

Feel free?

There is still confusion among settings as to what charges can be levied given that the 30 hours funded childcare is supposedly a 'free' entitlement. **Hannah Crown** has a guide

The DfE's 30 hours guidance for local authorities states that providers must not 'charge parents "top-up" fees (the difference between a provider's usual fee and the funding they receive from the local authority to deliver free places)'. But the then childcare minister Caroline Dinenage said in 2017 that nurseries should make supplementary charges if they need to do so to remain viable. The Government also amended its guidance to say that parents can 'expect' to pay for extras.

As the official position is somewhat contradictory, the key is to be careful about how these charges are framed.

What are the rules?

Government guidance:

1. Funding 'is not intended to cover the costs of meals, other consumables, additional hours or additional activities'. Parents can therefore 'expect to pay' for these.
2. Where parents are unable or unwilling to pay for meals and consumables, providers offering the free entitlements can set 'their own policy on how to respond'.
3. However, this must include alternative options, such as 'allowing a parent to bring in their own consumables or a packed lunch'.
4. Providers should also be 'mindful of the impact of additional charges on the most disadvantaged parents'.
5. All parents should have the same rights to access a free entitlement place, regardless of whether or not they choose to pay for extras.

How are settings translating this into practice?

PACEY recommends point one

in the above list is shared with parents. It advises settings to keep additional charges separate, and not to include them in an hourly rate, as this could be seen as a 'top up' fee. It also recommends including a statement to support less well-off families, e.g. 'If you experience difficulties meeting the cost of additional services, please come and speak to me.'

In reality, many settings are charging an amount which covers the gap between their funding and their usual fee and framing this as a consumables charge. One is Tops Day Nurseries, whose admissions policy has been approved by eight local authorities.

Managing Director Cheryl Hadland says 'it allows us to charge additional extras for a whole range of things to match the difference between funding and the cost of the places. We do still have some completely "free" places.' Key points from the group's policy are:

- We offer the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds for every child, irrespective of background or family circumstances, subject to vacancies.
- During core hours there may be additional charges such as for extras including snacks.
- Optional extras such as Forest School, cooking school, nursery meals also incur an additional charge.

FAQs

How much should I charge and how should I ask for it?

Settings impose charges by hour,



day, session, month or term, depending on their hourly rates, funding shortfalls, and other costs. One pre-school practitioner advises being upfront about it being related to sustainability, saying,

'We've been open and honest with our parents, told them what our funding rate is and what our annual loss would be if we didn't charge an additional fee.' She advises settings to 'Work out your loss (hourly rate minus funded rate) and that is your consumable charge.'

Some settings also report that sending out details of these charges in letters or policies which parents have to read and sign has more success than adding them to invoices. Settings also have the option of imposing additional charges as a condition of all places at the setting, free or fee-paying.

What can be charged for?

There is no definitive list of items which can be charged for. For example, some settings interpret 'consumables' more widely than others.

According to NDNA, items can include food, trips, additional classes and activities, e.g. yoga, music, nappies, sunscreen and wipes, Forest School, nursery uniform/ weather-appropriate clothing and special events.

Some settings give a list of examples to parents, but make a point of saying the list is not exhaustive.

But isn't the funded entitlement supposed

to be delivered without extra charges?

Yes, so any extra charges have to be voluntary, with alternative options available, such as to bring a packed lunch. Bear in mind that the statutory guidance states that, 'Children should be able to take up their free hours as part of continuous provision and providers should avoid artificial breaks in the day wherever possible. For example, the lunch time hour/session should form part of the free provision where the child is attending a morning and afternoon session.'

The DfE also says that 'requiring parents to pay for lunch, or pick up their child in the middle of the day during the lunch hour, is not consistent with this statutory guidance.'

Can I limit the number of 'free only' places?

Yes. Providers can limit the number of funded places they offer, but not according to whether parents choose to pay for optional extras. There should be no difference in the 'core provision' of funded hours available to parents taking the free entitlements, regardless of whether or not they choose to pay for optional extras.

Can I charge different amounts for different groups of children?

Yes. Some settings have different additional charges for three- and four-year-olds and two-year-olds, which tend to have higher funding rates, for example.

Further information:

Early years entitlements: operational guidance, June 2018
→ <https://bit.ly/2JdZZ63>
Model agreement,
→ <https://bit.ly/2EhH3D1>
DfE 30 hours Q&A,
→ <https://bit.ly/2Vjfl07>

Risk benefit

Ofsted has said that settings need to be bolder with incorporating risk into activities. Jack and Jill's nursery has a model that works. By **Hannah Crown**

Our philosophy is one that children cannot learn to keep themselves safe if they don't know what risks are,' says Jack and Jill's nursery manager Jessica Bell. 'Children only learn about safety by understanding what makes them vulnerable.

'We allow children to take calculated risks so that they are able to understand the limitations of their bodies and their skills. They then can start to self-regulate and make judgements for themselves.'

At Jack and Jill's, risk is built into the daily routine. The setting runs Forest School, which includes woodwork and den-building, and takes the children swimming each week.

Ms Bell says, 'Children splash in the stream, they slide down the mud banks and they sit around the fire (and no, we do not have physical boundaries in place between them and the fire). The children love responsibility and because they are free to challenge themselves, they are motivated to learn.'

The swimming sessions, run by qualified instructors, have been put on because the setting 'wants children to have the skills so that when risks are posed in life they are well equipped to deal with them.'

Helping children to form a deeper understanding of the environment they are in is key to developing their understanding of risk. 'We wouldn't allow risky play without talking to the children about the environment first,' Ms Bell adds.

'We teach children all the way through nursery rules and boundaries, and it is no different at Forest School. Children know where they can and can't go in the forest and



they adhere to these rules with no need for physical boundaries. Children are asked open-ended questions such as 'what would happen if...?'. We get children to think about the environments and allow them to move equipment and decide where to play.'

This is connected with the idea that children should be treated as autonomous individuals. 'Our staff are trained to supervise children but allow them to come up with their ideas and make mistakes. We never allow children to get themselves into dangerous situations but we will allow them to test their physical skills and work out their abilities, especially in the garden,' says Ms Bell.

Risk assessment

'Of course, as adults it is our responsibility to risk assess environments and situations prior to the children having their turn. This does not mean our children can't emulate our procedures and do it themselves too,' says Ms Bell.

'Our children work with staff to identify risks in the environment. We talk about why areas are risky, for example wet steps outside, to support

children's critical thinking.'

Children also risk assess learning opportunities. 'They start to understand that scissors are sharp, for example, and that if they run they may slip and bump their heads. We talk through risks and scenarios, which keeps them motivated to learn about what is risky play and what

constitutes as being safe.

'Our children like to take a visual checklist into the garden and tick off when they have cleared the hazards (and yes, adults deliberately leave hazards). We would not be safeguarding our children adequately if we didn't risk assess our environments, but we believe the children should take responsibility for themselves.'

Graduated risk

The setting tries to graduate the level of support rather than tailoring risk for each child.

'Our purpose is to encourage independence and primarily equip our children to live in a rich, varied (and risky) society. As children grow and develop, they will be faced with similar challenges without the safety net of an adult to guide them. If we were to graduate the risk as such, we wouldn't be preparing all children adequately. Graduated support allows us to slowly take steps backwards, allowing our children the time to become excellent decision-makers,' Ms Bell says.

Benefits

So what benefits do they see? Ms Bell says, 'Children can

nursery overview

Name Jack and Jill's Nursery School

Number of settings 1

Established 1991

Location Yorkshire

Nursery owner

Tracy Humphreys

Hopscotch consultancy comment: 'Through plenty of risky play, children become self-reliant and keep trying to achieve their goal. It is clear through the staff's teaching that children are learning how to take risks appropriately.'

explore and push their mental and physical boundaries with the support of an adult who is always there to guide and challenge. This in turn gives children a good gauge of their capabilities and allows them to set personal targets. As children set their own learning objectives, we see them taking control of their learning and becoming fiercely independent.'

Parents accept this approach because 'the end product is so clearly visible,' says Ms Bell. 'Our children are happy, engaged, critical thinkers and more than school ready as they leave our setting.'

This point was endorsed by Ofsted in its last inspection report from 2017, which rated the setting Outstanding and said, 'Teaching is of the highest quality and worthy of dissemination to others. Staff are highly qualified, experienced and knowledgeable. They interact splendidly to guide and stretch children's learning. Children are highly motivated learners, who are exceptionally well prepared for school.' ■