

Policy

# Giving all children a healthy start in life

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Part of: National Health Service, Public health and Children and young people

Applies to: England (see policy for [Scotland](#), [Wales](#) and [Northern Ireland](#))

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## Issue

What happens to children before they are born and in their early years can affect their health and opportunities later in life. For example, babies that are breastfed have less chance of getting infections or of becoming obese and therefore developing type 2 diabetes and other illnesses when they get older. And those who grow up in a safe environment and have a healthy relationship with their parents are more likely to do better as they go through life.

We want to do more to help children who grow up in the most at-risk families and to help parents give their children the best possible care. We also want to help children be as healthy as possible by preventing illness, and encouraging healthy behaviours from pregnancy onwards.

## Actions

### Helping families to have the best start in life

We want women to have a positive experience of maternity care and to provide the best possible services for women and their babies.

We are improving maternity care by:

- giving women a single, named midwife who will oversee their care during pregnancy and after they have had their baby
- making sure that every woman has one-to-one midwife care during labour and birth
- giving people expecting a baby a choice about where and how they give birth
- making sure that women who have postnatal depression and women who have suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth or the death of a baby get more support from the NHS

We are also measuring how well the NHS looks after parents who have miscarried or suffered a stillbirth or cot death. We are asking patients to rate how they have been treated, so that we can improve our services.

From 1 October 2015, local authorities will take over responsibility from NHS England for planning and paying for public health services for babies and children up to 5 years old. These services include health visiting and the Family Nurse Partnership programme.

Local authorities know the needs of their local communities best, so they will be able to bring together a range of different services for children and families and have more opportunities to reduce the health inequalities in their areas.

### Helping parents to keep their children healthy

We want to improve all children’s chances in life by giving families the help they need to keep their children healthy and safe.

Our [Healthy Child Programme](#) is available to all families and aims to:

- help parents develop a strong bond with children
- encourage care that keeps children healthy and safe
- protect children from serious diseases, through screening and immunisation
- reduce childhood [obesity](#) by promoting healthy eating and physical activity
- encourage mothers to breastfeed
- identify problems in children’s health and development (for example learning difficulties) and safety (for example parental neglect), so that they can get help with their problems as early as possible
- make sure children are prepared for school
- identify and help children with problems that might affect their chances later in life

We are also helping mothers and young children in low-income families stay healthy through our [Healthy Start](#) programme. Healthy Start gives pregnant women and mothers vouchers every week to spend on milk, fruit and vegetables and formula milk. They can also get free vitamins.

### Encouraging healthy living from an early age

We’re giving parents and people expecting a baby information and advice through regular emails, text messages and short videos on the [NHS Information Service for Parents](#).

We’re also giving parents advice on how to encourage a healthy diet and physical activity in young children through our [Start4Life](#) programme.

From September 2014, we will offer [free school meals to all pupils in reception year, year 1 and year 2](#) in state-funded schools in England.

### Improving the health visiting service

Health visitors are trained nurses or midwives with specialist training in helping families and young children. They are skilled at spotting problems that can affect a child’s health and wellbeing.

We have [expanded and strengthened the health visiting service](#) to help every child get the healthiest start to life possible. For example, between 2010 and 2015, we are recruiting and training an extra 4,200 health visitors to increase the support and information available to families.

### Protecting children through immunisation

[Immunisation](#) is the most important way of protecting babies and children from some illnesses – including those that suddenly become a bigger threat. For example, in 2012 there was the biggest outbreak of whooping cough for a decade, so we launched a temporary immunisation programme to make sure babies were protected.

[NHS England](#) is now responsible for planning immunisation in England. We give the board information about diseases and the benefits and side effects of immunisation.

### Supporting mothers and children with mental health problems

It is important that mothers and children with mental health problems get the help they need as early as possible, to reduce the impact of poor mental health on a child and to prevent problems extending into a child’s later years.

We are:

- as part of our work on [mental health](#), spending £400 million on giving more people, including children and young people, access to talking therapies
- making sure that health visitors have training to spot the signs of postnatal depression in patients and to get them the help they need as soon as possible

### Improving chances for children with vulnerable mothers

By supporting vulnerable mothers, we can:

- increase a child’s chances of developing healthily
- make it less likely that a child will experience abuse and neglect

Between 2010 and 2015, we are doubling the number of places on our Family Nurse Partnership. The partnership gives young, first-time mothers a family nurse, who can help them prepare for parenthood and support them until their child is 2.

### Providing free school meals

From September 2014, we are providing free school meals for children in reception, year 1 and year 2 of infant school to help all children have a healthy start to life.

Studies suggest that young children eating a healthy meal together at lunchtime can improve their development and social skills.

To help schools, we’re providing advice to those who need it most as well as funding to increase capacity in school kitchens.

## Background

The public health white paper ‘[Healthy Lives, Healthy People](#)’ (2010) emphasises the importance of giving all children a healthy start to life. It sets out plans for the Healthy Child Programme, health visitors and the Family Nurse Partnership and shows how these contribute to the wider public health priority of encouraging good health and wellbeing throughout life.

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