Food for Growing Minds: A Practical Nutrition Guide for Parents

Recipes: Dinner Ideas

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Foreward

Evening time is often when routines get tested: tired minds, sports training, homework battles, and the universal question - what's for dinner? This section brings calm to the chaos, drawing from our Back to School guide's 3-Part Plate approach:

½ Colourful Vegetables, ¼ Protein, ¼ Wholegrain or Starchy Carbohydrate

These meals are made for real homes, real schedules, and real kids. They're freezer-friendly, easy to batch cook, and filled with familiar flavours that support growth, sleep, recovery, and mood. They also bring in practical ingredients that reflect our smart shopping tips, from pantry pulses to freezer vegetables, helping keep dinners budget-friendly and stress-free.

Recipes that follow the 3-part plate:

- **Sweet Potato & Chickpea Coconut Curry** – Full of fibre, vitamin A, and plant-based protein, this one-pot wonder supports immunity and gut health, and the coconut milk adds comforting creaminess.
- **Soy & Ginger Noodle Stir-Fry with Chicken & Veg** – A speedy dinner that combines lean protein, wholewheat noodles, and colourful veg for a satisfying, well-balanced meal.
- **Cheesy Baked Potato Boats with Beans & Corn** – Kids love the fun format, and the filling offers fibre, protein, and colour in every bite.
- **Oven-Baked Turkey Burgers with Hidden Veg** – A dinner that works for toddlers and teens alike - packed with protein, iron, and hidden veg, it's a freezer winner and encourages hands-on assembling at the table.
- **Lemon & Herb Fish Traybake** – Great for introducing oily fish and fresh herbs, this dish brings in brain-boosting fats and vitamin D, both mentioned in our nutrient reference chart.

Many of these ideas were selected with weeknight practicality in mind - options like stir-fries, traybakes, and air fryer dishes support busy households. We've also highlighted "Fakeaway" meals, a core part of our guide's recommendation to offer familiar favourites in healthier, homemade formats.

– from the Sodexo Irish Culinary Team

Meet the Team

Niall Hill

Sodexo Ireland Head of Food

Niall has over 30 years' experience working as a chef at the highest levels both nationally and internationally, across a variety of sectors. As head of food at the award-wining food company The Butler's Pantry for 16 years, Niall won numerous awards including the Great Taste Awards, Small Business Award and Blas na hEireann. In addition to having a huge passion for quality local and Irish ingredients, Niall has an MSc in Applied Culinary Nutrition and a BA in Botanical Cuisine and has completed a postgraduate in Sustainability Leadership in Business.

Niall combines knowledge and passion with a highly strategic and practical approach to drive the highest food quality and delivery on an ethos of local, seasonal, nutritious, and sustainable food. Niall joined Sodexo as Head of Food for the Island of Ireland in February of this year and will be actively involved in the development & implementation of food offers & marketing initiatives, while driving a culture of excellence in food service delivery across the Island of Ireland.

John Core

Culinary Nutrition Lead

John Core serves as the Culinary Nutrition Lead for Sodexo, bringing over 25 years of professional culinary experience to the role. He holds a Master of Science degree in Applied Culinary Nutrition and utilizes his extensive academic and practical expertise to create dishes that are both delicious and nutritionally balanced for Sodexo's clientele. John delivers promotional pop-up restaurant concepts, culinary based nutrition seminars and one to one clinics for Sodexo client catering program.

Recently, in recognition of his contributions to the field of culinary nutrition, John was honoured with the Paula Mee Applied Culinary Nutrition Award.

Glen Stewart

Mobilisation Catering SME / Regional Development Chef

Glen has nearly 30 years' experience as a chef. Working through the years in Switzerland and Austria as well as in a number of seafood restaurants, hotels and gastro pubs between England and Ireland, he joined Sodexo nearly 13 years ago.

Glen has won several awards in competition and still maintains a passion for French cookery, as well as making novelty and formal celebration cakes in his spare time.

Cathy Adamson

Craft Development Chef

Cathy has been working with Sodexo for 30 years in various sectors of the business and has spent many years being an active member within the UK&I Culinary teams. Cathy has also spent time working with world class chefs & competing at National level to obtain several awards and accolades.

Cathy is committed to developing the culinary talents within our teams and is actively involved with the Northen Ireland Schools Programmes such as 'Future Chef' to encourage young people into the business. Cathy has a real passion for food and loves working with a product or dishes to obtain the best possible flavours, whilst maximising quality.

David Sayce

Regional Development Chef

Chef David Sayce is a seasoned professional with over 25 years of experience in the culinary industry. His career has spanned a wide range of roles, with a significant focus on 5-star hotels and fine dining restaurants.

One of the greatest privileges of his career has been the opportunity to combine his passion for food with travel. His work has taken him across the globe, including stints in Austria, South Africa, Australia, and Hong Kong, where he expanded his culinary repertoire and embraced new cultural influences.

For nearly two years, Chef Sayce has been part of the Sodexo team, initially serving as a hospitality chef for private corporate events, including luncheons and dinners. Over the past eight months, he has taken on the role of Regional Development Chef, a position that has brought new and exciting challenges. He enjoys finding innovative solutions while supporting his district, striving to help and contribute wherever possible.

Gordon Carberry

Regional Development Chef

Gordon Carberry, currently a Craft Development Chef with Sodexo, brings a wealth of experience and passion to his role. Since joining Sodexo as Head Chef in 2022, Gordon has made a significant impact through his dedication to culinary excellence. He is actively involved in the competitive cooking scene, participating in prestigious events such as CATEX, the Culinary Olympics, IFEX in Belfast, and HRC in London.

With a background rooted in the high standards of Michelin-starred kitchens, Gordon's expertise spans fine dining, comfort food, and everything in between. His deep understanding of both refined techniques and hearty, approachable dishes allows him to craft memorable culinary experiences. As a proud member of the Panel of Chefs Ireland, Gordon continually seeks to elevate his craft, blending creativity with the rich traditions of Irish cuisine.

Sweet Potato & Chickpea Coconut Curry

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: 25 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2 Sweet potatoes (peeled & cubed)
- 400g Tinned chickpeas (drained)
- 400ml Coconut milk
- 400g Tinned chopped tomatoes
- 2 cloves Garlic (crushed)
- 1 tbsp Curry powder
- 2 handfuls Baby spinach
- 1 tbsp Olive oil
- Salt & pepper (to taste)

Method:

Heat oil in a large saucepan.
Add garlic and curry powder and cook for 1 minute. Stir in sweet potatoes, chickpeas, tomatoes, and coconut milk. Simmer for 20–25 minutes until the sweet potato is tender. Stir in spinach and season to taste.

Tips:

• Serve with brown rice or flatbreads.

• Leftovers are ideal for lunchboxes or freezing.

• Let children sprinkle on toppings like toasted coconut or chopped herbs.

Baked Turkey & Veggie Pasta Shells

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cook Time: 25 minutes

Ingredients:

- 250g Large pasta shells
- 400g Turkey mince
- 1 medium Courgette (grated)
- 1 medium Carrot (grated)
- 400ml Tomato passata
- 1 clove Garlic (minced)
- 1 tbsp Olive oil
- 50g Grated mozzarella

Method:

Preheat oven to 200°C (fan). Sauté garlic, turkey mince, courgette, and carrot until the mince is browned. Add passata and simmer for 10 minutes. Boil pasta shells until al dente, then stuff with the turkey mix and place into a baking dish. Top with cheese and bake for 15–20 minutes.

Tips:

- Swap turkey for beef or lentils.
- Get kids to help stuff the pasta shells.
- Great for batch cooking and freezing.

Lemon & Herb Fish Traybake

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: 25 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 White fish fillets
- 400g Baby potatoes (halved)
- 1 Red pepper (sliced)
- 200g Green beans
- 1 tbsp Olive oil
- 1 Lemon (sliced)
- 1 tbsp Fresh parsley (chopped)
- Salt & pepper (to taste)

Method:

Preheat oven to 200°C. Toss potatoes, peppers, and green beans in oil, season and roast for 15 minutes. Add fish fillets and lemon slices to the tray and return to the oven for 10 minutes or until the fish flakes easily. Sprinkle with parsley before serving.

Tips:

• Serve with a yoghurt and dill dip.

• Use frozen fish fillets if needed.

• Swap beans for asparagus or tenderstem broccoli.

Soy & Ginger Noodle Stir-Fry with Chicken & Veg

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cook Time: 15 minutes

Ingredients:

- 250g Dried wholewheat noodles
- 2 Chicken breast (sliced)
- 1 Carrot (matchsticks)
- 1 Red pepper (sliced)
- 150g Broccoli (small florets)
- 2 cloves Garlic (crushed)
- 1 tbsp Fresh ginger (grated)
- 3 tbsp Soy sauce (reduced salt)
- 1 tbsp Honey
- 1 tbsp Sesame oil
- 1 Lime (juiced)

Method:

Cook the noodles according to pack instructions and set aside. In a large wok or frying pan, heat sesame oil and cook garlic, ginger, and chicken until browned. Add the vegetables and stir-fry for 5 - 7 minutes. Stir in soy sauce, honey and lime juice. Toss in the noodles and mix until everything is heated through and coated.

Tips:

• Let kids choose their veg - courgette, sugar snaps or baby corn work well too.

• Vegetarian version: use tofu or scrambled egg instead of chicken.

Cheesy Baked Potato Boats with Beans & Corn

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: 1 hour (bake time)

Ingredients:

- 4 Large baking potatoes
- 400g Tinned baked beans
- 150g Sweetcorn (drained)
- 100g Grated cheddar cheese
- 2 Spring onions (sliced)
- 1 tsp Olive oil

Method:

Preheat the oven to 200°C. Prick the potatoes and rub with oil and a little salt. Bake for about 1 hour until fluffy. Halve and scoop out some of the centre into a bowl. Mix the potato flesh with beans, sweetcorn, half the cheese, and spring onion. Fill the skins with the mix, top with the remaining cheese, and return to the oven for 10 minutes to melt and bubble.

Tips:

- Add leftover chicken or tuna to the mix for extra protein.
- Serve with a side of steamed broccoli or salad.

Oven-Baked Turkey Burgers with Hidden Veg

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cook Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 500g Turkey mince
- 1/2 medium Grated courgette
- 1 small Grated carrot
- 1 clove Garlic (crushed)
- 1 tsp Dried oregano
- 1 Egg
- 50g Wholemeal breadcrumbs
- Salt & pepper (to taste)
- 4 Burger buns (wholemeal)
- Toppings (lettuce, tomato, yoghurt sauce) as preferred

Method:

Preheat the oven to 200°C. Mix all ingredients (except buns and toppings) in a bowl. Form into four patties and place on a lined baking tray. Bake for 20 minutes, flipping halfway, until golden and cooked through. Serve in buns with salad and a spoon of yoghurt or relish.

Tips:

- Freeze raw patties between baking paper for future use.
- Let kids build their own burgers at the table.

Air Fryer Chicken & Veggie Tray Bake

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 20 minutes
Cook Time: 20 minutes

Ingredients:

- 4 Chicken thighs
- 2 Carrots (medium)
- 1 Red pepper
- 1 Courgette
- 1 Red onion
- 1 Sweet potato
- 1 tbsp Olive oil
- 1 tsp Garlic powder
- 1 tsp Smoked paprika
- 1 tsp Salt & pepper
- 400g Long grain rice

Method:

Chop all the vegetables and chicken into even pieces. Let the kids wash and help chop the softer veg with supervision. In a large bowl, toss everything together with olive oil, garlic powder, smoked paprika, salt and pepper - hands-on mixing encouraged! Load the mixture into your air fryer baskets (you may need to split into two batches). Set the air fryer to 180°C and cook for 20 minutes, shaking halfway through. Ensure the chicken is cooked through (75°C internal temp) and the veg is soft with crispy edges. Cook the rice in a saucepan for 15 minutes until tender, then drain.

Finishing Touches

Sprinkle grated cheese over the hot chicken and veg mix once cooked and let it melt before serving over a bed of rice

Tips:

• This is a great way to clear out your veg drawer.

• Kids love helping prep and mix - just mind the spice levels.

• Works well with boneless chicken breasts or veggie sausages too.

Beef & Chorizo Ragu with Hulk Mash (Kale Mash)

Serves: 8
Prep Time: 30 minutes
Cook Time: 3 hours 30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2kg Beef shin (cut into chunks)
- 200g Diced chorizo
- 4-5 tbsp Olive oil
- 2 Onions (finely chopped)
- 3 Carrots (finely chopped)
- 4 Celery sticks (finely chopped)
- 4 Garlic cloves (sliced)
- 3 tbsp Tomato purée
- 400ml Red wine
- 2 Rosemary sprigs
- 2 Bay leaves
- 2x 400g cans Chopped tomatoes
- 500ml Beef stock
- 1.5kg Rooster potatoes (peeled)
- 300g Kale leaves (blanched)
- 250ml Cream & milk (mixed)
- Grated Parmesan (to serve)

Method:

Preheat the oven to 160°C (140°C fan) or gas mark 3. Season the beef generously. Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a large flameproof casserole and brown the beef in batches until deeply coloured, using fresh oil with each batch. Once browned, drain the beef in a colander to remove excess fat.

Wipe out the pan and add the remaining oil. Sauté the onions, carrots, celery, and garlic with a pinch of salt over low-medium heat for 8–10 minutes until softened. Stir in the tomato purée and cook for a further 3 minutes. Pour in the red wine and bring to a simmer, then add the rosemary, bay leaves, chopped tomatoes, and beef stock. Stir well, return the beef to the pot, bring back to the boil, then reduce to a simmer. Cover and transfer to the oven for 2 hours 30 minutes. Uncover, stir, and cook for another 30 minutes to thicken slightly. Use a fork to roughly shred the beef through the sauce and adjust seasoning as needed. (Tip: this ragu tastes even better the next day.)

Meanwhile, boil the potatoes until soft and pass through a ricer or fine sieve to create a smooth mash. In a small saucepan, gently heat the cream and milk until just boiling, then add the blanched kale. Blend this mixture into a vibrant green purée. Fold the kale purée into the mashed potato until fully combined. Season to taste.

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To serve:

Spoon a generous portion of the green kale mash (“Hulk mash” in our house!) into a bowl. Top with a hearty ladle of beef and chorizo ragu and finish with a sprinkle of grated Parmesan.

Tips:

- The ragu freezes brilliantly - perfect for batch cooking or easy weeknight dinners.
- For younger children, blend the kale finely into the mash for a smoother texture.
- Swap red wine for extra stock if preferred.
- Leftover ragu works well in pasta bakes or over jacket potatoes.

Chicken & Broccoli Wholemeal Pasta Bake

Serves: 6
Prep Time: 25 minutes
Cook Time: 40 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2 Garlic cloves (crushed)
- 200g Broccoli florets (blanched & chilled)
- 1/4 tsp Chilli flakes
- 2x 400g cans Chopped tomatoes
- 1 tsp Caster sugar
- 6 tbsp Mascarpone
- 4 Skinless chicken breasts (sliced into strips)
- 300g Wholemeal penne pasta
- 70g Mature cheddar (grated)
- 50g Mozzarella (grated)
- 1/2 smal bunch Fresh parsley (finely chopped)
- 3 tbsp Olive oil

Tips:

- Serves six generously - leftovers reheat well for lunch the next day.
- Let older children take charge of each component to build kitchen confidence.
- You can swap in spinach or peas if broccoli isn't on hand.
- For extra fibre, leave the skins on the broccoli stems and slice thinly to add in.

Method:

This dish is a family favourite in our Chef Davids house. Its his daughter's go-to when she takes over the kitchen—great for developing recipe confidence and essential cooking skills.

Preheat the oven to 220°C (200°C fan) or gas mark 7. Heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a large saucepan and sauté the onion over a medium heat for 10-12 minutes until softened. Add the garlic and chilli flakes, cooking for 1 minute more. Stir in the chopped tomatoes and sugar, season well, and simmer uncovered for around 20 minutes until thickened. Stir through the mascarpone to create a creamy tomato sauce.

Meanwhile, heat the remaining tablespoon of oil in a frying pan and cook the chicken strips for 5-7 minutes until fully cooked and golden. Cook the pasta according to packet instructions, then drain and toss with a drizzle of oil to prevent sticking.

In a medium ovenproof dish, combine the cooked pasta, chicken, and broccoli. Pour over the sauce and mix well to coat. Sprinkle the cheddar, mozzarella, and chopped parsley on top. Bake for 20 minutes until golden and bubbling.

One-Pot Chilli & Polenta Cobbler

Serves: 6
Prep Time: 15 minutes
Cook Time: 1 hour

Ingredients:

For the Chilli

- 2 tbsp Olive oil
- 1 Onion (finely diced)
- 2 Garlic cloves (chopped)
- 1 tsp Cumin powder
- 1 tsp Chilli powder
- 1 Green chilli (diced)
- 500g Beef mince
- 400g Tinned chopped tomatoes
- 500ml Vegetable stock
- 180g Kidney beans (drained)
- 1 tbsp Fresh coriander (chopped)

For the Cobbler Topping

- 100g Quick cook polenta
- 200g Plain flour
- 1 tbsp Baking powder
- 1 tsp Salt
- 100g Cheddar (grated)
- 1 Medium free-range egg
- 200ml Full-fat milk

Method:

Preheat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan) or gas mark 6. Heat oil in a flameproof casserole dish and sauté onion and garlic for 5 minutes. Add the cumin, chilli powder, and green chilli, stirring for a few more minutes. Add the mince, season, and fry for 5 minutes until browned. Stir in tomato paste, tinned tomatoes, and stock. Bring to the boil, reduce to a simmer, cover and cook for 45 minutes. Uncover, skim off fat, then stir in the kidney beans and coriander.

To make the cobbler, mix polenta, flour, baking powder, salt, and cheese in a bowl. Combine egg and milk, then mix into the dry ingredients. Dollop spoonfuls of the mixture around the edge of the chilli. Bake for 15 minutes until the topping is golden and risen.

Tips:

• Add sour cream or grated cheese on top before serving.

• For vegetarians, use plant-based mince or more beans.

• Avoid overmixing the cobbler dough for a lighter texture.

Bacon & Mushroom Pesto Pasta

Serves: 4
Prep Time: 30 minutes
Cook Time: 25 minutes

Ingredients:

- 400g Pasta (penne, fusilli, etc.)
- 3 tbsp Olive oil
- 250g Chestnut mushrooms (sliced)
- 8 rashers Streaky bacon (chopped)
- 4 tbsp Pesto of choice
- 200ml Crème fraîche
- Handful Basil or rocket (to garnish)
- 200g Leftover cooked vegetables (optional)
- 200g Leftover cooked chicken/ham (optional)

Method:

Cook the pasta according to pack instructions, then drain and set aside. In the same pan, heat the olive oil, add the bacon and mushrooms, and fry until browned. Stir in any leftover vegetables or meat and cook for 3-4 minutes. Lower the heat, return the pasta to the pan, and add the pesto and crème fraîche. Mix well to coat. Garnish with basil or rocket leaves and serve warm.

Tips:

• Works well with homemade **Vegetable Scrap Pesto** - recipe pg 18.

• A great way to use up Sunday roast leftovers.

• Add frozen peas or spinach for extra colour and fibre.

Vegetable Scrap Pesto

Serves: Makes approx. 1 jar
Prep Time: 10 minutes
Cook Time: None

Ingredients:

- 150g Mixed seeds (not peanuts or nuts)
- 225g Mixed greens/soft herb scraps (e.g. carrot tops, rocket, spinach)
- 2 cloves Garlic
- 1/2 tsp Salt
- 200ml Olive oil
- 100g Grated parmesan

Method:

In a food processor or blender, combine the seeds greens, garlic, salt, and olive oil. Blend until smooth or slightly chunky—your preference. Stir in the grated parmesan at the end to avoid melting during blending. Store in a jar in the fridge for up to 5 days or freeze in small portions.

Tips:

- Use in pasta, sandwiches, or as a veggie dip.
- Freeze in ice cube trays for easy future use.
- Helps reduce food waste and boost flavour.

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