



# Hydration for Health

Guidance for a healthy drinks policy for Torbay primary schools

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# 1 Rationale

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## 1.1 Introduction

This guidance for a healthy drinks policy is intended for use by Torbay primary schools and should be used alongside the School Food Plan and Early Years Foundation Stage Nutrition Guidance (see Appendix 1). It supports education settings in promoting healthier hydration habits by encouraging the consumption of plain water and milk only, during the school day including at breakfast clubs and afterschool activities.

Torbay Council recommends the adoption of a healthy drinks policy in primary schools to support children's health and wellbeing. This will help to reduce sugar intake, improve hydration and cognitive function, promote healthier weight and improve oral health in pupils.

As part of the policy, pupils are to be only provided with plain water (still water from a tap or bottle without flavourings) and milk (including lactose-free or soya alternatives) during the school day. The policy also applies to packed lunches.

Primary schools wishing to implement a healthy drinks policy will be able to use the following drafts included in this document:

1. Recommended healthy drinks policy content
2. Information letter for parents
3. Information for school newsletters
4. Information for whole-school staff regarding the policy and expectations

## 1.2 Background

According to the NHS Eatwell Guide, children should aim to drink 6–8 glasses of fluid daily to stay properly hydrated<sup>1</sup>. Hydration plays a vital role in maintaining concentration, cognitive performance, and physical health<sup>2</sup>. However, removing access to sugary drinks is essential to

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/726114/Obesity\\_healthy\\_eating\\_and\\_physical\\_activity\\_in\\_primary\\_schools\\_170718.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/726114/Obesity_healthy_eating_and_physical_activity_in_primary_schools_170718.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32370147/>

reduce the risk of unhealthy weight gain and tooth decay, while promoting healthier choices among pupils<sup>3</sup>.

Excessive consumption of sugary drinks is a major contributor to poor health outcomes in children. These drinks are a significant source of excess calories and a key contributor to weight gain, increasing the likelihood of children being above a healthy weight. For example, a single can of cola can contain up to 35g of sugar - well above the recommended daily limit of 24g for children aged 7–10. High sugar and acid levels also damage teeth, causing decay and, in severe cases, extractions. Despite being marketed as healthy, some milk alternatives, fruit juices, and smoothies contain high levels of free sugars, which contribute to unhealthy weight and tooth decay<sup>4</sup>. These products are often more expensive than water or milk and provide limited nutritional benefit.

Certain sugary and fizzy drinks - especially energy and sports drinks - also contain high levels of caffeine. Excessive caffeine intake in children has been linked to poor concentration, headaches, irritability, fatigue, and sleep disturbances, all of which can negatively affect classroom behaviour and academic performance<sup>5</sup>. Squash and flavoured water, including sugar-free varieties, encourage a preference for sweet tastes and offer no nutritional benefit<sup>6</sup>.

In contrast, plain water and milk do not harm teeth and support better concentration, healthy weight, and overall wellbeing. Encouraging regular water consumption is therefore the best approach. The [TORBAY JOINT STRATEGIC NEEDS ASSESSMENT 2025/26](#) (JSNA) can be referred to for specific Torbay data.

School-based interventions show promising results in shaping children's dietary and physical activity habits<sup>7</sup>. Schools have a unique opportunity to create environments that support pupils' wellbeing and learning. Good nutrition and hydration are closely linked to cognitive performance, concentration, and overall readiness to learn, meaning that healthy habits directly benefit educational outcomes. By embedding healthy practices into daily routines, schools can help pupils thrive both academically and personally. A healthy drinks policy is one practical step that reinforces these efforts, helping pupils stay hydrated and ready to learn.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/10/12/e040833>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/food-facts/sugar/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/child-caffeine.html>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/food-guidelines-and-food-labels/water-drinks-nutrition/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28173882/>

# 1.3 Evidence, recommendations and good practice

## 1. Southwark Council

In 2019 Southwark Council commissioned Cookwise, nutritionists with experience in school catering, to study school meals within a sample of Southwark primary schools. Cookwise found that:

- In nearly all schools, water was freely available from dining room tables from either jugs or pre-poured drinking beakers.
- In schools where water was pre-poured into beakers, children were seen to drink more water, whilst in schools where children had to collect a cup from another table, they often did not and so went without a drink over lunchtime.
- Water jugs are often too heavy for younger children resulting in spillages. Cookwise recommends that for younger children, water should be pre-poured into beakers and topped up for them regularly to avoid spillages.
- For older children, water should be positioned in a visible location e.g. on dining tables so it is more difficult for children to avoid or miss.
- All children should be actively encouraged to drink water during their lunch break by dining room staff, teachers and midday meal supervisors.

## 2. Food Active

In 2023, Food Active conducted research in primary schools across Cheshire West and Chester, and then in return were able to offer practical recommendations to support the implementation of a water and milk only policy. Food Active's key advice included:

- Introduce the policy gradually, allowing parents and pupils time to adjust to water and milk becoming the default drink choices—this phased approach helps build understanding and long-term acceptance.
- Identify children as key influencers in the success of the water and milk only policy and engage pupils early through a series of lessons that highlight the health benefits of drinking water and milk, rather than relying on one-off assemblies. This sustained educational approach helps foster enthusiasm and lasting behaviour change.
- Make water more appealing and accessible - schools found success in installing water coolers, which allowed children to refill their bottles with chilled water—something they preferred. Simple incentives like stickers also proved effective in encouraging regular hydration.
- Engage staff and engage them early. Keeping all staff informed about the rationale behind the policy and involving them in its development ensured practical implementation across Early Years, KS1, and KS2. Gathering input from staff at each stage helped tailor the approach to suit the needs of different age groups.
- Encouraging schools to adapt their strategies based on age. Younger children responded well to visual tools like reward charts, while older pupils engaged more with information

about the health and environmental benefits of choosing water and milk—empowering them to make informed decisions.

## 2 Model Policy for Schools

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### 2.1 The healthy drinks policy

For schools looking to implement a healthy drinks policy, the following templates can serve as useful models to help develop a policy tailored to a specific school site.

#### The Healthy Drinks Policy

Our school is committed to supporting children’s health and wellbeing. To help pupils stay hydrated, focused, and healthy, we are introducing a Healthy Drinks Policy. During the school day - including breakfast clubs and after-school activities - children will be offered only plain water and milk (including lactose-free or soya alternatives). This simple change reduces sugar intake, supports oral health, and promotes better concentration and learning. The policy also applies to packed lunches. By working together, we can help create healthy habits that benefit pupils now and in the future.

The drinks to be available to our pupils during school hours are:

- Plain water (unless for medical reasons)
- Low fat milk
- Plain whole or semi-skimmed cow’s milk in nursery classes or for those under 5 (or unsweetened calcium fortified non-dairy alternatives).

If a child has a medical condition that requires them to drink sugary drinks, then this is treated as an exception to this policy and should be approved by the headteacher. The headteacher must be satisfied with the medical evidence before giving approval.

#### How Parents and Carers Can Help

We ask all parents/carers to support the policy by:

- Please avoid bringing sugary or flavoured drinks onto the playground before and after school.
- Support your child by providing water or milk in their packed lunch and encouraging these choices at home.

- Talk to your child about why water and milk are the healthiest options - it really helps reinforce what they learn in school.
- School meals include water or milk as the drink option; please do not send alternative drinks or substitutes
- Water is freely available in school; parents may include water or milk in a carton with packed lunches if they wish.

### What We Will Do in School

Our school staff will support the policy by:

- We will make sure plain water and milk are the only drinks offered during the school day, including in dining halls, breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, and at school events.
- Water will always be freely available from fountains or jugs, and staff will encourage children to drink regularly.
- Our team will model healthy habits by drinking water in front of pupils and promoting hydration as part of daily routines.
- We'll display positive messages and posters around school to remind children that water is the best choice.

## 2.2 Exceptions to the policy

Pupils in all settings should consider the policy to support healthier choices and reduce sugar intake. Pupils should be encouraged to drink only plain water or milk during the school day.

However, in recognition of the diverse needs within SEND settings, schools may need to consider and support this policy in line with any requirements set out in a pupil's Education, Health and Care Plan or through other planning and discussion to best support each individual child appropriately. Staff should work closely with families and health professionals to ensure that any adaptations are appropriate and in the best interests of each pupil's wellbeing.

## 2.3 Tips for parents and children

Water is fully sufficient to meet children's hydration needs throughout the school day. It's readily available in schools, and pupils are encouraged to drink it regularly as part of a healthy eating approach. The absence of sugary drinks does not compromise hydration.

For children who may be hesitant to switch to water or milk, here are a few suggestions to make the transition easier:

- Add slices of fruit like lemon, orange, or berries to chilled water for a natural flavour boost
- Encourage repeated exposure - it often takes a few tries to get used to a new taste
- Let younger children choose a favourite water bottle or decorate their own to make drinking water more enjoyable

## 3 How to Share and Promote

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The following templates provide support for the implementation of the healthy drinks policy in your school.

### 3.1 Frequently Asked Questions

Following the successful implementation of a healthy drinks policy, Cheshire West and Chester Council developed a set of Frequently Asked Questions to assist schools in addressing potential concerns from parents regarding the policy. These resources can be found in Appendix 3 and shared with parents and carers as well as all school staff.

### 3.2 Letter/email to parents/carers

Dear parent/guardian/caregiver,

We want every child in our school to be healthy, happy, and ready to learn. Drinking enough water is very important for concentration and energy. It also helps keep teeth healthy and reduces sugar in children's diets.

To support this, our school is now a Healthy Drinks Only school. This means:

- Children should only bring **water or plain milk** to school.
- Milk can be semi-skimmed, skimmed, lactose-free, or soya. Full-fat milk is fine for children under 5 or if recommended by a doctor.
- Sugary drinks, fizzy drinks, squash, and flavoured water are **not allowed**.

#### **Why are we doing this?**

Schools that follow this policy see better health, behaviour, and learning. Too much sugar can cause tooth decay and unhealthy weight. Water and milk are the best choices for hydration and learning.

#### **How you can help:**

- Give your child a clear, reusable water bottle.
- Fill it with plain tap water.
- Wash the bottle daily in warm, soapy water and let it dry upside down.

- Encourage healthy drinking at home too.

We're here to support you - please get in touch if you'd like to discuss this change or read the FAQs attached/via our website (EDIT AS APPROPRIATE).

Thank you for helping us make our school a healthy place for every child to thrive.

Kind regards,

[Headteacher's name]

### 3.3 Article template for school newsletter

#### **TITLE: Supporting Learning and Health**

We're excited to share that our school is now a Healthy Drinks Only school! Why? Because staying hydrated helps children focus, learn better, and feel great—and water and milk are the best choices.

#### **What's changing?**

- ✓ Only water or plain milk during the school day
- ✓ Milk can be semi-skimmed, skimmed, lactose-free, or soya
- ✓ No fizzy drinks, squash, flavoured water, or sugary drinks

#### **Why it matters:**

- Drinking water boosts concentration and energy
- Reduces sugar intake, helping teeth and overall health
- Supports healthy habits for life

#### **How you can help:**

1. Send a clear, reusable water bottle filled with tap water
2. Wash bottles daily
3. Encourage water and milk at home too

Thank you for helping us make healthy choices easy for every child!

## 3.4 Template for Communication to staff

**SUBJECT:** Healthy Drinks Policy – Supporting Learning and Wellbeing

Dear Team,

As part of our commitment to creating a healthy and supportive school environment, we are introducing a Healthy Drinks Policy across the school. This means that during the school day, pupils (and staff when in the presence of pupils) should only have plain water or milk (including lactose-free or soya alternatives).

### **Why this matters:**

Research shows that good hydration is essential for concentration, energy, and cognitive performance. Schools that have adopted similar policies have seen improvements in pupil health, behaviour, and learning outcomes. Reducing sugary drinks also supports dental health and helps prevent unhealthy weight gain.

### **What we're asking from staff:**

- Please model healthy habits by drinking water or milk in front of pupils.
- Encourage pupils to drink water regularly throughout the day.
- Support the policy during breakfast clubs, after-school activities, and school events.

We know this may be a small change for some, but your support is vital in creating a consistent message and helping pupils develop healthy habits for life. If you have any questions or need advice on how to support pupils with this transition, please get in touch.

Please see the attached FAQs that may help with any queries or concerns you have about the implementation of the policy. For any further questions, please do not hesitate to speak to me.

Thank you for your continued commitment to the health, wellbeing, and learning of our school community.

Kind regards,

[Headteacher's name]

# 4 Appendix

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## 4.1 Supporting Materials

The following list will provide links to useful supporting materials and resources. These may be useful in the implementation and maintenance of your healthy drinks policy in school.

**School Food Plan:** The School Food Plan website offers practical support for implementing a Water and Milk Only Policy in schools through its dedicated section titled “Tap Water and Milk as the Drinks of Choice”. <http://www.schoolfoodplan.com/>

**Early Years Foundation Stage Nutrition Guidance:** Guidance for group and school-based providers and childminders in England.

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6839b752210698b3364e86fc/Early\\_years\\_foundation\\_stage\\_nutrition\\_guidance.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6839b752210698b3364e86fc/Early_years_foundation_stage_nutrition_guidance.pdf)

## 4.2 Example of water-only posters to promote the policy

Resources are available online: <https://www.nhs.uk/healthier-families/>

## 4.3 Frequently Asked Questions

### 4.3.1 For Settings and staff

**How do we go about making these changes?** If your school specifies within its school food policy/ healthy drinks policy that water and plain reduced fat milk are the only drinks to be provided at school, then the school canteen will need to ensure that supplied drinks align with this policy. The supplier that you get your school food from should be informed of your new policy and your contract updated to include this.

**How could this healthy drinks policy be enforced?** Pupils who are found with a drink other than water (or low-fat milk) while at school will be asked to put it away. Schools must ensure that water is freely available for pupils to access via fountains around the school and in jugs at lunchtime. This will not apply to pupils who have a medical reason which requires them to drink something that is not water or milk. Parents and carers of children who this affects should inform teachers directly.

**Might water get spilt on tables in class?** Schools could provide or encourage parents to provide personal reusable bottles. A spilled bottle of water is much easier to clean up than a sugary drink.

**Some children are bringing in sugary drinks from home, what can I do?** Recommending that pupils use transparent water bottles can reduce the likelihood of this happening. You could send a letter to parents explaining the changes and importance of drinking more water, and less sugary drinks and the reasons why – a template is included in this policy guidance pack.

**Some children don't think that the drinking water from fountains is clean, what can I do to encourage them?** Listen to your pupils to understand why they think this. You might want to address this topic in lessons or a school assembly, a letter to parents might also help. Water in the UK is safe to drink and pupils should feel confident that there have been no cases of sickness or infection caused by drinking from fountains.

**Aren't water bottles or fountains unhygienic?** Bottles should be washed regularly at home in warm, soapy water and left to air dry upside down. Children should also be encouraged to avoid touching the fountain with their mouth and to wash their hands regularly to minimise contamination.

**If children start drinking more water in class, won't they need the toilet more often and cause disruption to their lessons?** Schools that have adopted a healthy drinks policy have not found this to be the case. Some schools have found that the number of toilet visits decrease.

**How much fluid do children need?** The amount of fluid a child needs depends on many factors including their age, their gender, the weather and how much physical activity they do, but generally they should aim to drink about 6-8 glasses of fluid per day (on top of the water provided by food in their diet). Younger children need relatively smaller drinks (e.g. 120–150 ml serving) and older children need larger drinks (e.g. 250–300 ml serving). This is based on recommendations from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which set out how much fluid children of different ages need. Assuming 70-80% of fluid in the diet comes from drinks (20-30% from food) the EFSA recommendations from drinks only are equivalent to 1.1-1.3 litres per day for

4–8-year-olds, 1.3-1.5 litres per day for 9–13-year-old girls and 1.5-1.7 litres per day 9–13-year-old boys. It is helpful for teachers to remind pupils to drink throughout the day to stay hydrated.

### 4.3.2 For parents/carers

**Won't restricting pupil's choice of beverages affect their hydration?** Water, which by law must always be freely available to pupils, is enough to meet children's hydration needs, and pupils are encouraged to drink water as part of the school's food policy. Hydration is not compromised by a lack of availability of sugary drinks in schools.

**Why introduce more rules? Surely pupils can be educated to make appropriate choices?** Schools are ideally placed to provide an environment that helps pupils to be as healthy as possible giving them the best chance in life. As part of that commitment, schools are uniquely placed to provide an environment where the healthy and most affordable choice is the easy one. Many primary schools across the country already have water only policies. By only providing and allowing water (and milk at break or lunchtime) schools will reflect the healthy eating messages taught in lessons.

**What about fruit juice? Isn't that healthy?** Schools should actively encourage pupils to eat fruits. But fruit juice is often high in sugar and does not contain the fibre contained within whole fruits.

**What about sports drinks, flavoured water, and diet drinks?** Water can fulfil all hydration needs, and milk provides nutritional benefits. In addition, some diet and sports drinks contain caffeine. Excessive consumption of caffeinated drinks by children is linked to negative health outcomes such as headaches, sleeping problems, irritation and tiredness.

**What other benefits are there to making the school 'healthy drinks only'?** Other than the health benefits, improved behaviour and learning, restricting fizzy and sugary drinks helps the environment by reducing waste and keeps the school and grounds litter free.