



National Day Nurseries Association

**\*Brighter thinking  
for early years**

# Factsheet

A photograph showing a woman with blonde hair and glasses, wearing a black sleeveless top and purple pants, kneeling on a purple mat and performing a choking rescue on a baby. The baby is lying on its back, and the woman is using her hands to clear the airway. A man with a beard is sitting on the left, looking on. Another woman in a red polo shirt and blue gloves is standing on the right, also observing. The background is a plain white wall.

## Preventing and Managing Choking

# Preventing and Managing Choking

Choking (asphyxia) is defined as:

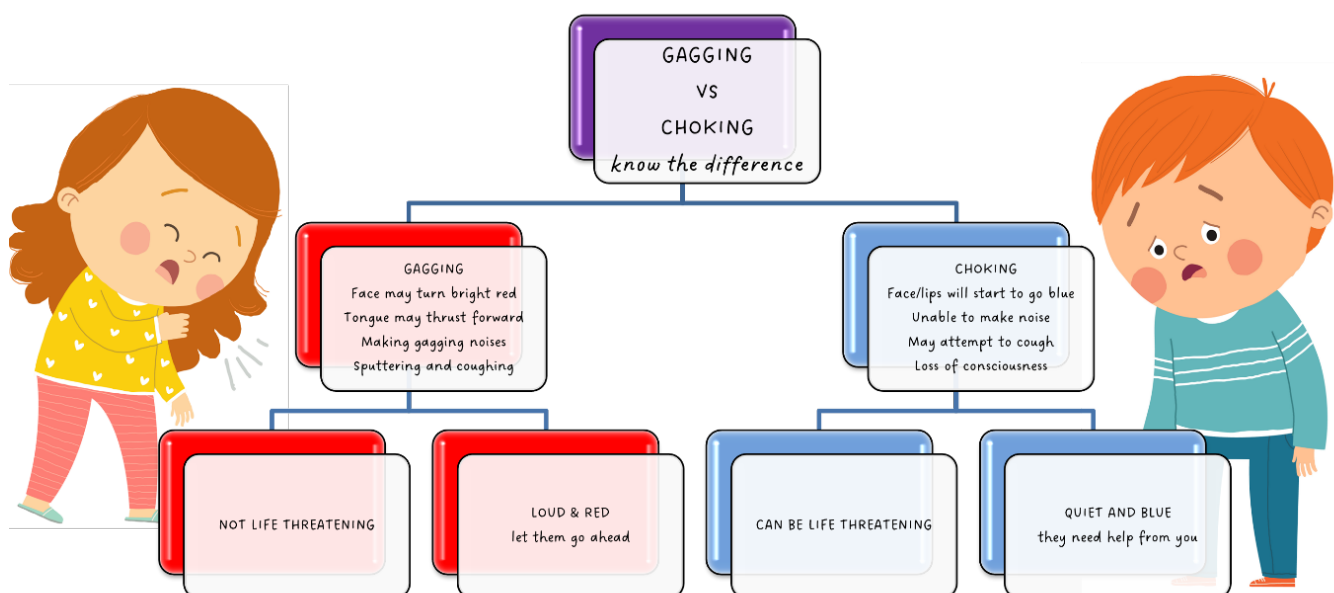
*Severe difficulty in breathing due to constricted or obstructed throat.*

## Is there a difference between choking and gagging?

Yes, there **is** a difference between choking and gagging.

**Gagging** is a normal reflex as a baby learns to chew and swallow solid foods or if an older child tries to swallow something too big and it catches in their throat. Gagging is loud. The child's skin may also look red when they're gagging, but redness can be harder to see on brown and black skin.

**Choking** is quiet. If a child has white skin, they may begin to look blue (cyanosis) when they're choking. If they have brown or black skin, their gums, inside their lips or their fingernails may begin to look blue.



## Gagging

Babies may gag when you introduce solid foods – this is totally normal. It happens because they are learning to regulate the amount of food they can chew and swallow at one time. They will eventually learn to cope with different textures and harder foods.

Older children may gag if they haven't chewed properly before swallowing or if they put something in their mouth which goes too far back for them to retrieve with their tongue or fingers.

If a baby/child is gagging, you may notice:

- Their eyes watering
- Them pushing their tongue forward (or out of their mouth)
- To bring the food forward in their mouth, they might make a retching movement, or they may vomit.

## Choking

A child may choke on food or may put small objects into their mouth (sweets, small toys, toy fragments, coins, beads, buttons, jewellery, button batteries, balloons) which causes a blockage of the airway.

If the blockage of the airway is mild they should be able to clear it by coughing.

If it is severe they will be unable to speak, cough or breathe and will eventually lose consciousness, which could result in death.

**If there's no professional help imminent and it's down to you, keep calm and take decisive action.**

**Moderate the amount of force used according to the age and size of the child and follow these instructions.**

## Choking treatment for babies

- Shout for help, but don't leave the baby
- Sit or kneel and lay the baby over your lap, face down, head lowest, supporting the head
- Give up to five sharp blows between the shoulder blades with the heel of your hand
- If the obstruction is still not cleared, turn the baby uppermost (lay them on your arm). Support their head and lower it below the level of the chest
- Use two fingers to give up to five chest thrusts
- If the obstruction is still not cleared, repeat back slaps and chest thrusts
- If treatment seems ineffective, shout for help and have someone call 999/112
- If the baby becomes unresponsive, start CPR.



Image courtesy of the British Red Cross



## Choking treatment for young children

- Instruct the child to cough
- If the cough becomes ineffective, shout for help but don't leave the child
- Lean the child well forwards
- Give up to five sharp back blows between the shoulder blades with the heel of your hand
- If the obstruction has still not cleared, proceed with abdominal thrusts
- Stand behind the child and place both arms around them
- Make a fist with one hand and place it just above the belly button
- Grasp this fist with your other hand, then pull sharply inwards and upwards
- Do this up to five times
- If the obstruction has still not cleared, repeat the back slaps and the abdominal thrusts
- If treatment seems ineffective, shout for help and have someone call 999/112
- If the child becomes unresponsive, start CPR.

## Paediatric first aid confidence in managing a choking baby or child

Staff who hold paediatric first aid (PFA) certificates will have learnt how to manage choking incidents as part of their training.

Regular opportunities to practice dealing with a choking baby or child, such as through staff meetings, will support staff to retain their confidence in this area. Soft bodied dolls and setting up scenarios in the rooms can also help staff to remember the procedures for back blows and abdominal thrusts.

If staff feel unsure whether they are confident or competent with managing a choking child or baby, encourage them to refresh their PFA training or ask a health professional, such as a health visitor, to carry out some training.



## Early years food choking hazards



Below is a table of advice on key foods for care givers who are involved with preparing and serving food for babies and young children (under 5 years old)

Vegetable and fruits	Advice
Pips or stones in fruit	Always check beforehand and remove hard pips or stones from fruit.
Small fruits	Cut small round fruits like grapes, cherries, berries, strawberries and cherry tomatoes, into small pieces: cut lengthways and then again cut them in halves (quarters).
Large fruits and firm fruits	Cut large fruits like melon and firm fruits like apple into slices instead of small chunks. For very young children, consider grating or mashing firm fruits, or softening them up by steaming or simmering.

### Guidelines to reduce choking hazards

1. Whilst eating, children **must** be within sight and hearing of a member of staff (remember choking is silent, so being able to see the children is crucial), where possible sit facing the children while they are eating
2. Ensure there is always a member of staff in the room during meal and snack times with a valid full paediatric first aid certificate
3. Encourage children to sit whilst eating
4. Ensure food is appropriate and prepared for the correct age group:
  - a. See the Food Standards Agency advice for preparing and serving foods
  - b. See advice regarding weaning on the NHS website
5. Reduce risks from small items by following the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) guidelines, below
6. Carry out daily risk assessments on resources that are available to children; pay special attention to loose parts and give consideration to the consequences resulting from any resource becoming damaged
7. Only adults should inflate balloons and children should be supervised around balloons
8. Supervise all activities carefully including craft type activities (small loose items)
9. Consider staff deployment during free flow activities offers the maximum supervision for children.

### RoSPA guidelines to reduce the risk of choking

1. Choose toys appropriate to the age of the child
2. Ensure that small objects and small toys are kept out of reach of children under 3 years old
3. Keep nappy sacks out of the reach of babies and young children
4. Ensure children who are falling asleep do not continue to eat and that they do not have food in their mouths when put to sleep
5. Never let children run with objects in their mouths
6. Be vigilant during free flow activities and ensure that all children are within sight of a practitioner at all times.

## Toy safety

RoSPA recommends that you look for the official CE symbol and UKCA mark on a toy. This is a claim by the manufacturer that their toy meets the regulatory requirements. Look also for the British Toy and Hobby Association (BTHA) 'Lion Mark' which requires that members' toys meet statutory safety requirements.



## RoSPA's top ten safety tips on toy safety

1. Buy toys only from recognised outlets
2. Make sure the toy is suitable for the child's age and stage of development
3. Be particularly careful with toys for children under three
4. Be wary of young children playing with older children's toys
5. Check for loose hair, small parts, sharp edges and points
6. Ensure that garden swings and slides are robust and are not a strangulation hazard
7. Check toys regularly for wear and repair or dispose of them where necessary
8. Keep the play area tidy
9. Follow the instructions and warnings provided with toys
10. Supervise young children at play.

## Links and resources

- Red Cross video – How to save a choking baby: <https://bit.ly/3KLrB4H>
- Red Cross video – How to save a choking child: <https://bit.ly/3VI3IH8>
- St John's Ambulance – Choking advice: <https://bit.ly/3Xy6vyi>
- NHS – Choking advice: <https://bit.ly/3XmcjuX>
- NHS – Weaning advice: <https://bit.ly/4ciYwJC>
- Food Standards Agency – Early years food choking hazards poster: <https://bit.ly/4bZLd12>
- **Millie's Mark:** Equipping settings to deal with emergencies, Millie's Mark endorses childcare providers that go above and beyond minimum statutory paediatric first aid requirements. Settings who hold the Millie's Mark Award have 100% of staff trained in paediatric first aid while ensuring that everything learned during the training is kept alive and in the forefront of practitioners' minds so that they are confident, ready and capable. Find out more here: <https://www.milliesmark.com/>



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# Factsheet

Our factsheets are written by early years experts for the early years workforce. Most NDNA factsheets are free to our members.

NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at [www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets](http://www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets)

*The information provided in this factsheet is for use by early years practitioners only. It has been written by early years experts but is not intended to be, and should not be relied upon, as a substitute for professional advice. NDNA has endeavoured to ensure the accuracy of the information presented in this factsheet. NDNA assumes no legal liability or responsibility for your interpretation or use of the information contained within it.*

## National Day Nurseries Association

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