



Position Statement
The Missing Milestone: Why Feeding Development
Belongs in the Personal Child Health Record ("Red Book")

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By: The Feeding Trust (transitioning to *The Children's F.E.D. Foundation*)

Executive Summary

We are calling for feeding development to be recognised within the UK Personal Child Health Record ("Red Book") as a fundamental component of child development.

The Red Book is a powerful public health tool. It helps parents, health visitors and healthcare professionals monitor developmental milestones, identify concerns early, and access support when needed. Communication, vision, hearing, mobility and social development are all recognised. Feeding development is not.

Yet learning to eat is one of the most complex developmental achievements of early childhood. Feeding development involves the acquisition of motor, sensory, behavioural, cognitive and social skills that enable children to eat safely, nutritiously and independently. When feeding development does not progress as expected, the consequences can extend beyond nutrition to participation, learning, wellbeing, family life and long-term health outcomes.

Our position is simple:

If feeding development matters to child health, participation and development, it should be visible within the Red Book.

Why This Matters

Current systems often identify feeding difficulties only after problems have become entrenched. Families are frequently advised to adopt a "wait and see" approach, despite growing evidence that early identification and early support lead to better developmental outcomes.

The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention's **Learn the Signs. Act Early.** programme explicitly advises families and professionals not to wait if developmental concerns arise. Parents are encouraged to discuss concerns promptly because early identification creates opportunities for earlier support and intervention.



We believe the same principle should apply to feeding development. Children should not have to reach crisis point before feeding differences are recognised.

Feeding Development Through the Lens of the F-Words

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) and the "F-Words for Childhood Disability" framework provide a useful lens through which to understand feeding development.

Function

Eating is a functional life skill.

Children learn to accept new foods, chew, drink, self-feed, regulate appetite, participate in mealtimes and develop independence. These skills do not emerge automatically for every child and may require support and adaptation.

Family

Feeding difficulties affect entire families.

Parents frequently report stress, anxiety, social isolation and significant emotional burden associated with supporting a child who experiences feeding difficulties. Earlier recognition creates opportunities to support both children and families before difficulties escalate.

Fitness

Nutrition is fundamental to growth, health and development.

Feeding development is the mechanism through which children gain access to nutrition. Food availability alone is insufficient if a child lacks the skills, confidence or support needed to eat.

Friends

Eating is a social activity.

Children develop friendships, social confidence and a sense of belonging through shared food experiences. Feeding difficulties can limit participation in nursery, school and community activities.

Fun

Food should be explored, enjoyed and experienced.

Positive early experiences support curiosity, confidence and participation. Feeding development is about much more than calories and nutrients; it is about enabling children to engage with the world around them.

Future

Early feeding experiences influence lifelong outcomes.

Research increasingly highlights links between nutrition, health and educational attainment. A recent study examining social determinants of nutrition and academic performance concluded that nutritional factors and educational



outcomes are closely interconnected across childhood and adolescence (Vargas Olalla et al., 2026).

What the Evidence Tells Us

Feeding difficulties are common. Published reviews suggest feeding difficulties affect approximately 25-45% of typically developing children and up to 80% of children with developmental disabilities.

Recent guidance from Swanson and colleagues (2025) describes learning to eat as a developmental process that depends upon supportive environments, responsive caregiving, repeated opportunities for practice and participation. Learning to eat is therefore not simply a nutritional issue; it is a developmental one.

Our own published research found that every child within a clinical cohort meeting diagnostic criteria for Paediatric Feeding Disorder demonstrated feeding-skill deficits that affected their ability to learn to eat effectively. Twenty per cent also presented with nutritional deficiencies.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that feeding development is both measurable and meaningful, yet current developmental monitoring systems rarely acknowledge it explicitly.

Our Recommendation

The Children's F.E.D. Foundation is calling for feeding development to be incorporated into future editions of the Personal Child Health Record ("Red Book"). This should include:

- Age-informed feeding development milestones.
- Information for families about typical feeding development.
- Guidance on when feeding development may not be progressing as expected.
- Signposting to discussions with health visitors, GPs and relevant professionals.
- Recognition that feeding development includes participation, confidence, skill acquisition and mealtime experiences, not simply growth or nutritional status.



The Missing Milestone

The Red Book has transformed early identification by helping families and professionals recognise developmental differences sooner. Feeding development deserves the same recognition. By making feeding development visible from the very beginning, more children can access the nutrition, learning and participation opportunities they need to thrive, with earlier identification helping to prevent avoidable crisis and escalation.

Learning to eat is a developmental milestone. It is time for the Red Book to recognise it as one.

From October 2026, The Feeding Trust will transition to **The Children's F.E.D. Foundation**. Drawing on experience working in partnership with parents and schools and grounded in clinical expertise and an established evidence base, the Foundation's mission is to build national capability through education and training, advocacy and awareness, research, and a community-based digital platform for schools, families, and practitioners.

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Signed on behalf of the Trustees

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'NR.' with a stylized flourish.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Melissa Bujtor' in a cursive style.

The Feeding Trust

Natalie Raven Morris (Founder & CEO) and Dr Melissa Bujtor (Board Member)

Key references

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