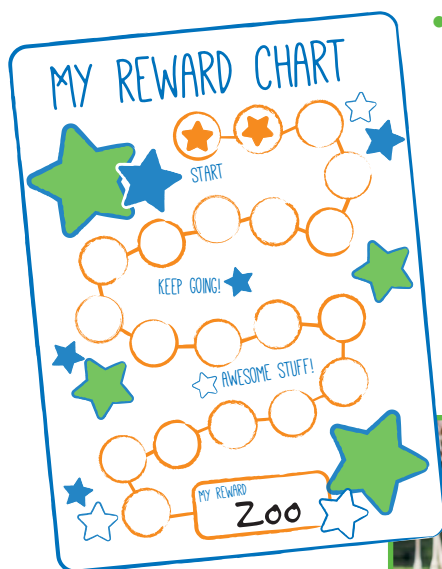


## B – Managing Behaviours at meal and snack times

You may find that all your child wants to do is eat. Try having a discussion with your child's teachers or behavioural team at school to look at some possible ideas and interventions.

Here are some ideas that can help:

- Introduce changes very slowly – make one change at a time
- Show evidence when there is nothing left – for example, an empty saucepan
- If your child is able to understand rewards, you could try a reward chart or way of encouraging them along the way with non-food treats
- Never give food as a reward: use other actions/prizes as a reward, e.g., a cuddle, a fun activity such as having their nails painted, stickers on a chart, or a marble in a container – if they get a container full of marbles, they are awarded a toy/book/day out
- Be careful allowing the television or something that will encourage your child to sit down, rather than being active





- Have a box of distraction 'toys'/ activities – drawing, junk modelling, cars – and change this regularly so they don't tire of it
- Keep your child occupied as much as possible – sometimes when we are bored, we feel like eating more so occupying your child may help take the focus away from food

- Limit access to food – keep out of reach, use locks or do not buy unhealthy foods
- Use visuals – try no entry signs on fridges and cupboards, or posters with foods that are allowed and not allowed
- Provide visual hunger and fullness scales – this can help with expressing and recognising hunger cues
- Adding clocks to meal timings can help some children to get used to the idea of meal structure, if they are keen to eat often through the day
- Use positive reinforcement – it's important that they don't feel they are being 'punished'



## C – Reduce Calories from snacks

Try to limit snacks to 200 calories (kcal) per day. This can either be as two snacks of 100kcal or one snack of 200kcal depending on your child's routine. Fruit and vegetables are the best option as they are low in calories but will help your child feel more full and satisfied.

### 50-100 calories

- 2 Tuc/ Hovis crackers or water biscuits
- Mini Milk/ mini Twister/ Fab ice lolly
- Low calorie chocolate drink
- Ginger nut or rich tea biscuit
- Fig roll or fruit shortcake
- Low fat fruit yoghurt
- Portion of fruit
- Meringue nest
- Sugar-free polo mints
- Slim-A-Soup





## 100-150 calories

- Treat size chocolate bar
- Small KitKat or Curly Wurly
- 3 After Eight mints
- 28g boiled sweets/fruit gums/fruit pastilles
- Chocolate teacake
- Scotch pancake or crumpet
- 28g brie/ camembert/ edam
- Slice of toast (use spread from daily calorie allowance)
- Harvest chewy bar
- Packet of Wotsits, Quavers, Skips or Twiglets
- Pot of fromage frais
- 3 tablespoons of dry cereal



## 150-200 calories

- Bread roll or English muffin
- 28g milk, white or plain chocolate
- 150g pot of custard or rice pudding
- Packet of Hula Hoops
- Solero or choc ice
- 28g peanuts
- Currant bun
- Chocolate biscuit bar
- Fruit Corner yoghurt
- Extra meat portion



## D – Change to low-calorie Drinks

A child may confuse thirst for hunger so it's important that they stay well hydrated. Water can also help fill up tummies and reduce hunger, so it's important to offer water at meal and snack times.



Limit drinks to water, sugar free squash or sugar- and caffeine-free fizzy drinks. If your child enjoys drinking milk then swap to skimmed milk or plant-based milks as these are lower in fat and calories.

Water or semi-skimmed milk is the best choice for children's teeth. An occasional small smoothie or diluted fruit juice (150ml) is okay.



## Recommended fluid intake

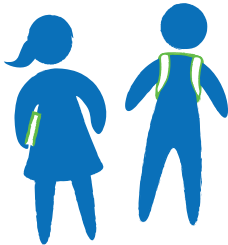
The below fluid recommendation is a guide and will vary depending on the size of the child, physical activity, season, and additional losses such as excessive drooling or sweating.



1,300ml

4-9 years

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1,500-1,700ml

9-13 years

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2,000ml for females

2,500ml for males

>14 years

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## E – Eatwell plate

The Eatwell guide shows us what and how much we should eat to be healthy. You can find more information on:

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well)

### Fruit and vegetables



### Protein

(e.g. some beans, meat, eggs)

### cereal

### Carbohydrates

(e.g. bread, pasta)



### Sugary, salty and fatty foods

With each meal, make sure that your child's plate is a third carbohydrate, third to half fruit or vegetables, and a third either protein or dairy. Sugary, salty and fatty foods should avoided, or included in small quantities.

## Portion control

When looking at portion sizes for your child you need to think about how big the portion you are providing is and could it be reduced. Here are some tips to help with portion control:

1. Use your child's hand as a guide:
  - Use their palm as a guide for the amount of protein food they need (e.g. meat, fish, poultry, beans, pulses, soya mince, Quorn®, eggs, lentils, dahl)
  - Use their fist size for the size of the starchy carbohydrate portion (e.g. pasta, rice, potato, chapatti, couscous)
  - Use both their hands cupped together for the portion of vegetables and/or fruit
2. Try using a smaller plate so that visually, the portion does not look small.
3. Fill up 1/2 of the child's plate with vegetables (if they will eat them).
4. Portion plates can be great. You can buy these online. Make sure you get the right size for your child. There are child sized versions and larger sizes for teenagers.
5. If your child will always want seconds, make the first portion smaller.

Visit the British Dietetic Association's (BDA) website for more portion size advice:

[www.bda.uk.com/resource/food-facts-portion-sizes.html](http://www.bda.uk.com/resource/food-facts-portion-sizes.html)

# Weekly food menu choices and meal planning

Although planning your meals for the week can be time consuming, it can solve some problems when you get in late with a hungry child and the easiest thing to reach for is an unhealthy meal/snack. We've included a meal planner on the next page to help with this. It can help with shopping too.

## How to plan

- Have a list of recipes and meals that you know are lower calorie options – these can be as simple as they need to be depending on your time constraints.
- Think about the week ahead and on busy days consider whether you can have a meal prepared in the freezer or leftovers from a previous meal.
- If your children have hot meals at school, they do not need big evening meals.
- It can be helpful to communicate your aims with school – they can support your child to eat the correct portion size as well as inform you if your child has not eaten a big meal at lunch time, so if your child is hungry, you can take this into account.
- Some children will enjoy and respond well to a visual plan – try downloading a photograph of choices, snack options or breakfast options and allowing your child to choose – it may be helpful in heading off behaviour issues. If your child is able, try to involve them in this. Put the picture guide in a place that is helpful (e.g., on the fridge) and personalise it with a photo of your child.

## Meal ideas

The following websites may be helpful in planning out some healthy meals:

- **Healthier Families**  
[www.nhs.uk/healthier-families](http://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families)
- **NHS Eat Well** – some recipe ideas that may be more suitable for children with complex needs  
[www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well)



## Vitamin and mineral supplements

Having a variety of different foods is important for your child to support their growth and development. If your child only has foods from one or two food groups then they might benefit from a multivitamin and mineral supplement.

These supplements come in different forms such as powder, liquid or gummies and it's important to ensure the supplement you choose is age appropriate.

# Healthy packed lunch guide

What does a healthy packed lunch look like?

It should:

- ✓ Be based on a starchy food
- ✓ Include both fruit and vegetables
- ✓ Include a portion of protein
- ✓ Include a drink

## Starchy food (preferably wholegrain, if applicable)

- Bread
- Couscous
- Noodles
- Rice
- Wrap
- Pitta
- Pasta
- Chapatti
- Bagel

## Protein portion

- Hummus
- Ham
- Low fat cheddar
- Mixed beans
- Chicken
- Low fat soft cheese
- Tuna
- Falafel

## Fruit and vegetables

- Chopped vegetable batons (carrot, cucumber, pepper)
- Cherry tomatoes
- Salad garnish (in sandwich)
- Grated carrot (mixed with falafel/hummus)
- Sweetcorn (try with tuna or as part of a pasta salad)
- Chopped fruit (often easier to eat than the whole fruit)







## Tips for healthy cooking on a budget

- Use seasonal fruit and vegetables to save money
- To reduce use of expensive condiments, you could try adding dried herbs and spices or jarred pastes/preserves for extra flavour
- Use frozen vegetables to add to casseroles, soup, or stir-fries
- Use frozen berries to add to porridge or yoghurt
- Use tinned beans/lentils/chickpeas
- Plan your week (use the food planner on the following pages)
- Bulk cook and freeze food to reduce waste and save time
- Bulk buy
- Use leftovers in sandwiches/wraps/pitta bread
- Make cauliflower rice and add it to normal rice to help bulk it out



# Weekly food plan

Go to page 14 for information about menu choices and planning.

|     | Breakfast | Snack or distraction | Lunch |
|-----|-----------|----------------------|-------|
| Mon |           |                      |       |
| Tue |           |                      |       |
| Wed |           |                      |       |
| Thu |           |                      |       |
| Fri |           |                      |       |
| Sat |           |                      |       |
| Sun |           |                      |       |

| Snack or distraction | Dinner | Planned activity for the day |
|----------------------|--------|------------------------------|
|                      |        |                              |
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