

30 hours childcare: what parents need to know

What is 30 hours free childcare?

From September 2017, three- and four-year olds of working parents in England will be entitled to 30 hours per week of government-funded early education and childcare during term time (38 weeks of the year). This amounts to 1140 hours per year in total and an average annual savings of £5,000. The entitlement can be 'stretched' across the year to include school holidays and weekends.

Am I eligible?

To qualify, each parent (or the sole parent in a single parent family) needs 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), 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 minimum average earnings threshold.

If one parent is in receipt of benefits relating to caring responsibilities or has a disability and the other parent is working, you will 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.

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.

All 3- and 4-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.

For more information, see the Government's [eligibility factsheet](#)

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 must make your application the term before you wish to start receiving the entitlement. You can apply the term 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.

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 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 5000 or 11, which you must take to your chosen childcare provider(s).

Your provider 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.

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 this, 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'.

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

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 year's 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 not on Ofsted's Early Years Register (e.g. unregistered childminders, pre-

schools or playgroups). You are also not permitted to take up a funded place with a childminder who is related to you.

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 up to two different providers per day, for example between a childminder and sessional nursery or pre-school.

If providers have separate Ofsted registrations but are based on one site (e.g. a breakfast club and a nursery) they will be treated as one provider.

When can I take up my funded 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.

You do not have to take up your full entitlement, and can take as many funded hours up to 1140 per year as you wish.

Why is my provider charging me for food?

The rate that your childcare provider receives for delivering funded places does not include consumables (meals, snacks, nappies, wipes, etc.) or additional services (outings, classes, emergency cover costs, drop-offs and pick-ups, etc.). Your childcare provider may therefore charge you for these.

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

You should be aware that in many parts of the country, the rate that your provider receives from the local authority 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 extension to 30 hours can be delivered to all working families who need it.