

30 hours childcare: what parents need to know

What is 30 hours free childcare?

Since September 2017, three- and four-year olds of working parents in England have been entitled to 30 hours per week of government-funded early education and childcare during term time (38 weeks of the year). This amounts to 1,140 hours per year in total and an average annual savings of £5,000 (according to the Government). The entitlement can be 'stretched' across the year to include school holidays and weekends.

Am I eligible?

To qualify, both parents (or the sole parent in a single parent family) need to be working and earning, on average, at least the equivalent of 16 hours on the national living/minimum wage per week (£120 per week for those aged 25 or over, or slightly less for younger parents), and no more than £100,000 per year. The number of hours worked is less important than the money earned, so if you are a high earner you could be working only a few hours per week and still be eligible.

If you are self-employed or on a zero-hours contracts you may still be eligible if you meet the earnings threshold. If you are newly self-employed, you do not need to demonstrate you meet the income criteria for 12 months.

If one parent is not in paid employment (or neither of you works), you will usually not be eligible for 30 hours. There are exceptions for parents who are on parental, maternity, paternity, adoption or sick leave. If you are studying or in training you will not be eligible unless this is combined with paid work which meets the earnings threshold.

If one parent is in receipt of benefits relating to caring responsibilities or serious disability and the other parent is working, you may be eligible. However, if you are a single parent who is disabled or has substantial caring responsibilities you will not be eligible.

If you are separated, eligibility requirements will apply to the parent with whom the child 'normally lives', and any partners of parents will also be required to meet them.

From September 2018, some children in foster care will also be eligible for the 30 hour entitlement, providing they meet the criteria outlined in the [statutory guidance](#). Foster parents must apply directly to their local authority for 30 hours rather than HMRC. More details are provided in the [operational guidance](#).

As with the universal 15-hour entitlement, children become eligible the term after they turn three and you have had your eligibility confirmed by the Government.

Date of child's third birthday	Earliest date child becomes eligible for the 15-hour and 30-hour entitlement (if parents have had eligibility confirmed)
1 January – 31 March	Start of term beginning on or following 1 April
1 April – 31 August	Start of term beginning or following 1 September
1 September – 31 December	Start of term beginning or following 1 January

All three- and four-year-olds will remain entitled to 15 hours of early education per week during term time (570 hours per year), regardless of their parents' work status and earnings.

More information about all forms of government support for childcare can be found on the [Childcare Choices](#) website.

How do I sign up?

You must apply for the 30-hour entitlement through the Government's digital [childcare service](#) (you do not need to apply if you only want to claim for the universal 15-hour entitlement). You also apply via telephone by ringing the childcare service helpline on 0300 123 4097.

You must make your application **the term before** you wish to start receiving the entitlement. You can apply up to 16 weeks before your child turns three if you meet the earnings requirement, although you can only start claiming your 30 hour place the term following your child's third birthday or the term following the date the eligibility code was issued – whichever is later. The latest you can apply is 22 weeks after your child turns five, assuming (s)he is not enrolled full-time in a state-funded school. **You are advised to apply as early in the term as possible to ensure you can reserve a place with your chosen provider(s).**

As part of the application process, you will need to create a Government Gateway account (if you don't already have one), and provide your name, address, and national insurance number, as well as the same information for your partner (if you have one). You will be asked if you and (and any partner) expect to meet the income requirements over the coming three months and whether you are in receipt of any relevant benefits.

Once your eligibility has been confirmed, you will receive a unique 11-digit code beginning with either '500' or '11', which you must take to your chosen childcare provider(s).

Your provider(s) will then be required to confirm the validity of your code through their local authority. They will need your written consent to do this, along with your national insurance number and your child's date of birth.¹

If you apply on time, but don't receive your code before the beginning, contact your local authority, as they are encouraged to help secure a 30 hours place for parents in this position.

You will be required to reconfirm your eligibility every three months by making a declaration that you expect your earnings to fall within the required threshold. You will be prompted by text message or email to do this², and if you fail to do so you could lose your eligibility. If you make an inaccurate or dishonest declaration you could be fined up to £3000.

What if my circumstances change?

If your circumstances change and you are no longer eligible for the 30-hour entitlement, you will retain your funded place for a short period of time known as the 'grace period'.

The grace period will work the same way in every part of the country, and the online Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) will automatically encode the grace period end date to all eligibility codes:

Date parent receives ineligible decision on reconfirmation	Local authority statutory audit date (and suggested audit window)	Grace Period end date
1 Jan – 10 Feb	11 Feb (11– 18 Feb)	31 March
11 Feb – 31 March	1 April (24 March – 1 April)	31 August
1 April – 26 May	27 May (27 May – 2 June)	31 August
27 May – 31 Aug	1 Sept (24 Aug – 1 Sept)	31 December
1 Sept – 21 Oct	22 Oct (22 Oct – 29 Oct)	31 December
22 Oct – 31 Dec	1 January (24 Dec – 6 Jan)	31 March

Your child will still be eligible for the universal 15-hour entitlement.

If your child has been taking up the 30-hour entitlement with more than one provider, you will need to inform their local authority where you would to receive the 15 hours.

If you become eligible again after you have fallen out of eligibility, you will have to make a new application through the childcare service and present your code to your provider(s) again for verification. If the same parent completes the application, the code will not change.

If you fall into the grace period before your child has started their 30-hour place, you will not be able to take it up. In exceptional circumstances, your child may change providers during the grace period.

¹ If your partner is listed on the application, (s)he may come in your place and should bring their own national insurance number, as well as your number.

² If you applied by telephone, you will need to reconfirm your eligibility by telephone.

Which childcare providers can I use?

You can take up a free place with any provider on Ofsted's Early Years Register, including childminders, day nurseries, playgroups, pre-schools and nursery schools. Funded places can also be taken up by primary schools offering early years provision (nursery classes only – you are not eligible if your child has started reception year) and childminders registered with an Ofsted-registered childminder agency.

You cannot take up your free place with a nanny (even an Ofsted-registered one) or any other providers that are not on Ofsted's Early Years Register (e.g. unregistered providers). You are also not permitted to take up a funded place with a childminder who is related to you, unless the local authority funds the place out of its own budget.

Your provider should have a 'good' or 'outstanding' grade from Ofsted. Providers with a lower grade will only be able to provide free places at the discretion of their local authority.

New providers awaiting a full Ofsted inspection with an Ofsted judgment of 'met' will be able to offer funded places, but those with a 'not met' judgment will not.

Does my provider have to offer it?

It is completely up to your provider whether they offer funded places or not; they are under no legal obligation to do so.

Can I use more than one provider?

You can split your funded hours between multiple providers on up to two different sites per day, for example between a childminder and sessional nursery or pre-school. However, the providers all have to agree with the arrangement.

When can I take up my free place?

It is up to your provider when they offer funded places, but in theory they can be delivered any day of the week, even weekends, any time between 6am and 8pm. There is no longer a minimum session length, but a single session cannot exceed 10 hours.

The free entitlement hours cannot be compressed (i.e. you cannot take more than 15 or 30 hours per week over fewer than 38 weeks of the year). However, you can choose a provider that is open for fewer than 38 weeks of the year and therefore receive 15 or 30 hours a week during fewer weeks.

You do not have to take up your full entitlement, and can take as many funded hours up to 1,140 per year as you wish.

Why is my provider charging me for meals and outings?

The rate that your childcare provider receives for delivering funded places does not include consumables (meals, snacks, nappies, wipes, sun cream etc.) or additional services (outings, classes, emergency cover, drop-offs and pick-ups, etc.). You can expect to be charged for these, although charges cannot be a condition of providing a free entitlement place.

Providers can also charge you a refundable deposit to confirm your child's place in advance. They can only charge a non-refundable registration or reservation or administration fee if you are paying for hours in excess of the entitlement.

You should be aware that in many parts of the country, the hourly rate that your provider receives from their local authority for delivering the free entitlement is lower than their private rate, and they may be losing money by providing a 'free' place. PACEY and other early years organisations have been calling on the Government to provide sustainable funding for childcare and early education places, so the 30 hour entitlement can be delivered to all working families who need it.

What to do if your childcare provider is sick?

It is always best to check with your Local Authority what their specific procedure is. In some councils, if the provider has a few days of sickness they would be expected to make up for the time missed. If the sickness was for a substantial amount in some cases they may also need to pay funding back to their local authority or source an alternative care for the child where the funding can be passed on to.

What other support is available to families to help with childcare costs?

Working parents who are eligible for the 30 hours of free childcare will additionally receive support with childcare costs of up to £2000 per child through the [Tax-Free Childcare scheme](#). Please note that Tax-Free Childcare is not available to parents in receipt of tax credits, Universal Credits or childcare vouchers, but it can be used at the same time as 30 hours free childcare.

Parents on low incomes will get up to 85% of their childcare costs reimbursed through the childcare element of [Universal Credit](#), which is gradually being rolled out across the country over the next several years. Since October 2019, the time allowed for parents to claim back these costs has increased. See our [news story](#) for details.

More information about support for childcare is provided on the [Childcare Choices](#) website.

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