

Evidence shows that food can contribute to the development, prevention, and management of mental health conditions, including depression and anxiety disorders. Therefore, it is important that we make it priority in educating ourselves and others in the early years sector, to make the link between nutrition, the way in which food makes us feel and how we can support positive messages around it.

What foods do you think could promote good mood?

- Wholegrains - Brown varieties of rice, pasta, and bread release energy slower into our body, helping us feel 'full for longer'. For 1–4-year-olds it is good to mix brown and white varieties so to not stifle their appetite. Consider wholegrain once per day for early years children.
- Fruit and vegetables – are rich in nutrients which help keep us mentally and physically well.
- Protein – helps your body to regulate your thoughts and feelings.
Whole nuts are a choking risk for children under 5. Smooth Nut butters offer a safer alternative. Some settings have a no nut policy to protect children with allergies.
- Healthy fats - omega-3 helps to keep our brain working well. You can find these healthy fats in:
 - Oily fish, such as salmon, pilchards, sardines, and mackerel (tinned are usually cheaper). Avoid smoked varieties for Early Years children.
 - Eggs that are fortified with omega 3.
- Fluids - Plain milk and water are the best sources of hydration. Our brain is 70% water, so keeping it hydrated can really help with its functioning.

Other protective factors:

Social mealtimes

Sharing food and eating with others promotes childhood development in so many ways. It harbours connection and positive experiences which contribute to a beneficial effect on mood.

Regular food routine

Eating at regular intervals can prevent us feeling tired and bad-tempered. Early years children should eat 'little and often' - 3 meals and 2-3 snacks throughout the day, with no more than 3 hours between meal/snack time during the day.

Look after your gut.

It's been said, our gut is like a 'second brain' because the link between gut health and mood has been well documented. When we feel stressed, we may feel it in our gut as nausea or 'butterflies'. We can protect our gut by offering it all the ingredients it needs to promote good bacteria – whole fruits, vegetables, wholegrains, plain yogurt. Also regularly practicing relaxation techniques can support gut health – see Relaxation and mindfulness Q-card for ideas.

Task 1

Individually or in pairs, draw/write down specific foods from your settings menu which contribute to a healthy body and mind for the children in your care.

If you don't have a menu, think about what snacks you provide, or what foods appear in packed lunches that children bring in.

Are there any foods which you are unsure of, or that may not help a child's mood? DISCUSS as a team what can be done about this. How will you share this information with parents – raising awareness around the connection with food and mood.

Task 2

A well-balanced diet contributes to a healthy body and mind. This interactive game is a quick and easy way to get thinking about food groups and getting the right balance. Give it a go... it's not just for kids! [Lunchbox Hero | Health for Kids](#)

Task 3

Explore these links for further information:



[Early Years Foundation Stage nutrition guidance](#)



[Leicestershire Nutrition and Dietetic Service for Early Year's Settings](#)

Did you know? Leicestershire Nutrition and Dietetic Service is commissioned to support settings in Leicester City with providing adequate nutrition. See link below to gain further information.



[Health for Under 5s | For healthy, happy early years](#)

Links to other information:



[Food And Mood | Health for Teens](#)



[Food and mental health - Mind](#)