



# READ WHAT 16 YOUNG PEOPLE WHO LIVED IN THREE CHILDREN'S HOMES IN SCOTLAND HAD TO SAY ABOUT FOOD. GO ON!



**LISTEN!**  
**YOUNG PEOPLE IN CARE HAVE  
SOMETHING TO TELL YOU ABOUT FOOD!**



When you see this sign it's a question for you



When you see this sign it's a question you could go and ask staff

## But why would you want to talk about food?

At first some of the young people thought that talking about food was boring. However, when you think about food and what it is like in a children's home, you realise that it can take up a big part of your daily life.

It can involve difficult stuff, like arguing with staff over snacks or doing the dishes BUT food can also play a big part in making you feel happy and comfortable in the children's home.

The way food is done, like the kind of rules around what you can eat, when, and where, says a lot about how the staff look after you, what they want you to learn and what kind of place you live in.

The following pages tell you what young people living in care said about food. These young people were between 9 and 18 years old. You will see their age after their names.

## TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT: FOOD WHEN YOU FIRST COME IN

“When you first come in you don’t even think about food. Most people don’t want to sit down at the table.”

(Mandy, 16)

*One of the girls said that if she had to get up and get food from the serving dishes herself with everybody watching her, she would rather not have eaten at all.*

“It was horrible. I was in for tea, but I didn’t have it. I wouldn’t go through and sit.”

(Matt, 15)

Almost all of the young people, boys and girls, said that when they first moved in they felt too **embarrassed** or **scared** to join everybody for a meal around the table.

Several young people also said there was really no point asking them what they wanted to eat because there were so many other things to worry about - food isn’t really on your mind.

Many of the young people said they worried that everybody was going to look at them eating and they did not want to sit **so close** to people they did not know well enough and did not **trust**.

**It can be really difficult to know what you are supposed to do!**

Having people ask you random questions at mealtimes can be quite demanding. Even when somebody brings a plate of food to your room you might think long and hard about accepting it. Like one of the boys in our study, you may hide your plate because you don’t want the staff to know that you ate the food. Other young people said they preferred to eat with everybody right away and to do everything themselves to **get it over and done with**.

# SOME THINGS YOUNG PEOPLE FELT COULD MAKE IT EASIER AT FIRST

"I would ask if I could eat somewhere else with whoever. 'Cause like when I came in Demi done that with me, but then the staff wouldn't even let us. And like I was hungry, but I was just too embarrassed to eat in front of everybody."  
(Abbey, 12)

"Well we never ate on the first day. But on the second day I had macaroni, which I love."  
(Carrie Ann, 15)

👉 **YOUNG PEOPLE ALSO SAID TO KEEP IN MIND THAT DIFFERENT THINGS MAKE IT EASIER FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE.**

**"You just really want to get to know them. It's just like when you first came in. Like everybody'll have to come in at one point and have to go through what they've been through. So we know what it's like. When Ryan first came, me and Matt and Adam just wanted to make him feel at home."**

**(Melanie, 16)**

## Young People's Top Tips For You

- *"It's ok to be scared"*
- *"Don't be scared to go and cry to staff"*
- *You could ask a member of staff to sit next to you*
- *It helps when you can eat with somebody you got to know a little*
- *It helps when you get food you really like*
- *"Give the cook a list of what you want to eat"*
- *It helps to be allowed to go to the shop with a member of staff to get food you like*
- *Push yourself to get over the worst bit*
- *"Be friendly", "not moany"*



Can you think of more things that might help? Is there anything you can do to help new young people feel more comfortable?



# CHANGES

All of the young people said that how they felt about eating and what they ate **changed** the longer they lived in the children's home.

Several young people said it took some time for them to realise that people **"weren't actually really bothered"** about watching them eat. Then, once they got to know people, they could join in the conversation more.

Getting used to food and mealtimes in a young people's home can take time because so many things can be different from what you were used to. While some said they used to eat around a table with people when they lived at home, others didn't.

The majority of young people said they usually ate 'on the go'.

Some young people said when they moved into care they started to eat a lot more, others said that they couldn't eat the same way they used to eat.



**"We had a wee table in the living room, but it was only to put the keys on so we used to have it on the floor or we had it on our lap"**  
(Natalie, 10)

**"I didn't even have tea. I just had a packet of chips, then went out."** (Tom, 12)

**"I've never really had any time for lunch"** (Alex, 15)

**"I used to eat like a fat wee pie, but never put weight on. And now it's like I would make myself a big plate and you would be lucky if I eat about 10 spoonfuls and then I just feel sick."**  
(Ryan, 15)



Is food at the children's home different from what you had before? What else has changed?



# RULES



Quite a few of the young people said that when they were staying with their family there were few rules around food and they could more or less eat anything they wanted.

***IN A YOUNG PEOPLE'S HOME THERE CAN BE LOTS OF RULES AROUND FOOD***



Several of the young people told us that having many rules made them feel less like they were 'at home', particularly as they weren't living in the unit by choice.

However, there were a number of rules which the young people thought were fair although they were maybe different from the rules they had in their own house



**"Nah it's not like in your own house, 'cause you've got too many staff telling you what to do and everything."  
(Natalie, 10)**

## Fair Rules

For example, it's fair and helpful to have:

- **A rule that limits the amount of snacks you can eat; such as having them locked away**
  - because it could help young people to stay healthy
  - and would prevent other young people from eating all the snacks in one go
- **A rule that prevents people from spoiling food**
- **A rule that makes sure that other young people do not put you off your food, such as by saying or doing things that many people find disgusting. One of the boys felt it would be ok to remove somebody from the table if they were upsetting other people and didn't stop.**



# RULES



Several young people felt that the staff sometimes took rules too far. It could feel like staff had to have it their way.

**👉 THEY SAID: WHEN STAFF ARE GOING ON ABOUT RULES TOO MUCH IT CAN MAKE YOU WANT TO DO THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT THEY ASK YOU TO DO. IT CAN MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE PEOPLE DO NOT RESPECT HOW YOU FEEL, DO NOT TRUST YOU OR MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE A BABY NOT ABLE TO DO ANYTHING BY YOURSELF.**

## Unfair Rules

- Being pressured into changing your diet
- Being told off for your manners in front of everybody
- Having to do chores
- Staff locking rooms like the kitchen or dining room
- Staff not letting you bring your possessions to the table, like mobile phones or a gadget
- Group sanctions for something other people have done
- Not being allowed to make yourself something to eat outside the fixed mealtimes, e.g. when you've been out in the evening

**“Cause like one day if you can't be bothered doing anything the staff go, 'Wash your hands, wash your hands.' That can be really annoying, that's what puts us off.” (Demi, 15)**

**“You're not going to eat just when they tell you to eat. You want to eat when you want to eat.” (Alex, 15)**



What is it like at your young people's home? Are there fair rules? Are there rules you disagree with? Do you have your own rules or expectations in regard to what people should or should not do around food? Are there any that are different from those of the staff?



Have the staff explained the reason for having rules? Ask the staff to explain any rules to you that you disagree with or don't understand.

The staff can also try to get you to eat different things compared with what you used to eat when you lived at home.

Many of the young people felt it was up to them what they ate. However, many also thought it was good that staff encouraged them to try different foods. You might **discover new favourites** or end up being healthier.

However, many young people also said it was important to them that they still had a **choice**.

## TRYING DIFFERENT FOOD

**“Well I’ve been eating more fruit and I’ve eaten more healthier.”**  
(Callum, 10)

**“Well they put stuff on the table like vegetables, salad stuff, they make stuff new and they just ask you to try it because they say ‘If you don’t try how are you supposed to know that you don’t like it’. I think it is true. If I didn’t taste macaroni I wouldn’t love it.”**  
(Carrie Ann, 15)

*“I have had vegetables at home, my mum’s always made me eat them, but here you’ve sort of got a choice. Like from my mum’s point of view was ‘If you don’t let me put peas on your plate then I’m not going to give you the plate,’ so I was just like, ‘Right, put peas on the plate.’ That’s how my mum’s always done it, but here you can pick what you want and there’s nobody standing over you. I don’t think anyone should get pushed into doing anything.”* (Alex, 15)

Almost all the young people saw lots of differences between the children's home and their family home. Especially when you first move in, you may notice all the things that are different from what you think somebody's home should be like.

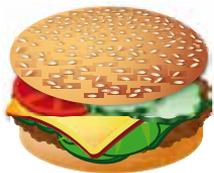
**“It isn't like being in a proper house 'cause the kitchen's massive.”**

**(Demi, 15)**

However, some of the young people pointed out, that **just because it is a care home doesn't mean it has to be like one.**

Having your own space and possessions and a right to privacy was thought of by all as very important for making you feel 'at home'

Young people also said that food can help with making you feel 'at home'. Some argued, however, that food by itself cannot make you feel 'at home' - **“It's just food”** (Natalie, 10).



**☞ A 'GOOD' CARE HOME CAN BE THOUGHT OF AS: A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE HELP YOU, A “CHILL SPACE”, A “BREATHING SPACE” AND A “SAFE PLACE”**

While almost all the young people felt that getting your favourite meal could make you feel happy, several of the young people said that their families' cooking was tastier than the food in the young people's home. Some said that even when you told the cook or staff how to make it, they never seemed to get it right.

**IS IT HOME?**



**☞ THE YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US THAT, IN THE END, NOBODY CAN MAKE FOOD EXACTLY THE WAY YOUR MUM, DAD, OR GRAN MADE IT BECAUSE IT IS THE PERSON YOU CARE ABOUT WHO'S MISSING FROM THE MEAL AND WHO MAKES THE FOOD TASTE AND FEEL RIGHT.**



What several of the young people said was that food could make you feel at home when you could trust the people around you. Some of the young people worried that other residents or even the staff might have done something to the food.

In order to feel at home, a number of young people felt it was really important to be allowed to have snacks in their room or to have their tea in their room away from everybody, for example when they were going through a hard time.



What makes you feel 'at home'?  
Do any of the staff know that?

Two of the young people said that coming back from school or college for their lunch or tea around the table **"feels like you're at home again"** (Melanie, 16).

Some of the young people felt the adults shouldn't tell you "it's just like your own house" if it is not.

It seemed confusing that the adults were not making it like your own house but expected you to treat it as such.

**"Cause they say it's just like your own house...and if it was like your own house then you would be able to eat in the living room if you wanted to."** (Carrie Ann, 15)

## **CAN FOOD MAKE YOU FEEL AT HOME?**



Questions to ask staff:

What do staff mean if they say 'this is your own home'?

Can I eat in my room?

Why can't I do the same things that I did at home?

**“The worst thing is when you’re trying to eat your tea and there’s somebody nipping your head? I don’t like that myself”**

**(Alex, 15)**

**“There isn’t a good mealtime. Everybody’s nagging and stuff”**  
**(Natalie, 10)**

## **MEALTIMES COULD ALSO BE LOUD IN A BAD WAY**



**“If like you’re not talking to a young person or something and you are all sitting at the table and joining in conversation, you might feel a wee bit awkward. That could make it feel like a bad mealtime, ‘cause you can’t join in properly because you want to talk to them, but you’re not talking to them. So that could make it feel a wee bit weird. So you might not even want to go to the table then.”**  
**(Melanie 16)**

There were a number of things the young people said that would make it a bad mealtime for them. All of these had to do with the people who are there and what they do. They said it could be the staff **“nagging”** or **“whinging”** or it could be other young people **“being in your face”**, getting you into trouble, or putting you off your food either because of their manners or because they say nasty things about your food.

Generally when they had a difficult time with another child it could be difficult to join meals.



**What do you like and dislike about eating around the table with everybody?**

Finding a **time to eat that suits everybody** can be difficult. Many of the young people felt that the set mealtimes could be too strict and that they could also get in the way of other things that were important to them.

**“Sometimes like if I’m in a mood and that, I don’t like talking to anybody.” (Demi, 15)**

**“Cause sometimes you feel like there’s not a space for everybody, you know, or like somebody’s always in your face.” (Matt, 15)**

**“The only thing I could really say I don’t like, nothing about the food itself, it’s just you can’t eat it through in the living room and it would be better if the kitchen was just open for whatever time. Sometimes when teatime comes, I don’t feel really hungry so I don’t eat anything and then when it comes to about nine o’clock the kitchen is shut and you’re starving and you end up getting a wee bit of toast. It would just be better, if it was open all the time.” (Alex, 15)**

## **MEALTIMES CAN BE DIFFICULT TO GET RIGHT FOR EVERYBODY**

**HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT JOINING MEALTIMES CAN CHANGE ALL THE TIME**

If they were in a bad mood, sitting at the table could just turn them into a **“maniac”** or make them **“bite somebody else’s head off”**.



Ever been nasty to somebody at the table?  
Could there be other things troubling you?  
Can staff do anything to help you at mealtimes?

# MEALS

Many of the young people felt that a good mealtime is when:

**“Everybody’s like just having a laugh and just talking about things” (Abbey, 12)**

Meals in a residential home can be loud in a good way and in a bad way

**☛ SOME OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE THOUGHT THAT GETTING AN OPPORTUNITY TO TALK ABOUT YOUR DAY WAS GOOD, WHILE OTHERS POINTED OUT THAT BEING ASKED QUESTIONS CAN PUT YOU OFF TALKING.**

**“It’s better because then I can enjoy my tea and everybody else’s chitter chat and chit chat.” (Callum, 10)**

**“If you’re just sitting around the table and all you talk about is how your day was, like “Aye, it was fine.” “How was yours?” “Aye, fine.” “Alright.” That would just be boring. But if you’ve got banter in between, it’s a right laugh.”**

**(Melanie, 16)**

Some young people preferred to just eat and stay quiet.

In one of the care homes the young people felt that it was fun to listen to the staff’s stories and their debates with each other about everything and anything. However, they didn’t like it when certain people started to **take over** the conversation.

For a good mealtime it was important that everybody got to have a say



**How do you like mealtimes to be ?**



Staff keep going on  
at you “Eat more!”  
(Thomas, 12)

*Several young people felt that chatting around the table during mealtimes was one of the best ways to get to know everybody; but it could take some time to get used to people expecting you to behave in a certain way during a meal. There can be lots of rules.*



## **RULES FOR SNACKS, EATING AT THE TABLE, MANNERS... WHAT ARE THEY ON ABOUT?**

Not having embarrassing things said to you in front of others, for example about your manners or your behaviour, was important to a number of young people. Some felt they were always getting picked on by staff.

**☛ THE MAJORITY OF THE YOUNG PEOPLE FELT IT WAS IMPORTANT TO LEARN SOME MANNERS. HOWEVER, WHEN THERE ARE TOO MANY THINGS EXPECTED OF YOU IT CAN MAKE YOU NOT WANT TO JOIN MEALS.**



What is it like for you? Does anybody else know what changed for you or how you feel about things?

“I think the longer I was here the more comfortable it was sitting around a table. If you had something to say you wouldn’t speak with your mouth open.”  
(Colin, 18)

Several of the young people appreciated that staff made sure that everybody got things done when they should. It made it easier for young people to go to school, college or work because they got their sleep, were well fed and healthy. When the staff made sure every young person had regular cooked meals that was because they cared about them.

**☞ FOOD AND THE THINGS PEOPLE DO WITH IT CAN BE ABOUT SHOWING THAT YOU CARE**



There are other ways in which food could make you feel like somebody cares about you. Almost all the young people thought that it is a nice thing when somebody:

- asks you what you would like to eat
- cooks you your tea
- offers you an alternative when you don't like the main meal
- or makes you a snack between mealtimes

The young people said that it also made them feel happy when a member of staff made something especially for them, like a special lunch box, a supper tray that's like a "picnic", their favourite lunch, or bringing back sticky toffee pudding for them from the supermarket.

**"They're all making sure that everybody gets a set meal at an appropriate time, like 8 o'clock breakfast, 12 o'clock lunch and 5 o'clock dinner. 'Cause I've been out with young people and done overnights, and their mother says "Oh I'm just gonnae get ma dinner now" and it's been half past nine at night, you know. So I think it's kind of well organised here, you know, no-one's like having meals before they go to bed and that." (Colin, 18)**

## **FOOD AND CARING**

**☞ REMEMBERING HOW SOMEBODY LIKES THEIR TOAST OR THEIR CUP OF TEA COULD BE A SIGN THAT THEY CARE.**

# FOOD AND CARING

However, sometimes as one of the boys said, it would be better if the staff showed you that they cared by telling you directly and by rewarding you with letting you do more of the things you want rather than giving you a food treat to say 'well done'.

Here are a few things the young people said they did to show that they care:

**"We offer to make each other toast and tea" (Matt, 15)**

**"Not just saying, "Oh that looks disgusting," or something, like just turn round and at least taste it." (Abbey, 12)**

**"There's no point me saying to the cook "I want this" and then when it's coming through "Oh, I'm away out." (Matt, 15)**

***"If I make something I say "Do any of you want one" (Carrie Ann, 15)***

***"Don't treat the cook like he is your slave. He doesn't need to cook for you." (Carrie Ann, 15)***

Several of the young people said they preferred to make something to eat for somebody else than for themselves. They weren't sure why that is though...



What makes you feel like the staff care about you?  
What do you do to show somebody that you care?



Mmm interesting!? What do you think?

# FOOD AND YOUR MOOD

How you feel and what your mood is like can make you eat in different ways  
Young people said all of these can happen:



## Good Mood

“I just eat anything”  
without complaining

## Trouble, Worry & Boredom

When you have got a  
lot of stuff on the worst  
thing can be eating with  
everybody around the  
table

When I am worried or bored “I stuff my  
face with biscuits, crisps and a lot of  
rubbish”

I feel like food “gives you something  
to do” when you are ‘grounded’ and  
“stops you from thinking”.

## Bust Ups and Dust Ups

When you are angry  
you may say nasty  
things about some-  
one’s food.

Food can help say  
sorry to somebody. You  
can say “Do you want a  
brew?”



## Bad mood

“I don’t like this”  
“I don’t like that”!

Turn into a “maniac” or  
“psycho” at the table

“If somebody annoys  
me I’ll just go and eat”



## Guilt

When you have not left any food for  
other people, it can make you feel  
guilty.

When somebody made something  
especially for you and you don’t like  
it.

When you eat something fattening.



When you are feeling happy, excited, sad, down, bored – do you eat differently from usual? Next time you notice that you say something nasty about the food somebody offers you or you suddenly don't feel hungry or you could just eat and eat and eat, take a moment to think - 'how do I feel'?

Looking at how people eat can sometimes tell you quite a bit about how they feel inside even if they try and hide it. Can you talk to staff or other young people about how you feel instead of 'letting it eat away at you'? And when you notice that staff or a young person have stopped eating or suddenly want to eat lots is there anything you could do to check they are ok?

The young people who spoke to us said what was important to them about this booklet was that you realise **you are not the only one who feels like this about eating and other things around food in care but everybody goes through it**. There are things that may happen around food for you and other people that you may not notice until somebody asks you about it.

**A FINAL TIP FROM US: TELL YOUR STAFF WHEN THEY ARE DOING SOMETHING WELL OR ARE GETTING IT RIGHT IN RELATION TO FOOD!**

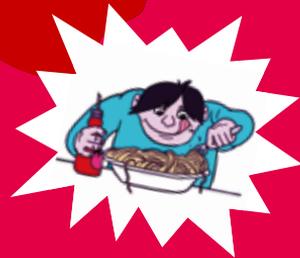


We hope that reading this booklet has been helpful in encouraging you to talk to other people about your worries, your questions, or your annoyances around food. A good person to talk to is also your **keyworker** or your **Who Cares Scotland? Worker**. If you don't want to talk to anybody directly here is the free number for **Childline**:

 **0800 1111**

**We hope you have enjoyed reading what young people in care had to say about food!**

Thank you to all the young people who helped prepare this leaflet and who took part in the research.



**Research Project:**

*Food Practices in Residential Care*

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