

Frequently Asked Questions by Parents on Free Early Education Places for 2, 3 and 4 Year Olds

Introduction

Free Early Education for any individual child is governed by three factors:

1. What the DfE Statutory Guidance allows and how this is administered in Kent
2. What the provider is offering
3. What parents want

1. What is Free Early Education?

Your child is entitled to a maximum of 570 hours Free Early Education per year. This can be taken in a pattern of up to 15 hours per week for 38 weeks a year. However to meet parental need, some providers may offer 12 hours per week for 48 weeks up to a maximum of 570 hours. This can be taken over a minimum of 2 days with no session being shorter than 2.5 hours per day or longer than 10 hours per day. It can be taken between the hours of 7am and 7pm.

2. How will I know what is being offered?

The provider will set out how and when they will offer their Free Early Education. There will be many different patterns of offers and you will need to check with each provider that their offer suits your needs.

The scheme is optional for parents and providers, but providers who choose to deliver Free Early Education must be registered with Kent County Council.

3. When is my child eligible to receive Free Early Education?

A child is eligible for Free Early Education in line with the Department for Education (DfE) table below:

Please be aware that 2 year old children must meet additional criteria, as the offer is not universal for 2 year olds. Full details of the criteria are available from: -

<http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/childcare-and-pre-school/paying-for-childcare/free-childcare-for-2-year-olds>

A child born on or between	Will become eligible for a free place from
1 April and 31 August	Start of the Autumn academic period (terms 1 & 2) in September following their second or third birthday
1 September and 31 December	Start of the Spring academic period (terms 3 & 4) in January following their second or third birthday
1 January and 31 March	Start of the Summer academic period (terms 5&6) in April following their second or third birthday

Three and four year old children must attend during the Kent designated headcount week to be able to claim Free Early Education for that academic period. Late joiners can claim their Free Early Education providing they meet one of the two following criteria:

1. A child moving to Kent from another local authority after headcount week
2. A child has not claimed at another setting in Kent during that academic period

There is currently no designated headcount week for 2 year old children so **eligible** 2 year olds can currently take up their free place at any time during the academic period.

4. Is Free Early Education available all year?

No – in Kent, Free Early Education can be claimed over 38 weeks usually in line with the KCC term dates. Your provider will explain to you when their free early education pattern is available. Where providers choose to stretch the funding this can be claimed over 48 weeks to a maximum of 570 hours per year.

Currently, Free Early Education operates within the context of three academic periods a year:

Autumn (terms 1 & 2)	September to December
Spring (terms 3 & 4)	January to March
Summer (terms 5 & 6)	April to July

Where a child attends a setting for more weeks than those funded, the additional hours will attract a charge.

5. Who is the funding paid to and how?

Payment is made directly by KCC into the provider's bank account for the hours claimed by that provider for each child. There is no monetary value to you – the entitlement is up to 570 hours free per year. The year starts when your child first becomes eligible for funding.

6. Can I be charged any fee for my child's Free Early Education?

No – you cannot be charged any kind of “top up” fee for any part of Free Early Education – it must be free at the point of delivery and providers should not impose any fee or charge.

Fees for any additional time are a private matter between you and a provider although your provider must let you know the cost before you take up the additional time.

7. Can I choose when my child attends their Free Early Education?

No – you need to take your Free Early Education in line with the patterns offered by the providers. Any additional time that you may require will need to be arranged with the provider.

8. I use a childminder. Will I be able to claim my Free Early Education?

Yes – but only if your childminder is registered directly with Kent County Council, or through a childminding agency that is registered with Kent County Council. You can search for childminders registered to offer Free Early Education by following this link: <http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/childcare-and-pre-school/advice-about-childcare>

9. Can providers charge what they like for any additional time after the free hours and/or for any optional services?

Yes – but you must ask your provider what these charges are before you accept additional time/optional services. Any additional time/optional services provided can only be charged for outside of Free Early Education – any additional services provided during the Free Early Education period may not be charged to you on a compulsory basis.

10. What do I do if I think I am being charged “top up” fees?

If you believe that you are not receiving your full Free Early Education and a top up fee is being charged, you will need to provide evidence to the CFIS (preferably in writing) to

support your concern. The CFIS will carry out an investigation and ask providers to explain their fee structure in order to determine whether a top up fee has been charged. If your concerns are upheld, the provider will be given the opportunity to rectify the situation before any action is taken.

11. Can Free Early Education cover the lunch period?

A provider may choose to include lunch as part of Free Early Education where this is delivered as part of a learning experience. In these circumstances you cannot be charged for the lunch period, although providers can ask for payment for meals. However you should be allowed to provide your own meals where appropriate storage is available. You will need to check this facility is available from your provider prior to taking up your place.

12. Can a child claim 10 hours Free Early Education in one day?

Yes – but you will need to check with your provider the pattern they are offering as they may offer their free early education in 3 or 5 hour blocks.

13. If the academic periods starts and ends mid week, is the part week covered by Free Early Education?

No - Kent pays only complete weeks although a week can be from Tuesday to Monday or Wednesday to Tuesday etc.

14. Will receiving Free Early Education affect my Working Tax Credits or the childcare element of Working Tax Credit?

No – it does not affect Working Tax Credit and it does not affect the childcare element of Working Tax Credit, although you cannot claim for the hours your child receives the Free Early Education. These hours must be deducted from the total amount of childcare hours claimed. Important - if you are applying for a free 2 year old place because you are in receipt of Child Tax Credit and/or Working Tax Credit, it is the annual gross **household** income that must be under £16,190 per year.

15. What is Working Tax Credit based on?

Working Tax Credit is based on HMRC's assessment of earnings under the previous tax year. It is not based on what someone thinks they might earn for the forthcoming year.

16. As a parent accessing Care to Learn funding, can I also access Free Early Education for 3 and 4 year olds and eligible 2 year olds?

Yes – if you are accessing Care to Learn funding you must inform Care to Learn that your child is accessing a funded place, so any additional hours over and above their free early education can be funded.

17. I am currently paying for childcare for my 2 year old and claiming tax credits as a result. However, I now meet the criteria for a free 2 year old place. What should I do?

Families who are in receipt of child tax credits, who then become eligible for a free 2 year old place, must inform HMRC. Families must tell the Tax Credit Office within one month if:

1. They normally pay fixed weekly childcare costs and the actual costs go down by £10 a week or more – and the change applies in each week for 4 weeks in a row.
2. They pay the same amount every month or different amounts for childcare at different times, for example, you pay more in the school holidays than you do during term time and your new average weekly costs go down by £10 or more.
3. They stop paying childcare costs.

It is important that families advise HMRC/Tax Credits within one month. If they do not, they may build up an overpayment which they have to pay back. They might also have to pay a penalty of up to £300.

18. As a parent of a 2 year old, what happens if my financial circumstances change after I have been confirmed eligible for a free place?

Once you have been confirmed eligible, the funding will remain in place until your child takes up their 3 year old funding.

19. What happens when a provider cannot open for 38 weeks per year?

Providers must explain to you that they will not be able to offer Free Early Education for 38 weeks per year. If you wish your child to attend a provider that is open for, say, only 36 weeks, that is entirely your choice.

If you choose to use a provider who is open for less than 38 weeks, the local authority is not under any obligation to offer the rest of your child's Free Early Education elsewhere.

20. I want to use two providers – can Free Early Education be divided?

Yes – to the maximum of 15 hours per week between the two providers.

21. Can I access just the 15 hours Free Early Education?

Yes – but the provider will explain their availability of a totally free place and their pattern of offer to you, as this may not suit your needs. A provider who is open for 15 hours must offer 15 hours of Free Early Education per week, subject to availability, but how and when this offer is available will be explained in the provider's offer pattern. However where a provider cannot open the full 15 hours per week, they are still able to register to offer Free Early Education, as parents can access their remaining hours at another provision.

22. Can I choose my Free Early Education pattern with a provider?

No – providers will explain their pattern on offer and availability to you. If a particular provider's pattern of offer and availability does not suit your needs, please look for alternatives by following this link:

<http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/childcare-and-pre-school/advice-about-childcare>

If you are still unable to find what you need please e-mail the Kent Children and Families Information Service (CFIS) on kentcfis@kent.gov.uk

23. Will I have to complete and sign paperwork when requesting my Free Early Education hours?

Yes – a provider must ask you to sign a Parental Declaration Form showing the number of weekly hours you wish to claim. Additionally, parents of 2 year olds will need to complete an application form to find out if their child is eligible for the 2 year old funding.

24. Can my child attend a nursery class in a KCC school/academy and a Private/Voluntary provision, and split Free Early Education between the two?

Yes - the 15 hours Free Early Education may be split between a nursery class in a KCC school/academy and a Private/Voluntary provision.

25. Can funded sessions be increased after headcount week?

Yes – for 2 year olds.

No – for 3 & 4 year olds. Claims are based on the headcount week for the whole of the academic period (Autumn, Spring, Summer). Your provider will give you these dates.

26. Can I increase my Free Early Education hours in the middle of an academic period, if I have not claimed the maximum 15 hours?

Yes – for 2 year olds.

No - for 3 & 4 year olds. Free Early Education hours are set in the headcount week and parent/carers would have to pay for any increase prior to the start of the next academic period (Autumn, Spring, Summer).

27. Can I change my provider part way through an academic period and continue to receive Free Early Education?

No – funding is paid to a provider for the whole of the academic period (Autumn, Spring, Summer). If you choose to change provider during this period you will have to pay your new provider until the start of the next academic period. In exceptional circumstances an appeals process is in place for parents, and all enquiries should be directed to CFIS.

28. My child is due to start a maintained school/academy reception class but will not be full time straight away. Can I still claim Free Early Education?

No – if a child is registered in a maintained school/academy reception class, the child is funded through the main schools budget and would not be able to claim Free Early Education.

29. Although my child has been offered a place in reception I am choosing to defer this. Will I be able to claim Free Early Education at my childcare provider?

Yes - provided your child is within the date of birth range for the term and has not accessed a school place.

30. What do I do now?

1. Contact the Kent Children & Families Information Service (CFIS) if you require a list of KCC registered providers who offer Free Early Education in your area.
2. Contact / visit some providers who you are interested in to discuss their pattern of offer and availability.
3. When you go to the provider to complete your paperwork please ensure you take your child's birth certificate, and if you are applying for a free 2 year old place you will also need to take
 - the date of birth and national insurance number of the person claiming the benefit in the household if you are applying under the economic criteria, or
 - proof of Disability Living Allowance for your 2 year old (this should be the most recent Awards Notice) if you are applying under the special educational needs / care and adoption criteria.

This is to confirm your eligibility.

For further information and to find out details of childcare providers who are registered to offer Free Early Education please follow this link:

<http://www.kent.gov.uk/education-and-children/childcare-and-pre-school/advice-about-childcare>

Alternatively you can contact the Kent Children & Families Information Service by email at kentcfis@kent.gov.uk

Or by calling 03000 41 23 23

Please note that calls can only be taken in English