

Free Early Years Entitlement
Autumn 2010 to Summer 2011

**A guide for parents to free part-time
places for 3 and 4 year olds**



3

this year?



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Free part-time childcare places

This is your guide to free early years and childcare places. It explains what to do if your child turns three on or after 1 September 2010.

From the term after your child's third birthday, he or she can have **up to 15 hours a week of free** flexible early years childcare and education.

All young children in England are now entitled to free flexible part-time childcare from the term after their third birthday. This is called the Free Early Years Entitlement. It is paid for by the government.

The Free Early Years Entitlement covers 570 hours per year – that's equal to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year. From September 2010, the time is counted in hours not sessions, so it will be easier to arrange a pattern that meets your needs. The hours are divided between the three terms:

Autumn – 210 hours

Spring – 165 hours

Summer – 195 hours

This is a change from last year, when most three-year-olds could have five 2½ hour sessions of free childcare – that's 12½ hours a week. The free places used to be called NEG places because they were funded with the Nursery Education Grant – NEG for short.

It is up to parents or carers to arrange an early years place for their child with a provider such as a nursery school, a private nursery, a playgroup or an eligible childminder. The first 15 hours a week are free for 38 weeks. Of course, you can pay for more childcare hours to fit in with your needs. You can find a list of providers on the internet at www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare.

This guide gives more information about **what you need to do** and how to choose the best care for your child. There is a question-and-answer section to explain how the free entitlement works.

What you need to do to get a free place

When your child is nearly three, you can plan ahead to book a free early years place. There are three steps:

- 1 Find out what's available**
- 2 Choose a provider**
- 3 Book a place**

1 Find out what's available

- Find out about childcare providers in your area, eg by asking friends, neighbours and family members for tips.
- Look for information in your local library, children's centres, schools and other places, and on the Council website: www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare
- If you need extra help, you can also get information about all childcare providers from the Family Information Service (FIS) – the contact details are at the end of this guide.

2 Choose a provider

- Choose the type of early years care you want your child to have (eg playschool, nursery, childminder etc). The different types of provider are listed in the section 'Choosing the right early years care'.
- Read the quality tips later in this guide to help you decide what's best for your child. Work out the regular days and times you would like your child to go. You can split the 15 hours between two providers (but not more than two).
- Contact your chosen provider/s and ask if they can offer your child a free place (not all providers can offer the free early years entitlement places). Ask what days and times are available.

3 Book a place

- You need to agree a regular pattern of hours/sessions with the provider. Most providers offer fixed times and sessions for you to choose from at the start of the term. Some providers can be more flexible to fit in with your needs.
- The provider should ask you for details of what other childcare you use, to make sure you do not go over the allowed number of hours per term for the free entitlement.
- Sign the 'Parental Agreement for the Provision of the Free Entitlement' – this is an official document that shows what you and the provider have agreed.



The benefits of early years care

Research shows that children get a better start in life if they have high quality early play and learning experiences. It is important for them to spend time with other children and adults, too. This is why the government decided to provide free part-time early years places for three and four-year-olds until they start school. Nurseries and other preschool childcare providers help children to learn through play.

All early years providers in Lancashire aim for high quality in their work. They have to meet government standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five. The standards are set out in a Statutory Framework called the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

The EYFS is a guide that childcare providers have to follow. It explains how young children develop, and what they can achieve at different ages, from birth to five. Providers encourage your child to develop a range of skills through the EYFS, including:

- How to play with others, mix in groups, and notice the feelings and needs of other people.
- Getting to know themselves, to recognise their own feelings and how to handle them.
- Using words: talking, listening, making marks, enjoying books and stories.
- Problem-solving and learning about numbers.
- Creative skills: developing imagination with pretend play, painting, music, stories, dance.
- Making sense of the world with indoor and outdoor activities, starting to use computers, understanding time and place.
- Physical activities, movement, and how to stay safe and healthy.

Purpose and aims of the Early Years Foundation Stage

“Every child deserves the best possible start in life and support to fulfil their potential. A child’s experience in the early years has a major impact on their future life chances. A secure, safe and happy childhood is important in its own right, and it provides the foundation for children to make the most of their abilities and talents as they grow up. When parents choose to use early years services they want to know that provision will keep their children safe and help them to thrive. The EYFS is the framework that provides that assurance.”

EYFS Statutory Framework, Department for Education and Skills, 2007

Choosing the right early years care for your child

The word “**provider**” means someone who offers early years childcare and education for young children. There are many types of provider. The place where the care is provided is also called “**a setting**”.

A provider or setting could be any of the following:

- Council nursery school
- Day nursery
- Nursery class at a private school
- Nursery class at a state primary school
- Preschool playgroup
- Private nursery school
- Some accredited childminders (see below).

Most providers charge for childcare, to cover their costs. But many of them can now offer free part-time places using the government’s early years entitlement funding. It is up to the Council to decide which providers can receive the funding to offer free places. The Family Information Service keeps a list on its website at www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare.

All childcare providers are registered with Lancashire County Council, so the Council checks that they provide high quality care and meet all the legal standards.

All childcare providers must also be registered:

- Either with Ofsted – the government body which inspects childcare providers and schools.
- Or with the government’s Department for Education (DFE).

Some childminders can offer free early years entitlement places, if they are accredited by the National Childminding Association (NCMA) and are also part of a childminders network. Check with the childminder whether they can offer a free place for your child.



Quality tips to help you choose the right childcare

To choose a nursery or other childcare provider, it is important to visit more than one place and have a look round. It is a good idea to go during opening hours when other children are there. Take your child with you if you can. You can ask to be put in touch with other parents who send their children to the provider, to find out what they think about the service.

Here are some quality pointers – things to look for when you visit:

- Are the children happy, active and treated with respect?
- Is there a calm atmosphere with no raised voices?
- Are the rooms safe, light and clean?
- Do the staff have a caring and friendly relationship with the children?
- Are there plenty of toys and varied equipment on offer?
- Can children see their own artwork and creations on display?
- Do toys, books and displays show different cultures in a positive way?
- Is there plenty of space for children to play, including a safe, stimulating and secure outdoor play area?
- Are toilets and hand basins child-size or adapted for children?
- Is there a comfortable area for children to relax?
- Are parents and carers welcomed, and are their views listened to?
- Do the staff seem happy to work there?

It is fine to ask questions, eg:

“What will my child do all day?”

“How much experience do the staff have?”

“Who will tell me how my child is getting on?”

Frequently asked questions

■ What is the Free Early Years Entitlement?

The free early years entitlement is free part-time childcare and early education for all children from the term after their third birthday. It pays for 570 hours per year. That's equal to 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year.

■ When can my child start?

See the section called 'Working out the dates' to find out when your child will be eligible for the free early years entitlement.

■ How are the hours divided across the year?

The free early years entitlement is divided into three terms each year – they are different from school terms, and cover the whole year:

Term dates:	Number of free hours per term:	Standard weeks per term:
Autumn (1 September to 31 December 2010)	210 hours	14 weeks
Spring (1 January to 31 March 2011)	165 hours	11 weeks
Summer (1 April to 31 August 2011)	195 hours	13 weeks
TOTALS	570 hours	38 weeks

At some providers, you may be able to spread the hours out over more than 38 weeks if that meets your needs better, as long as you don't go over the total entitlement – but please note that most providers do not cover the whole year.

■ How does the free early years entitlement fit in with school terms?

Schools are normally open for 38 weeks per year, divided into three terms with holidays in between. Many early years providers also follow this pattern, eg preschool playgroups. They would usually be able to offer 15 hours per week for the times they are open.



■ What days and times can I have the free hours for my child?

Most providers can offer a range of different sessions and patterns for your child's free place. For example, 15 hours a week could be:

- 5 x three-hour sessions a week, on agreed days
- 3 x five-hour sessions a week, on agreed days (a five-hour session could be 8am to 1pm, or 1pm to 6pm).

There could be different ways of making up the hours. You need to discuss the options with your provider, to find a pattern that fits in with their service and meets your needs.

■ Can I spread the hours out over more than 38 weeks?

Yes, if your provider stays open longer than the normal school terms. Then you can choose to have less time per week and spread the free sessions over more than 38 weeks – as long as you don't go over the total entitlement for each term. For example, the summer term covers 195 hours – that works out at about 9 hours of free entitlement a week for the whole summer, if the provider is open. Talk to your provider about your needs, and they will help you work out a pattern that suits you and fits in with their service.

■ What if my provider isn't open for the full number of free hours?

A few providers, eg a playgroup that uses a space that is shared with other groups, may not be able to offer the full 15 hours free entitlement. You may be able to find another provider who can make up the hours, or you could choose to stay with the times (usually 12½ hours) on offer.

■ What if my child goes to two or more forms of childcare?

You may be able to divide your child's free hours between two providers, eg a playgroup in the morning and a childminder in the afternoon. You can only get free places at two providers, and you must tell them both about the other place. It is very important to keep count of the number of free hours you have booked. If you arrange too many hours and go over the free early years entitlement, you will have to pay the provider yourself, even if it was a genuine mistake. Of course you can pay for more hours or sessions, and go to other childcare providers, to fit in with your needs and your budget.

■ **Does the free place include meals and snacks?**

Meals are not included in the offer of a free place. If your child stays at the provider over a lunchtime period, you may be able to pay for a meal if you wish, but you always have the option of giving your child a lunch box instead. No-one can make you pay for a meal if you choose not to. Snacks are usually included.

■ **What if I need more than 15 hours of childcare a week?**

Many childcare providers can offer extra time for your child, at a cost, to fit in with your needs and budget. If you want to pay for extra hours or sessions as well as booking your child in for free sessions, ask your provider how much they charge and what hours they can offer. If your provider only has fixed hours, you may be able to find another provider you can pay for extra time for your child.

■ **What if I can't afford to pay for extra hours?**

The last part of this guide explains ways that some parents can get help to pay for extra childcare with Tax Credits or Childcare Vouchers.

■ **What if my child misses sessions?**

Normally, if your child misses a few regular free sessions because of illness or another reason, they can't get extra hours to make up the time.

If you are likely to be away for more than four weeks, make sure you talk it over with your provider beforehand. In some cases, you could lose your child's free place.

■ **What if my child has a disability or other special needs?**

If your child has a disability or other special needs, talk it over with the childcare provider. They should be able to make adjustments and give the support needed for your child to take up a place. If you need further help, or if the provider needs information, contact the EYSEN (Early Years Special Educational Needs) Service in your area:

EYSEN North Team (Lancaster, Wyre and Fylde) – 01524 847140

EYSEN South Team (Preston, South Ribble, Chorley and West Lancashire) – 01772 904783

EYSEN East Team (Hyndburn, Ribble valley, Burnley, Pendle and Rosendale) – 01282 426952

■ **Why does my provider ask me to sign a "headcount form"?**

Each childcare provider has to claim the funding for the free early years places from the Council on a headcount form from near the beginning of each term. You will only be asked to sign this form if you have not signed a parental agreement.



■ What if I need to move my child to a different childcare provider?

Wherever possible, it is better for children to stay and settle down in a familiar place rather than keep changing. If you move your child after the headcount date, you will not be able to claim a free place somewhere else for the rest of the term. You can sign up with another provider to start the free entitlement again from the next term (ie 1 January, 1 April or 1 September).

The only exception is for looked after children. Children in public care or at risk can move during a term, under certain circumstances, and still keep their free place.

■ How can I tell if my child is happy at their childcare?

Trust your own feelings about the right childcare for your child. When they come home, listen to them talk about what they did and how they get on with the other children and the workers. The way they tell you about their day gives you an idea of how they are settling in, and you can help them deal with any difficulties.

■ What can I do if things seem to be going wrong?

If your child seems really unhappy, talk with the provider and the staff to find out more and resolve any problems. Many providers have a 'key worker' system – that means there is one named person who develops a positive relationship with your child and keeps an eye on them. The key worker should meet you regularly to talk about how your child is getting on. If you have a serious complaint about the provider, you need to raise it with Ofsted.

■ Who pays for the free sessions?

You should not be charged for the early years entitlement hours – they are free at the point of use. Childcare providers in Lancashire sign a contract with the Council agreeing what early years places they will provide. For the free hours, the provider claims the money from the Council, using the 'headcount form' to prove how many free places they provide. The Council pays the fees direct to the provider, using money from the government's Department of Children, Schools and Families. If you have a query about the funding or the free entitlement, contact the Family Information Service (details at the end of this guide).

Help with the costs of childcare

Many parents and carers can get financial help with the cost of looking after their children. Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit are extra money paid into your bank or post office account. Childcare Vouchers are given by some employers as a tax-free part of your pay.

Child Tax Credit

Nine out of ten families with children qualify for Child Tax Credit. It depends on things like:

- how many children live with you
- if any child or young person in your household is disabled
- your income.

To apply for Child Tax Credit, ring the Tax Credits Helpline on **0845 300 3900**.

Working Tax Credit

If you are working but on low pay, you can apply for Working Tax Credit to top up your earnings. You may get extra if at least one of these things applies:

- you are a parent or carer responsible for one or more children or young people
- you pay for childcare
- you are disabled
- you're aged 50 or over.

To apply for Working Tax Credit, ring the Tax Credits Helpline on **0845 300 3900**.

Childcare Vouchers

Some employers run a Childcare Voucher scheme. This means that parents/carers can opt to receive childcare vouchers instead of part of their usual pay, and benefit from reduced tax and national insurance. A few employers choose to give childcare vouchers to their staff on top of normal pay. The vouchers can be used to pay for many kinds of childcare, including:

- nurseries, playgroups and preschool
- registered childminders
- after-school clubs and breakfast clubs
- holiday play schemes
- nannies and 'au pairs'.

For Childcare Vouchers, ask your employer if they have a voucher scheme or are willing to start one. You can also ring the Family Information Service (details below) for help.



Family Information Service

For more information about anything in this guide, contact the Family Information Service (FIS). This service is run by the Council. It gives information to parents and anyone else about services related to children and families. FIS staff can:

- give you details of all types of childcare providers in your area
- help you find free early years places
- give you information about how to choose the right childcare for your child
- help parents and carers to apply for extra money for childcare.

How to contact FIS:

- Phone (free from most landlines): **0800 195 0137**
Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm, or leave a message
- Email: **lancsfis@lancashire.gov.uk**
- Website: **www.lancashire.gov.uk/childcare**
- Address:
Family Information Service
Sure Start Early Years and Childcare Service
Leyland House, Lancashire Business Park
Centurion Way
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