

**Essex County Council**

**Free Early Education Entitlement for Two,  
Three and Four Year Olds**

**A Guide for Parents**

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# 1. Introduction

Finding good quality childcare can be hard for parents. There are lots of things to look out for and to remember to ask when you visit a childcare provider.

This guide gives you points to consider so you understand how you can access the free early education entitlement for your child and what you should know before you sign up with a nursery, preschool or childminder. We will use the word 'childcare provider' throughout the rest of this guide to stand for nursery, preschool or childminder.

What is the Free Early Education Entitlement?:

- It is funding provided by the UK Government for all eligible children because they want children to have a good nursery education so that they have the best start in life.
- Some two year olds can get free entitlement hours if their parents are on certain benefits. These children will get up to 570 free entitlement hours over the year, they usually have 15 hours per week for 38 weeks. The 38 weeks are divided into three terms which are the same as the school terms.
- All three and four year olds can get free entitlement hours from the school term after they turn three up until they go to school, this is called the universal free entitlement. Children will get up to 570 free entitlement hours over the year, they will usually have 15 hours per week for 38 weeks. The 38 weeks are divided into three terms which are the same as the school terms.
- Lots of working parents can get the extended free entitlement (EFE), which is another 15 hours, this is often called the "30 hour offer". This is because children can have up to 30 hours a week for 38 weeks which is a total of 1140 hours of free entitlement a year.
- The 38 weeks (or 570 hours) start at the beginning of April and finish at the end of March in the next year. The terms start in April with Summer, then September for Autumn and finish at the end of the Spring term (January to March).

## 2. Choosing the right childcare for you and your child

To find out more information on different types of childcare, please click on the following link <https://www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/five-steps-choosing-childcare> which includes a list of useful questions to consider when looking for childcare or please visit: [Find a childcare provider: Types of childcare - Essex County Council](#).

You can find information about all government childcare support and how to apply on [Childcare Choices](#) website. There is also information for parents on the Family Information Service (FIS) webpage on the main ECC website [Family Information Service - Essex County Council](#)

All early years providers have a duty to support children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and will be able to provide you with information about how they will do this. If you need extra help to find the right setting for your child with SEND you can email [early.years@essex.gov.uk](mailto:early.years@essex.gov.uk) and someone will support you with your childcare search.

All childcare providers can claim free entitlement if they:

- are registered with Ofsted as an early years provider, or are a school nursery in which case they will be registered as part of the school
- have an Ofsted judgement of Good, Outstanding or Requires Improvement to, offer the free entitlement to three and four year olds
- have an Ofsted judgement Good or Outstanding, to offer the free entitlement to two year olds
- have a free entitlement funding contract with Essex County Council

If a childminder is part of a Childminder Agency they can still claim the Free Entitlement Funding if the Agency or the Childminder has a funding contract with Essex.

Newly registered childcare providers can offer the free entitlement before their first Ofsted inspection. But, if they don't get a Good or Outstanding judgement at their first Ofsted inspection, they won't be able to offer free entitlement to two year olds.

Essex County Council must make sure that all childcare providers who claim free entitlement hours:

- deliver the full Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum
- keep records about children receiving the free entitlement and make the information available to the Local Authority, and Ofsted if they ask to see it

### 3. Eligibility

#### Two Year Old Free Entitlement Funding

Thousands of parents across Essex already use childcare for their 2 year olds. Not only does it give you time back for yourself, your child can also play, learn, and have fun with other children.

You may be able to get the free entitlement for your two year old if you claim certain benefits or meet additional criteria.

For further information please click on the following link <https://www.gov.uk/help-with-childcare-costs/free-childcare-2-year-olds>

Essex County Council use the Department for Education's Eligibility Checking Service (ECS) to check that children meet the eligibility criteria based on benefits their parents receive (including Universal Credit).

Eligible two year olds can access their free entitlement the school term after they turn two, see below:

**If their birthday is between**  
1 April – 31 August  
1 September - 31 December  
1 January – 31 March

**They get the free entitlement**  
1 September after their 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday  
1 January after their 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday  
1 April after their 2<sup>nd</sup> birthday

If you are eligible and you want to talk this through with someone, you can contact the Essex Child and Family Well-being service Family Hub for your district. For details of your local Family Hub click on the following link <https://essexfamilywellbeing.co.uk/>

To register for 2 year old funding, you need to apply online and you will need:

- your National Insurance number
- to go to [Essex Education Portal - Logon](#) and login using your email address and password. If you are accessing the Portal for the first time, please click Register and follow the guidance provided

If you don't have internet access or need support completing the online form, you can get support from the following:

- Family Hub – see above for details of how to contact them
- email [Early.Years@essex.gov.uk](mailto:Early.Years@essex.gov.uk)
- speak to your childcare provider, Health Visitor or Social Worker

When you have filled in the online form, and the eligibility checks have been passed you will receive a reference number which you can then take to your childcare provider to get your free 15 hours. You will need to show the provider your child's birth certificate, your National Insurance number and other evidence if eligible due to the additional criteria.

### **Three and Four Year Old Free Entitlement Funding – Universal 15 hours per week**

All 3 and 4 years olds are entitled to receive the universal free 15 hours per week (term-time) funding, from the term after they have their third birthday, see below:

<b>If their birthday is between</b>	<b>They get the free entitlement</b>
1 April – 31 August	1 September after their 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday
1 September - 31 December	1 January after their 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday
1 January – 31 March	1 April after their 3 <sup>rd</sup> birthday

These dates have been fixed by the Department for Education and cannot be changed.

If your child is already going to a childcare provider, they may be able to claim the free entitlement so check with them to see how your child can access the funded entitlement hours.

If your child is not going to a childcare provider you will need to find one that offers free entitlement places and register your child with them.

You can search for a childcare provider in Essex by clicking on this link [Find a Childcare Provider \(essex.gov.uk\)](#)

Or you can contact the Family Information Service by email at [fis@essex.gov.uk](mailto:fis@essex.gov.uk)

Or you can visit a Family Hub, you can find your nearest by clicking on this link [Essex Child and Family Wellbeing Service](#) or allocated social worker.

## **Three and Four Year Old Free Entitlement Funding – Extended Free Entitlement (EFE)**

Some children will be eligible for the EFE. You will be able to check your eligibility using the online [Childcare calculator - GOV.UK](#) and complete an online application. Before you sign up for the extended entitlement, you need to look at all the options to make sure you choose the best package for you. It is possible that the childcare element of Working Tax Credit could be affected as you would likely be paying for less childcare.

If eligible you need to make sure you apply for EFE before the beginning of the term that you want the funding to start. **Please note:** If you apply for your code after the beginning of the term that you want funding to start, your provider will not be able to claim the extended free entitlement. You will only be able to get the universal 15 hours entitlement that term.

When you have finished your application and set up an account you will get an eligibility code to take to your childcare provider who will check the code on the early years portal. If the code clears all the checks you can then book your extended hours. You will also need to show your child's birth certificate.

## **Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP)**

Three and four year old children who get the free entitlement could be eligible for EYPP. The EYPP gives the childcare provider up to £302 a year, which they can use to provide resources that will support your child.

So that they can claim this extra funding, your childcare provider will ask you to fill in a form. You can do this at the same time as you fill in the Parent/Carer Agreement form when you sign up.

Your childcare provider will talk to you about what your child needs to help them learn. They can then use the extra funding to make sure they get the support they need.

## **4. Funding FEEE places**

To claim funding the childcare provider puts your child's details on an online form at set times each term, this is called a headcount. They add the number of hours that they are claiming for each child in their care onto the form, and this information is used by the council to work out the amount of funding that the childcare provider will be paid for the term.

570 hours of free entitlement can be claimed for 38 weeks in a financial year. Some providers allow the funding to be used over more than 38 weeks of the year, which can be useful if you need childcare all year round. If the childcare provider is stretching your free entitlement over longer than 38 weeks, they will claim the full number of hours allowed each term. If you are getting your full entitlement over 50 weeks your provider will note on your parent agreement form that they are claiming for 15 hours a week for the number of weeks allowable each term, this adds up to 570 hours over a full year.

FEEE funding is paid if:

- your child is on the headcount form and registered at the childcare provider on the day of the headcount.
- or if your child is included in the headcount but ill or away in that week but will go back to the childcare provider when they are better.

If your child starts after the headcount date, they can make a late claim for them if they have not received any free entitlement funding at any other Essex Childcare Provider during the term.

All childcare providers are paid a set hourly rate for 2 year old funding and a set hourly rate for 3 and 4 year old funding. Rates are not published as there is no monetary value to parents as the funded hours should be free at point of delivery.

Providers might also get an extra 10p, 20p or 30p per hour for children that live in an area that has low cost housing.

They may also get the EYPP for eligible 3 & 4 year old children, which is an extra 53 pence per hour for every hour of universal free entitlement funding paid.

If your child has additional needs the childcare provider can apply for inclusion funding to help them meet any extra needs that your child has. The provider must get help from a health or education professional such as a Health Visitor or Inclusion Partner to prove that the extra funding is needed. They should then apply to Essex County Council for an inclusion grant.

## **5. Points to consider**

The free entitlement can be taken up in different ways, the maximum number of funded hours which can be used in one day is 10 hours. Childcare providers can:

- set the period each day that they offer the free entitlement hours, such as 9am to 12pm
- have a maximum number of hours of free entitlement that can be claimed in any one day, such as 6 hours.
- offer a funded place only – these places may be limited so check to see if available

It is important to understand that different childcare providers will have different free entitlement offers so you need to find a place that suits your needs. Most childcare providers will offer free entitlement at the same time as school term times, but they don't have to, and some will offer it over more weeks.

Free Entitlement hours, both the universal and extended entitlements, can cover a lunch time where lunch times are used to help children learn new things and develop new skills.

When the Free Entitlement hours do include a lunch time there might be a charge for lunch or snacks, but any charge for the food must be agreed with you before your child starts. If you don't want to pay this charge the childcare provider should give you the choice to bring a packed lunch or allow you to take your child home for lunch.

The childcare provider can only charge for hours and services that are not part of the free entitlement. Check to see if you need to take additional hours in order to access the funded

hours. Any costs that you must pay should be made clear on the Parent/Carer Agreement contract and you should agree to them before your child starts at the setting and you sign the contract. The childcare provider must not attach any conditions to the funded only place which mean you must buy extra hours, pay lunchtime charges, pay a registration fee or charge for a uniform in order to receive them.

You can take the funding for fewer than 38 weeks at a childcare provider of your choice; the least they should offer is 33 weeks.

If the childcare provider is getting funding for fewer weeks they can't charge you for extra hours if your child is having 15 hours or less per week.

If you choose to use a childcare provider that is open for less than 38 weeks, you can't use the rest of the weeks anywhere else. If you need all the 38 weeks, it is best to choose a childcare provider that can offer this.

Some childcare providers have what is called a 'Stretched Offer', where the funding is stretched to cover the holiday periods. But you need to understand that the maximum hours per term you can claim for does not change. The total number of hours that can be claimed in a year is 570. If your provider does offer funding over 50 weeks of the year, you will get less hours over more weeks but the number of hours you are entitled to will stay the same, see Section 4 - Example of stretching the entitlement over 50 weeks.

The childcare provider must complete a Parent/Carer Agreement form with you which puts in writing the hours and days of free entitlement your child is getting each term. This must not be for more hours than your child attends. You do not have to claim all of the hours if you do not want your child to attend for the full 15 or 30 hours.

If you decide to increase the hours after headcount day, the childcare provider can't claim for the extra hours. This means they will ask you to pay for the extra hours until the end of the term. **It is really important that you are aware of all the details and read the information on the form before you sign the form. Make sure that you know about any extra costs, what they are for and you agree to them before your child starts.**

Check that the childcare provider will guarantee the funded hours each term and that the offer does not change dependent upon the age of the child or if the extended hours are needed.

If you move your child to another provider part way through the term, after the headcount has taken place, your new provider will not be able to claim the free entitlement funding from Essex County Council. So, you might have to pay fees for the rest of the term at the new provider.

In these cases, Essex County Council may ask the original provider to pass on the unused funding for the term to the new provider, but this is not part of their contractual agreement and we are unable to insist that they pass on the funding.

Also, your original provider will have a notice period and might charge a fee if you didn't give them the required notice that your child was leaving, please check this out before making your decision.

Any invoices you get should show that:

- you have received your child's full 15 or 30 hour funded place completely free, there should be no monetary value attached to the free 15 or 30 hours.



- extra hours and services you can be charged for, e.g. meals or hours in addition to the funded free hours. The provider must tell you about these before you take up the place as you will be agreeing to them by signing the Parent/Carer Agreement form.
- charges for any extra hours and/or services must be clearly recorded.

Please also be aware that:

- the rates that a childcare provider charges for extra hours outside of free entitlement are a private matter between you and them. Local Authorities cannot get involved in providers' private business.
- if your child is only getting the Free Entitlement you won't need an invoice. But the provider must tell you they have applied for funding and make sure you complete a Parent/Carer Agreement form.

Childcare providers can charge a deposit to reserve the free entitlement place for three and four year olds, but not for eligible two year olds. The deposit can be up to one week's charges covering the number of hours you want to take up. The childcare provider must give you back the deposit when your child starts or by no later than the next half term break.

The provider can claim free entitlement for one day each term when they are open without any children so that they can carry out staff training. They should make sure you know that you will lose a day of free entitlement per term before you sign your Parent/Carer Agreement form. You should also be given 6 weeks notice of any planned closures.

If your child attends on a day which is a bank holiday the provider should let you know before you sign the Parent/Carer Agreement form if they are closed on bank holidays. Your child won't get their full entitlement where there are bank holidays in the funded weeks.

The childcare provider will still get the funding if a child is away for a short period, if you take holiday or the child is sick during the term.

Three and four year old funding can be used with two or more childcare providers if it meets your needs. But you can only go to two providers in one day. Some childcare providers will have a sole provider policy where you must take all your entitlement with them and will not allow split funding.

If you are splitting the funding, you will need to put this on the Parent/Carer Agreement form you sign at the start of each term, putting the number of hours you will take at each childcare provider. You can't claim for more than your entitlement between both of them.

The childcare provider gives us the details of the hours your child is with them and we will check to stop any over claims. If they do over claim, you will have to pay for any hours that are not covered by the free entitlement.

If your child is getting the two year old free entitlement, they can only receive the 2 year old funding at one early years provider.

You can't split the funding between a childcare provider and a reception class in a school. This is because when a child goes into reception class all the funding for their early education is paid into the school budget and the childcare provider won't be able to claim it.

If your child is due to start in a reception class you won't be able to have any free entitlement hours for the days or weeks at the beginning of the autumn term before they actually start.

Schools are not allowed to say you have to attend their nursery if you want a place at the school. If you are told this, we would appreciate you letting us know so we can take action.

If your childcare provider has to close during a term and you need to find another one, please contact the Family Information Service by email at [fis@essex.gov.uk](mailto:fis@essex.gov.uk) . Once you have found another provider, they may be able to put in a late claim for your child's free entitlement for the rest of the term.

If you move to Essex from another Local Authority during the term, we will allow a childcare provider to claim for any child that isn't already getting free entitlement in Essex. They would be able to make a 'late claim' for the entitlement remaining for that term.