

Free Early Education and Childcare for 2, 3 and 4-year-olds

Frequently Asked Questions for Parents/Carers

Here are the answers to the questions that parents and carers often ask about the entitlements to free early education and childcare in Merton. If you need any further advice or information, please contact the Information Team by email: fsd@merton.gov.uk

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Free early education and childcare

What is free early education?

It is a chance for children aged 2, 3 and 4 to enjoy a place at a nursery, preschool or with a childminder where they will learn new things and be cared for.

Some 2-year-olds are entitled to a free place. This is for up to 570 hours a year. You can find out more about how to check if your 2-year-old child could be eligible in the section about early education and childcare for 2-year-olds on page 6.

All 3 and 4-year-olds are entitled to a free place for up to 570 hours a year, known as the universal entitlement.

3 and 4-year-olds whose parents are working may be able to get an additional 15 hours a week of free early education and childcare. This adds up to a total of 1,190 hours per year. This is called the Extended Entitlement (also known as 30 hours). You can find out more about how to check if your 3 or 4-year-old child could be eligible in the section about the Extended Entitlement on page 7.

Places are usually offered over 38 weeks of the year. Some childcare providers offer places for more than 38 weeks a year with fewer free hours each week.

What are the benefits for my child?

There are many benefits to your child's overall development. Evidence shows that enjoying good quality early education gives your child a good start in life, making them more likely to enjoy and do well at school. Benefits include:

- **Communication skills** - Developing their speech and language at two and developing the skills for reading and writing at three and four
- **Social skills** - Helping your child make friends with and play with other children
- **Physical skills** - Developing their gross and fine motor skills to do big movements, such as putting on their coat, and small movements using fingers and thumbs
- **Gain confidence and self awareness** - Being able to communicate their needs without tantrums
- **Thinking skills** - Helping your child process information and their ability to problem-solve and think creatively

When can my child start in their free place?

There are three 'funding periods' for delivery of free hours in a year:

Autumn – September to December

Spring – January to March

Summer – April to August

Your child can take-up their free hours from the start of the funding period that falls after their second or third birthday

| When your child was born | When they will be eligible |
|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 January – 31 March | 1 April |
| 1 April – 31 August | 1 September |
| 1 September – 31 December | 1 January |

Where can my child take up free early education?

The Local Authority keeps an up-to-date list of providers who meet the required quality levels set by Government. This is called the Directory of Providers. To find details of providers listed in the directory, simply:

- Visit the Family Services Directory at www.merton.gov.uk/fsd
- Select the childcare and education tab
- Search for your postcode
- Filter the results to select those which offer funded places or 2 or 3 and 4-year-olds

The Directory of Providers includes private or voluntary day nurseries and preschools, childminders, maintained and academy school nursery classes and independent schools.

How do providers deliver free early education?

Free early education sessions can be offered flexibly between 6am and 8pm and can be no longer than 10 hours in one day. Providers are encouraged to offer the free hours flexibly.

Providers must publish the days and times they offer free early education hours. For example, they may be open from 8am to 6pm, but only offer free hours between 9 am and 5pm

You can use your hours all year round and at the weekend if your childcare provider offers this. You can also use more than one provider, although not more than two sites in one day. The places are usually offered over a minimum of 38 weeks per year.

Being entitled to a free place doesn't guarantee that you can get a place with a particular provider or a guarantee that you can get any particular pattern of how the hours are offered. If the hours on offer do not suit, you can try another provider.

Can I access free early education over more than 38 weeks?

Yes, some providers allow parents to 'stretch' their free hours across more weeks, so parents would get fewer hours each week for more weeks of the year. For example, a 15 hour place across 52 weeks of the year is just under 11 hours a week.

Can I use fewer free hours?

Yes, you can use less than your entitlement if you don't need it all. You will need to agree this with the provider you choose and you must put this on your Parent Funding Agreement Form which they will ask you to sign. This is a contractual agreement that you have with the provider to agree how many funded hours your child will be receiving with them. They will make a claim to the Local Authority for whatever you have agreed on that form. Once the form is signed, you cannot change these hours until the next funding period.

Are there any times of the day when my child cannot access their free place?

Yes. Sessions:

- Cannot be longer than 10 hours and
- Cannot start before 6.00am or end after 8.00pm

Can my child receive their early education with more than one provider?

Yes, your child can split their hours of free early education between multiple providers, but cannot attend more than 2 different locations (sites) in one day. If you choose to split your hours over multiple providers, you must declare this on your Parent Funding Agreement Form.

Is the childcare provider paid for the place?

Yes. If you are eligible, the place is free to you, but the childcare provider gets paid by the Local Authority to care for your child. The provider puts in a claim for this funding once every funding period.

In every funding period there is a “Headcount” day, where the number of eligible children attending an early education provider are counted. The funding is based on this number of children and is paid directly to the provider.

Should I expect to pay any fees for the hours that my child receives as free early education?

No; the early education hours are free and funded by the Government.

Parents should expect to pay for additional services over and above the free early education, such as meals and snacks, nappies, sun cream, day trips or activities such as yoga classes.

You will be required to pay for any additional hours over and above the free hours.

You may also be asked for a deposit to secure your place. This should be returned to you as soon as possible after your child takes up their place.

Is my childcare provider allowed to ask for a deposit?

Providers are allowed to charge parents a deposit to secure their place. The deposit must be reasonable and refunded in full shortly after your child starts their place.

The provider cannot charge a non-refundable Registration Fee, unless they are providing you with additional hours of childcare over and above the free hours.

Can I also claim Tax Credits / Tax Free childcare?

Yes, you can claim Tax Credits and use Tax Free Childcare payments for hours, services and consumables you have to pay for. Go to www.childcarechoices.gov.uk for more information. However you must inform HMRC if your circumstances change when claiming Tax Credits and Tax Free Childcare as you cannot claim financial assistance for the free hours.

What about invoices?

The free hours must show on your invoice as having £0 value. Charges for any additional non-funded hours, consumables or services must be clearly detailed. This is so you can clearly identify that you have received your free hours as agreed in your Parent Funding Agreement Form.

My child has already started their free hours with a childcare provider, but I want to move my child. Can I do this?

When your child took up their place, you sign a Parent Funding Agreement Form with your provider. In this you agree that your child would not move to a different provider during a funding period.

If you choose to move your child during a funding period, you will not be able to receive free early education until the next funding period.

There are three funding periods:

Autumn – September to December

Spring – January to March

Summer – April to August

However, there are some exceptional circumstances that mean you can move your child during a funding period, such as if the provider the childcare provider closes down or your child's safety is at risk. These will be considered by the Local Authority.

What paperwork will I need to complete for the free hours?

You will have to sign a Parent Funding Agreement Form that the childcare provider will give you. This form includes confirmation of the hours and days that you have agreed with the provider for your child's free entitlement(s). You will be given a copy of the form for your records.

Questions about free early education and childcare for 2-year-olds

Can all 2-year-olds get a free place?

Not all 2-year-olds can get a free place. To be able to get a free place, you must be in a low-income working family (receive Working Tax Credit with an annual income before tax of less than £16,190) or receive certain unemployment benefits (e.g. Income Support, NASS card and immigration papers).

Places are also available if:

- Your child has a current Statement of Special Educational Needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP); or

- Your child receives Disability Living Allowance (DLA); or
- You have adopted your child or you have a special guardianship order or residence order to care for them.
- You are fostering a child who is looked after by London Borough of Merton

How can I find out if I am eligible?

For low-income families, those on unemployment benefits and families whose 2-year-old child receives Disability Living Allowance (DLA)

- Email your request for a check to the Early years and Childcare Team at fsd@merton.gov.uk
- We will get back to you to ask for the information we need for a check.
- We will run a check and let you know the outcome. If you are eligible, you will be given a Reference Number for you to use to claim your child's free place
- Find a place for your child by searching the Family Services Directory:
 1. Visit the Family Services Directory - www.merton.gov.uk/fsd
 2. Select childcare and education tab
 3. Search by postcode or type provider
 4. Use the filters on the left hand side to search by postcode, providers who offer funded places, those vacancies

Families whose children who have a Statement of Special Educational Needs or an Education, Health and Care Plan or are adopted:

1. Find a place for your child (see above)
2. Take paper evidence of your child's statement , EHCP or adoption to the provider of your choice. When the provider confirms your place, they will ask you to sign a Parental Funding Agreement Form and provide paper evidence of your eligibility and identity

Will I need to provide copies of my benefits papers to claim a place?

You will only need to give the provider your unique reference number and proof of your child's age.

What if I become ineligible once my child is taking up the free hours?

Once you have confirmed your eligibility with your childcare provider, if your circumstances change, such as you get a new job or stop claiming benefits, you do not need to re-check your eligibility. Once your child is taking up their free hours, they can continue to do so until the funding period after they turn three when they can move on to 15 free hours of early education for 3 and 4-year-olds which all children are eligible for.

Questions about the Extended Entitlement (30 hours) for 3 and 4-year-olds

Can my child get an extended entitlement place?

To be eligible for the extra 15 hours (the extended entitlement), your family must meet all the following criteria:

- your child's age means they are eligible for the first 15 hours (the universal entitlement)
- both parents are working (or the sole parent is working in a lone parent family)
- both parents earn or expect to earn a minimum equivalent to 16 hours a week at National Minimum or Living Wage over the coming three months.
- both parents are not earning more than £100,000 a year each

This applies whether you are in paid employment, self-employed or on a zero hours contract.

The national minimum wage criteria equates to £120 a week (or £6,000 a year) for each parent over 25 years old or £112.80 a week (or £5,800 a year) for each parent between 21 and 24 years old.

There are exceptions to both parents having to work. Families where one or both parents do not work will not usually be entitled to the additional 15 hours of free childcare.

However, they will be eligible where:

- both parents are employed but one (or both parents) is temporarily away from the workplace on parental, maternity or paternity leave, adoption leave or on statutory sick pay
- one parent is employed and one parent:
 - has substantial caring responsibilities based on receipt of specific caring benefits, or
 - is disabled or incapacitated based on receipt of specific benefits

How can I find out if I am eligible?

You must apply via the Childcare Service at <https://childcare-support.tax.service.gov.uk> where you will need to set up an account.

If you are eligible, you will be given an 11 digit eligibility code and confirmation of your eligibility via your account.

When should I apply?

The *earliest date* you can apply via the Childcare Service: <https://childcare-support.tax.service.gov.uk> is 16 weeks prior to your child's third birthday.

The *latest date* for you to be issued with an eligibility code is the day before the start of the funding period in which you child can start in a free place, for example a code issued on 31 December for a place from 1 January.

However, it can take some time for an eligibility code to be issued, so parents are strongly advised to apply for an eligibility code several weeks before the beginning of the funding period in which their child can start.

If your code is issued after the beginning of a funding period (such as after 1 January), you will not be able to take up a place until the beginning of next funding period (in this example, from 1 April).

I am self employed. Might I be eligible?

Yes, as long as you meet the other eligibly criteria.

If you are newly self-employed and have registered your business with HM Revenue and Customs, your first 12 months of self-employment is your "start-up period". During this time, you don't have to earn the minimum £120 a week to be eligible.

My child will turn 4 after 1 September 2017 and I have been told the first time application process will be different. What do I do?

If your child turns four between 1 September 2016 and 31 March 2017, there is an alternative process for you to apply for 30 hours childcare.

When you go to the Childcare Service website, at the point where you enter your child's date of birth, you will be directed to a GOV.UK page where they will be able to access an electronic form (iForm). This form can be completed online by the, printed off and posted to HMRC, who will process the application manually. You will receive a response, and a temporary code if you are eligible, via a letter from HMRC. This can take up to ten working days.

I have got an eligibility code. What do I do next?

If you are eligible, you will be given a code which you can take to your chosen provider for the extended hours. This does not have to be the same provider where your child takes up their Universal Entitlement free hours, but if they offer the Extended Entitlement free hours, it can be.

Your chosen provider must have registered with London Borough of Merton to provide funded places. The provider will validate your code using a secure online portal provided by London Borough of Merton. This submits information to the Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) run by the Department for Education. The ECS checks information from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the Home Office (HO) and Her Majesty's revenue and Customs (HMRC)

Your code must be validated by your chosen provider before your child can start their Extended Entitlement place.

Your provider will organise your place for you and you will need to complete a Parent Funding Agreement form with them.

Why do I need to re-confirm my eligibility every 3 months?

You need to re-confirm your eligibility every three months via your Childcare Service account to ensure that you continue to meet the eligibility criteria.

You'll be reminded to reconfirm you're still eligible 4 weeks before the deadline by email or text message.

You don't need to take your code to your provider every time you reconfirm. However, you should notify your provider if you fall out of eligibility.

What if I forget to re-confirm?

If you don't reconfirm, your childcare provider and London Borough of Merton will be informed that you no longer meet the requirements for a free childcare place.

What happens if I become ineligible?

If on reconfirmation your code becomes ineligible or you forget to reconfirm, although you will be no longer eligible for the Extended Entitlement hours, this does not happen immediately. You will be able to keep using them for a short period known as a **Grace Period**.

If you reconfirm again and become eligible inside this Grace Period, you can continue to receive your free extended entitlement hours.

If you remain ineligible at the end of the Grace Period, you will not be able to claim the Extended Entitlement after the relevant date shown below. However, you will continue to be eligible for your Universal Entitlement free hours.

Grace Period End Dates

| Date the code becomes ineligible | End of Grace Period and funding of Extended Entitlement |
|---|--|
| 1 September to 21 October | 31 December |
| 22 October to 31 December | 31 March |
| 1 January to 10 February | 31 March |
| 11 February to 31 March | 31 August |
| 1 April to 26 May | 31 August |
| 27 May to 31 August | 31 December |

What happens if my code becomes ineligible and the Grace Period ends?

It is the parent's responsibility to ensure the Extended Entitlement Code is reconfirmed at the appointed intervals.

In addition, providers will be supported by London Borough of Merton's online systems to keep up-to-date with the status of all Extended Entitlement codes they are claiming funding for. They will be notified if a code becomes ineligible.

If you remain ineligible at the end of the Grace Period, you will either have to pay for the additional hours at the provider's usual rate or you can withdraw your child from the Extended Entitlement place.

Your child's Universal Entitlement to 15 funded hours will remain.

I have been found not eligible for the Extended Entitlement. How do I appeal?

There is a 'review and appeals' process available to parents if they disagree with the eligibility outcome as determined by HM Revenues and Customs (HMRC). The review and appeals process is managed by HMRC. Please call 0300 1234 4097. Neither London Borough of Merton nor any provider can affect the outcome of HMRC's decision.

Published September 2017