

## **Why new school food standards could leave children with SEND hungry at school**

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## **Why the new school food standards could leave children with SEND hungry at school**

To support accessibility and processing, the commonly used term 'SEND child' is used throughout this post. Please note that a preferable term is 'child that attracts the label of SEND.'

The government's proposed overhaul of the School Food Standards (the first in over a decade) has been broadly welcomed. Banning deep-fried food, removing ice cream and high-sugar drinks, and requiring schools to serve more fruit, vegetables, wholegrains and pulses seems like a significant step forward for children's health. With one in three children leaving primary school overweight or obese, and tooth decay one of the leading causes of hospital admission for children aged five to nine, something needed to change.

But a crucial question is going largely unasked: what happens to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) for whom many of the newly mandated foods are not just unfamiliar, but potentially intolerable? For many SEND children and, particularly those that are autistic, those with sensory processing differences, ADHD, Pathological Demand Avoidance, or Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder (ARFID), eating is not a matter of habit or preference. It is determined by differences with their sensory and cognitive processing system. Research consistently shows that between 70% and 80% of autistic children experience significant eating difficulties, including highly restricted variety of foods, food refusal, and acute sensitivity to texture, colour, smell, and temperature. These are not habits to be overcome with gentle encouragement from lunchtime supervision staff. Sensory hyper and hypo-sensitivities are formally recognised in the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria for autism and effect an estimated 69% to 95% of autistic individuals across their lifespan. What this means in practice is that a meal like a roasted chickpea and vegetable wrap, one of the sample dishes mentioned in the government's consultation, may present a genuinely insurmountable combination of unfamiliar textures, smells, and visual cues for a child with significant sensory differences. A child's refusal to eat it is not wilful disobedience; it is biological and neurological difference.

The new standards propose to remove or sharply restrict precisely the foods that many SEND children currently rely on to eat. Plain pasta, chips, sausage rolls, and familiar desserts are not nutritional ideals, but for a child with a highly restricted diet, they may represent the only tolerated options in a school setting. When those options disappear, the likely outcome is not a SEND child expanding their palette; it is a SEND child who stops eating at school.

When a SEND child goes without lunch, the effects compound across the school day. Many already struggle with executive function, emotional regulation, and sensory overload in a school environment that is challenging. Both the food and the consistency of mealtimes can often be an opportunity to recover. For autistic children in particular, the school lunch hall is already one of the most challenging environments in the building. Removing familiar, tolerated food can tip an already difficult lunchtime into crisis increasing the risk of burnout, anxiety, and ultimately school refusal.

This strategy follows a familiar pattern in SEND policy making: a well-intended idea is developed around the “average” child, with insufficient consideration of those who fall outside that norm. There is no clear guidance on how mainstream schools should make individualised adjustments for SEND pupils, and no indication that funding will follow to make such adjustments feasible. The Equality Act 2010 requires schools to make reasonable adjustments for disabled pupils, but as any SEND parent knows, the gap between legal obligation and lived reality can be wide.

None of this is an argument against improving school food. Better nutrition matters, and the broader ambitions of this reform expanding free school meals and introducing breakfast clubs are genuinely positive. But good policy does not design for the median child and hope the rest will cope. Before these standards are finalised, the government's consultation which is open until 12 June 2026 must actively engage with SEND families, not as an afterthought but as a priority. Clear, funded guidance on individual adjustments must be issued to schools. And the new monitoring regime must track SEND pupil participation in school meals specifically.

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