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## Building Partnerships - A Start Right Approach to Mentoring in the Early Years



# STAR RIGHT LIMERICK





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## Overview

Start Right has developed strong connections with 9 community based Early Years (EY) settings in the Limerick Southside model area. 4 of these are based in Primary schools, 3 are within full-time crèches, 1 is a sessional service, and 1 is based in a full-time 'special service'. Start Right also works in partnership with 1 Afterschool Club in the model area, which previously was an unsupported service.

This case study provides lessons from Start Right's approach to partnership and makes important recommendations towards working with Early Years managers and practitioners. It also has important lessons for the roll out of the National Early Years Quality Support Service and the design of other projects such as the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme (2013-2016).

This case study highlights how the relationship between Start Right and the settings is key to the progress that has been made to date, and presents the successes and challenges within that journey. It highlights how the relationship between the programme and services was the key element of Start Right's work, and sets out the successes and challenges involved in building those relationships.

For this case study, informal interviews were conducted with Early Years managers, practitioners and primary school Principals within the Start Right model area. Informal interviews were also conducted with the Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker.

# **PARTNERSHIP** with

## 9 Early Years Services and 1 Afterschool Club



## Previous experiences of support and links with other agencies

An important finding in the course of interviews was that Early Years managers had felt isolated from other EY settings and community services and supports before working with Start Right. They felt the nature of the work itself means whether there is one or two adults in a room with children, it can still be isolating.

Such feelings of isolation were mentioned repeatedly:

*“Even if you’re in a room with another person and ten children it’s still isolating”*

(Claire-crèche Manager)

*“We were always isolated”* (Emer- Preschool manager)

*“We were so far removed”* (Maeve-Preschool manager)

*“You can be very much on your own”* (Kay- Preschool manager)

*“I’m quite isolated up here”* (Gillian- EY manager)

*“We didn’t have a lot of people interacting with us over the years.*

*Start Right would have been the first”* (Aine-Afterschool Manager)

Many also felt their setting was different from others and had particular needs. While managers have opportunities to meet other EY professionals at workshops, training events and conferences, they did not all know each other. While a couple of managers had access to peer support, most did not and there was no close support from other agencies. The following outlines agencies and services that Early Years settings generally interact with.

## Childcare Committees

Early Years settings in Ireland tend to operate independently from each other and from statutory and community services and supports. However, there are a number of organisations who work with EY settings locally and nationally to improve the quality of their services, such as City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The Childcare Committees are a main point of contact for EY settings when accessing Early Years schemes such as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Community Childcare Subvention, Childcare Education and Training Supports. They also support the development of services locally by providing advice, information, site visits, training and support.

## Voluntary Childcare Organisations

During interviews managers spoke about being members of Voluntary Childcare Organisations. While the general feeling is that being a member is important and has its benefits, there is a difference between accessing information over the internet and hands-on support. While there is contact, there is a sense that there is little on-site engagement. One manager noted:



*“You’re talking about the difference between hands-on people, hands-on support. It’s ok being involved in all those organisations, but...you join up, you look at our website and you see what we have...and the thing about it is, it costs money”.*

(Sinéad- crèche Manager)

One manager recalls having the support of a development worker from the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA). She found the informal approach very beneficial, but it has been six years since she had any hands-on support from the NCNA (now known as Early Childhood Ireland).

## Pobal

Many settings provide childcare places under government schemes such as the ECCE preschool year, Childcare Education and Training Supports (CETS) and Community Childcare Subvention (CCS). To monitor these schemes, Pobal carries out on-site compliance visits once a year, or at a very minimum once every two years. They work with Early Years settings around contracting and payments and site visits involve purely administrative tasks.

## Tusla Early Years Inspection Service

While Start Right and the Early Years Inspection Service have very different roles in the Early Years sector, manager’s experiences of communication and interactions with them is a key factor in building constructive relationships.

Managers contrasted Start Right’s approach with the Tusla Early Years Inspection Team. Experiences of inspection visits are described as formal and “*intimidating*”, whereas Start Right’s approach was less formal and more engaging.

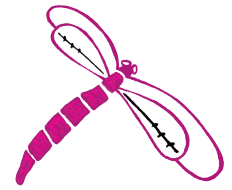
Sinéad (crèche manager) said: *“It’s like when the health board comes, you see two of them getting out of a car with a briefcase and you go, ok we’re up”.* Whereas she felt Start Right did not have the attitude of *“we’re going to take you over now, we’re gonna tell u what you’re gonna do”.*

Another noted:

*“They’re writing away while they’re asking you questions, its intimidating at times...”*  
(Tara- EY practitioner)

*“Whereas when [Mary] comes in, she has a completely different approach...”*  
(Joanne- crèche manager)

*“Even when she [Mary] was in the rooms, she sat down and interacted with the children. We worked away and she interacted with the kids. You didn’t feel you were being watched”* (Tara- EY Practitioner)



There are a number of ongoing changes within the Early Years Inspection Service. It has transferred from the HSE to Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency, and has changed name from 'Preschool' to 'Early Years' Inspection Service, which reflects the wider focus on early childhood care and education from 0-6 years. There has been particular emphasis on reform of the Inspection Service since the screening of 'A Breach of Trust', an RTE Prime Time programme which raised concerns about the quality of Early Years practice and experiences of young children in crèches.

Early Years managers felt isolated and while they recognise a number of support structures available to them, they had little previous experience of working in partnership with agencies geared towards achieving better outcomes for children and families.

Start Right, with its ethos of collaboration and partnership, began working with these Early Years settings in a way they had not previously experienced.

In this particular context, gaining trust and building relationships would require time and a particular approach based on individual needs.



# Sowing the Seeds of Partnership

## Getting started the Start Right way

The ethos of Start Right is about creating a sense of partnership and shared objectives in meeting the needs of EY providers. The Start Right Coordinator made initial email and telephone contact with Early Years managers and Principals of Primary Schools in the Start Right model area. Initial meetings focused on visiting Early Years settings and Primary schools, meeting managers and Principals and building connections. The Coordinator explained what Start Right was about, how it aimed to support Early Years services to improve outcomes for children and that every partner is “*a big contributor and a key player*”.

Early Years Managers and Principals had mixed reactions to Start Right and while most were initially open to the idea of working with the project, many were unsure how it would work. There was a lot of apprehension and uneasiness about who and what Start Right was. Managers recall feeling “*very sceptical*”. Much of this was related to previous experiences of feeling judged, assessed, and let down.

Early Years managers were not used to having an agency offering support and inviting collaboration with them. Based on previous experiences, they wondered if there were strings attached or if Start Right wanted something in return. They wondered if Start Right would be another organisation they would have to report to and if they would be billed.

One manager summed up the reactions of many:

*“I think realistically everybody was worried, where’s the strings, what’s the catch? What are they gonna want from us, because realistically that comes with everything. Even if you get your funding and there’s strings attached to it, you’re so used to having to jump through hoops... Will there be a pile of paper work to fill in... is this going to be another organisation that we have to be accountable to and that are going to have expectations of us, so there was a bit of ‘uh, what are we in store for’”.*

(Claire- crèche manager)

Previous experiences of agency visits whether through Pobal or the Early Years Inspection Team were compliance based rather than support based. These were managers’ only experiences of having their services observed and evaluated. Issues observed during an Early Years inspection could mean a non- compliance, so visits tend to bring tensions.

Successful monitoring and evaluation of quality in Early Years practice is a process that needs to combine compliance of standards with opportunities for managers and practitioners to reflect on their practice individually, together and with other supportive agencies. When Start Right invited partnership with Early Years settings, they were uncertain as to how they would be seen. They wondered if discussing challenges in their work meant Start Right would judge rather than support them. Buying into Start Right meant they would have to be able to trust in them. Start Right was a different project than managers previously experienced, so it took time for many of them to become comfortable with the idea of this new approach to partnership.



# Start Right 'quick wins'

## Materials

Some managers could see the value of having support and opportunities for up-skilling staff. Others were reluctant to welcome a partnership approach. In these instances, there was a tougher 'buy-in' process and the Start Right team felt they had to prove themselves. For many settings this came in the form of providing equipment and materials such as books, water tables, and Early Years furniture. Tangible resources have an important role to play in improving quality environments for children and enhancing the quality of practice. When Start Right delivered on requests for equipment and materials, managers were assured that Start Right genuinely wanted to help and support them and in some cases it paved the way for discussion around Síolta and Aistear training needs. For many, a foundation for trust and further engagement was laid.

## Accompaniment

Some managers were completely open and "*absolutely delighted*" to receive support and guidance. They immediately identified a need for staff training and to have onsite support. They could see the benefits of having someone who would work hands on with staff. As soon as the Start Right Development Worker was recruited onto the team, onsite mentoring and development work was seen as a quick response to an identified need by many of the services.

## Encouraging reflective practice

A number of cases highlighted how identification of needs is a process and combination of observation and discussion. In one particular service the manager did not see a need for any kind of support. However, she was very open to discussing quality. Through these conversations, a number of themes were identified for staff training and changes to the EY environment.

## Linking to other services

Start Right recruited a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) onto the team. SLT is one component of a broader Start Right approach to support, that included assessment, on-site mentoring, provision of funding for necessary resources, training and supporting the up-skilling of staff. A number of services did not see a need for onsite support or staff training within their service but did accept Speech and Language intervention.

## Respect

Throughout initial conversations, observations and consultation with staff, in a small number of situations, the Start Right team saw opportunities for quality improvement. For example with staff/child ratios, staff/child interactions, room layout and toileting facilities. Offers of support to address such matters were not always accepted. In these situations Start Right staff respected the view and independence of individual settings to engage at a level they were comfortable with.

## Responsiveness

Most services felt Start Right came at a good time. As Claire (crèche managers) recalls: "*Financially everybody was struggling...they were offering... training that we didn't have to pay for... that's the reality of it...and that realistically makes it a lot more of an attractive prospect*"



# Listening and Responding to Needs

## What did managers say?

- They felt isolated from other Early Years services and from statutory and community services and supports
- They had little previous experience of regular on-site support and partnership approaches
- 24% of staff in the Start Right model area had no recognised childcare qualification in 2011
- Services who are motivated to engage with Síolta and Aistear have limited resources to do so
- Training can be too broad, it does not always address the specific issues they face
- Training and workshop events can be costly
- Training and workshop events can be daunting for practitioners, especially if they do not know others attending
- Early Years settings have different needs and require tailored support
- Practitioners prefer day-release training but this does not always suit as paying for staff cover can add financial pressure
- In a sector where staff feel undervalued, their motivation and willingness to participate in evening training varies
- The Early Years sector is under-resourced and practitioners are under paid
- The demands of working in Early Years practice are high

## How did Start Right respond?

- Connected Early Years settings through the development of the Southside Early Years Managers Network, staff site- exchange visits, on-site shared training, outings and trips to other centres and conferences
- Linked Early Years settings with other services and the wider community through meetings, networking and training
- Provided fully funded specialised training in Inclusive Care and Education. Level 6 Certificate, designed and delivered by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
- Encouraged staff to up-skill towards a recognised qualification in childcare
- Delivered training and workshops on Síolta and Aistear
- Provided on-site mentoring, training and support
- Provided funding for replacement staff, so practitioners could attend day-release training
- Funded materials and equipment to enhance the quality of Early Years environments
- Recruited a Speech and Language Therapist to work intensively with EY settings in the model area





## Building Trust to Build Capacity

Start Right first formed relationships with individual managers and principals in the Start Right model area and then organised a collective meeting for all. The aim of this meeting was to provide information on Start Right. Ultimately it laid the foundation for what became known as the Southside Early Years Managers Network.

The approach Start Right took was informal; it was about making the time to chat with managers and getting to know them. Managers felt Start Right did not come in with their own ideas of what kind of support services were needed, rather needs were identified through discussions and observations. Sinéad (crèche manager) noted: *“It’s got to do with an attitude...[Start Right Coordinator] didn’t come in with a briefcase, she didn’t come with all these ideas she wanted to change in childcare”*.

Start Right’s approach was about extending an invitation to partnership and encouraging managers to identify their own needs, combined with observations from Start Right. There was no blanket provision for settings, needs were self-identified on an individual ‘needs-by-needs’ basis and settings engaged at different levels. Managers realised over time that Start Right support was not about judging, instructing or telling, and that support wasn’t conditional on giving something back to Start Right:

*“It’s different from somebody selling you something. They didn’t want us to buy anything. They just wanted us to agree with the standards of childcare and to raise them”*. All Start Right wanted was *“feedback which was free, just our own opinions, advice, what we wanted...’we don’t want anything, we just want your participation’. Wow!”* (Sinéad- crèche manager).

## Community Partners

In one section of the Start Right model area, the local Family Resource Centre’s Children’s Services Coordinator plays a central role in supporting relationships between Start Right and some of the Early Years settings, parents, and local primary schools. The Children’s Services Coordinator had previously established working relationships with some and in a number of cases was an important link in helping services to understand what Start Right was about. She has a similar role to Start Right’s Development Worker in terms of supporting quality in Early Years settings and so, both work very closely.

## Promoting parental and community engagement

The Start Right approach involves working with parents and families and supporting Early Years staff to engage more effectively with them. The most important aspect of this engagement involves including parents in decisions about the services that they use.

Encouraging parental engagement is a continuous process that values the voice of parents and says parents have a right to be involved in their child’s care and education and Start Right implemented a Community Wraparound Programme, which aims to coordinate all work with an individual child, in partnership with parents and any additional service providers that may be involved in the child’s life. Start Right organised key meetings between Early Years managers and other

statutory and community services and supports. It organised a series of events to support parents to have a voice and empower them in their role (i.e. communication sessions, community consultation events, etc.).

Start Right provided funding to refurbish a preschool in the model area. While the materials were supplied by Start Right, it was an important opportunity to involve parents in the development of the service. Parents were encouraged to help out and so the manager, parents, practitioners, and Start Right staff all worked together to repaint the preschool and prepare the room for the new term.

The Start Right Speech and Language Therapist delivered the 'Happy Talk' series in Early Years settings. 'Happy Talk' is a project designed to improve language and learning skills of children aged 0-6 years. It is designed to help parents and EY practitioners to develop skills to support children's language development. One of the most significant aspects of the 'Happy Talk' programme is the participation of parents. All managers and practitioners who worked with the SLT have said the 'Happy Talk' programme was very successful and had an extremely positive effect on engaging parents.

Similarly, Start Right contracts an Art Therapist who engages fully with parents before their child can access therapy. He also has a strong working relationship with the EY settings to ensure that children who need extra emotional and social support, receive it.

## Training to support parents

The Start Right Development Worker facilitated training in Síolta Standards, in particular Standard 3: Parents and Families. During on-site mentoring, when managers and practitioners discussed issues relating to children and parents, the Development Worker would always encourage involving parents and encouraging them to work together on particular issues. In some situations the Development Worker facilitated informal meetings between managers, practitioners and parents and modelled how to build constructive relationships with parents. A manager described her experience of one such meeting and Start Right's approach to parental engagement:

*"In that meeting with the parent... she actually built a relationship with that parent as well, I mean that was unbelievable, I mean to watch it was unbelievable... the one thing that I'd notice about them when they come in, they'd say hello to everybody, every parent... it was a partnership with parents as well. This was the first time ever that we had an organisation based solely on the benefits for the children and parents alike ... anyone else that I ever encountered never had the same impact on me like Start Right had for parents, for partnership with parents"* (Sinéad- crèche manager).

síolta

**Aistear**  
Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Another example of Start Right's work with families was seen through the 'Being Me' children's project and exhibition. This project promoted children's perspective and expression of their lives by providing them with disposable cameras to take photographs of things in their lives. Start Right provided the cameras and Early Years practitioners gave them to parents and children. The photos were displayed in a local Community Café. Feedback suggests that parents and locals were motivated by the idea. The project, which promoted parental and community engagement, highlighted how EY services are an important resource in connecting communities. One manager explained: *"it gives a sense of community to the place and it gives the children and the families a sense of purpose and value...and that's important and that's something we can help... we can continue to promote"* (Claire- crèche manager)

Managers agree that Start Right strongly encouraged working in partnership with parents. All of these services came to realise over time that Start Right was not just about supporting a service, but also supporting a community.

## Connecting Early Years settings

Start Right supported the development of the Southside Early Years Managers Network. The Network provides peer support for Early Year's managers in the Limerick City Southside. It offers valuable opportunities for managers to support one another, to access and share information and resources, to organise group activities such as training and outings and to connect Early Years settings with wider community and statutory services and supports.

Start Right encouraged managers to think about how they could work with other Early Years services in minimising the barriers to staff training and professional development. A number of solutions were identified:





1

## On-site Shared Training

Managers collaborated to host training events on-site in their own EY settings and invited practitioners from other settings to attend. A number of settings took part and it was a particularly significant step towards working together and a first for these Early Years settings. It highlighted how managers can maximise the use of existing resources. It provided opportunities for managers and practitioners to observe other EY environments, and to interact with and discuss practice with others.

2

## Day Trips and Outings

Trips were organised to other settings and conferences, through the Southside Early Years Managers Network and supported by Start Right. Visits include:

- ReCreate, creative resource centre in Dublin
- Barnardos Brighter Futures centre at Knocknaheeny in Cork
- The NEYAI dissemination conference in Dublin
- 'Happy Talk' speech and language conference in Cork

3

## Staff Site-Exchange Visits

In consultation with managers and practitioners and with support from the Tusla Early Years Inspection Team, Start Right organised 'staff site-exchange visits'. These exchange visits were organised so that practitioners 'swapped' EY settings and spent time observing, sharing knowledge and reflecting on their own practice. Through discussions with managers and practitioners, it became clear that many practitioners had never worked in another Early Years setting, outside of their own. In some cases they had not worked with another age group of children. The site-exchange visits were a peer learning exercise that provided ideas for planning and developing quality practice.



## The combination of these events:

- Provided opportunities for managers and practitioners to observe, interact with and discuss practice with others:

*“Watch the way they dealt with difficult situations, how they ran it and getting different ideas... it was good to see...whether I’m doing right or wrong in my own place or could I improve in certain areas... just talking to people even...you might take on some of it or you mightn’t, or you might say, I’ll do that better”* (Fiona- EY practitioner)

- Provided practitioners with the opportunity to experience the diversity of EY practices and curricular approaches.

*“I went to four different settings and I found the visits to be extremely beneficial. Not only did I get to network with other practitioners in the community, I also picked up some wonderful ideas on ways to improve on my own setting”* (Jane- Early Years Practitioner).

- Fostered a culture of collaboration and consultation among EY settings
- Highlighted how managers can use existing resources, reducing the need to hire venues
- Reassured practitioners that they were not alone and others experienced similar issues in their work

*“Where you hear somebody else is feeling the same way it helps your confidence, we don’t all do everything right, but we don’t all do everything wrong either and it’s nice to know”* (Claire- crèche manager)

- Helped them to forge links with other EY practitioners

*“I’ve known people from different crèches that I never did before”* (Claire- crèche manager)





## Collaborative Working

Working with the Early Years Inspection Service was key in Start Right organising 'staff site-exchange visits' among EY settings in the model area. Regulations for Early Years services require that information relating to all staff, such as Garda clearance certificates, CV's, qualifications and references, must be on file within the premises and available for viewing upon inspection. Start Right consulted the Early Years Inspection Service who then supported procedures which made the staff site-exchange visits possible.

The Southside Early Years Manager's Network Invited the Early Years Inspection Team to attend a Network meeting and in Spring 2014, the Inspection Team Line Manager attended. The meeting was positive and managers found it very useful to have a space in which to have an open discussion with him. It provided an opportunity for managers to have a collective voice in challenging inspection procedures. The Inspection Team Line Manager saw the meeting as a step towards *"encouraging providers to give feedback to inspectors both positive and negative"* and to *"encourage a sense of partnership between inspectors and providers in seeking to improve quality"*. This philosophy is a positive step towards a competent Early Years system, one in which working together with a common focus on high quality early childhood care and education is the priority.

## Voluntary Management Committees

Community childcare settings are generally run by Voluntary Management Committees. Effective committees are made up of major stakeholders (parents, members of the community, child care professionals, local businesses, etc.) who have skills and knowledge that can support the development of the service. If settings do not have a childcare professional or specialist on the committee and if managers experience a lack of support from their Management Committees, this has serious implications for the development of an Early Years' service.

Start Right has sought to engage with Management Committees, by organising an 'Information and Quality Training' event and inviting each chairperson. Unfortunately, there was very little uptake and as a result the event had to be postponed.

In the experience of Start Right staff, good managers need good Management Committees in order to provide a quality service. While 'quality training' is one aspect in Management Committees playing an important role in delivering high quality care and education, a critical aspect is having a childcare professional on the Committee. Management Committees who do not have a childcare professional, lack the knowledge of Early Years practice and of the sector that is critical in being able to support an EY manager to do an effective job. A number of difficulties within EY settings are related to staffing and Human Resources (HR). By the very nature of the job, EY managers are required to be on-site and they spend a considerable amount of time working with practitioners on the ground and covering staff breaks. They are not always equipped to deal with HR issues and need good structures and knowledgeable committees to support them.



# From Worker to Practitioner: The Start Right Approach to Up-skilling the Early Years Workforce

Managers contrasted Start Right's approach of Early Years training with other agencies. Generally when other agencies roll out training, they decide the type of training, when and where to conduct it. Most managers felt when they were not consulted it was unlikely to meet their specific needs. Generally managers feel they have to wait and see what kind of training would be on offer and then decide if it is relevant to their service. Whereas they feel Start Right took a more proactive approach: they consulted services about their training needs, and they tailored training to suit individual settings. One manager said

*"We've needed training tailored to our needs and they're very accommodating in that regard, so it would be more about how they can help us rather than us having to fit in with them"* (Claire- crèche manager).

Managers and practitioners identified a number of features of Start Right's approach that supported their relationships with Start Right.

## Convenient location for training, workshops and networking

Training, workshops and networking were always local, which made it accessible for managers and practitioners. If training and workshops were not carried out on-site in Early Years settings, it would be delivered in a no-cost venue conveniently located in the Southside of the city. The venue for the Southside Early Years Managers Network is also conveniently located in the Southside within a few minutes drive for all Managers.

## Low numbers at training events

In organising training events, Start Right kept the number of participants low. Practitioners found this beneficial. One of the obstacles for practitioners in attending training is the size of large groups and another is not knowing others attending, which can be intimidating for practitioners. One manager summed up her experiences of workshops and training events with Start Right which were: "always small manageable groups...you don't feel too intimidated going in the door...it's not like 29 people are sitting there and you don't know anybody...and if it's in another service, you know it's going to be nearby...that makes it all very accessible" (Claire- crèche manager)

## Consistency of trainer

The majority of workshops and training were developed and delivered by either (or both) the Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker. Both staff have extensive knowledge and experience of Early Years policy and one has wide-ranging experience in practice. In some cases when Start Right invited other Early Years specialists to deliver training, for example on 'Play' and 'Behaviour Management', Start Right were always present.

Having the consistency of the same people delivering training and being available at these events benefited managers and practitioners. They felt that having that consistency reduced anxiety about training events and influenced their decisions to attend training. One manager said; "It's the same people you're dealing with, so you get to know them and you're not anxious then" (Claire- crèche manager). It also meant that when managers and practitioners asked questions, responses were appropriately tailored because Start Right staff were familiar with their service. Training events provided opportunities to strengthen relationships, which were again reinforced through on-site mentoring.

## Personal reminders

Start Right set up a system of reminders for upcoming workshops and training events. Emails and phone calls were followed by individual mobile text messages to managers and practitioners. The individual text reminders promoted a sense of value in practitioners.

*"I know it sounds like a stupid thing, but it does make a difference...it makes you feel important...it felt like the course was important...and it's important that I'm there...it gave you a value to you attending and also it gave a value to yourself that you were getting a reminder personally"* (Claire- crèche manager).

## Recognition of attendance

After training events participants were presented with certificates of attendance. This recognition fostered a sense of achievement and promoted confidence in practitioners: *"The little piece of paper that says you went to the workshop is nice to get"* (Claire- crèche manager).

In the experience of Start Right staff, training and learning from workshops will most likely be implemented in practice if both practitioners and managers attend the same event. When managers are hearing the same messages that practitioners are hearing it is likely to be motivating for practitioners and it enhances their confidence to try new things. It also paves the way for managers to acknowledge practitioner efforts in trying out ideas in practice. It creates opportunities to discuss and reflect on practice which supports a positive manager/practitioner relationship and ultimately improves quality.

## Practical resources

There is agreement among managers and practitioners that what is learned in a formal learning environment can be very difficult to put into practice. A unique feature of Start Right's approach to training was the practical application through providing materials and resources for those who attended workshops and training events.

At some workshop and training events, Start Right provided materials for all attendees, such as book bags and workshop packs. One manager talked about the benefits of getting a story pack having attended a workshop on sharing stories with children and how receiving practical resources gave her encouragement:





*“So you come back with what you’ve learned in the workshop, you have your little pack and you’re ready to go straight away while it’s still fresh in your mind. Whereas sometimes I find you go to these things and ...by the time I get what I need, I’ve forgotten half of what I’m supposed to be doing and the enthusiasm is gone as well. Whereas when you come in the next day, right I have my bag and I’m ready to go. You know, you’re a bit more inclined to do it...I did one on play and I came back with a bag of goodies and just to bring them into the room with the kids, it keeps your excitement that you had at the workshop going because you’re seeing the kids’ excitement as well. So I think the small little rewards that we get are not to be underestimated” (Claire- crèche manager).*



## Accredited training

Through the work of the Professional Development Subgroup, Start Right offered fully funded specialised training for early childhood practitioners in the area of inclusive practice. This Level 6 Certificate in Inclusive Care and Education (0-6 years) was designed and delivered by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. 34 Early Years practitioners from the Start Right model area have completed this course to date.

Sinéad noted that Start Right *“provided conversation around it and why it would be beneficial and this is your opportunity and let’s go for it”* (Sinéad- crèche manager). The benefits to practitioners have been great and have led not only to changes in practice but renewed self-confidence for many. Sinéad expressed appreciation as some of her staff have not had educational opportunities like this: *“The pride that everyone felt that day on that day on graduation... people have said it. Thank you so much for allowing us the opportunity to say we could do this”*

A survey carried out by Start Right in 2011, when the project began, showed qualification levels held among staff in Southside EY settings. Accredited training was a need identified by a number of managers. 6 out of 9 EY services had a total of 14 staff with no recognised childcare qualification. By January 2014, this number was reduced to 1.9 practitioners had completed FETAC level 5 training. 5 practitioners were in the process of achieving level 5 accreditation. Other practitioners who had achieved level 5 trained to level 6 and some went on to study degree level. Start Right provided funding to assist in the up-skilling of staff and played a key role in motivating staff to embark on training opportunities.

Managers in general feel that motivating staff to up-skill can be challenging. The demands placed on EY practitioners are high; the sector is under resourced and staff are under paid. Encouraging them to up-skill places extra demands on them. One manager noted how Start Right encouraged her to incorporate Síolta into her practice: *“They’ve also helped motivate me to do the Síolta...which we wouldn’t have gone near at all...Start Right got me in contact with Síolta coordinator and [Mary] was there for the first meeting...having Start Right there just made me connect to the early childcare setting”* (Gillian- EY manager).

## On-site mentoring

Professional Development is a continuous learning process that includes personal and professional growth. Accredited and non-accredited training opportunities are important features of professional development. On-site mentoring is therefore a major element of Start Right's work in Early Years settings. The Start Right Development Worker 'Mary' provides intensive on-site support in many settings. Mary's work has mostly been with Managers, but in some settings she also worked with practitioners. Feedback indicates that it is the practical application of training and workshops and the on-site guidance that is needed most in Early Years practice. As Claire (crèche manager) noted: *"I think in childcare that's what most people want. They just want practical, not somebody to tell them what to do, but just give them some ideas to start with."*

Mentoring is a process where a knowledgeable and experienced person supports another to develop professionally. It can play a significant role in ongoing professional development, particularly in Early Years practice. High quality mentoring in Early Years lowers staff turnover, decreases isolation felt by managers and practitioners and increases practitioner emotional responsiveness in interactions with children.

Throughout interviews a number of important mentoring behaviours were highlighted. These behaviours are in line with four key competencies: the personal qualities and workplace behaviours required to carry out the role of mentor effectively. These qualities and behaviours fit into four categories:

- Communication skills
- Mentoring strategies
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Flexibility and adaptability

The new National Early Years Quality Support Service will see Early Years Specialists working in partnership with EY managers and practitioners to implement both Siolta and Aistear and to enhance the quality of early care and education experiences for children and families. Start Right's approach to mentoring holds significant lessons for the development of this support service and is particularly important in terms of the key tasks an Early Years Specialist will be expected to carry out:

- On-site visits
- Supporting services to evaluate, assess, plan and document practice
- Support services to develop and implement policies and practice
- Provide advice and support in areas such as inclusion, SEN, management, building relationships with parents and community

The following section provides a detailed account of managers' and practitioners' experiences of on-site support. It connects these experiences with the personal qualities and workplace behaviours of mentoring that reflects Start Right's approach to partnership. An approach that consulted, listened and acted on what they needed. It is this particular approach, with its key ingredients, that can inform policy and future services that aim to support Early Years settings to enhance their practice, ultimately achieving better outcomes for children.

# The Start Right Behavioural Competency Model for Supporting Parents and the Early Years



## Introduction

All Start Right staff possessed a high level of knowledge-based competencies to support the range of services targeted by the Programme. The team comprised:

- Early Years Specialist (Trained Síolta Coordinator)
- Early Years Research and Policy Worker
- Speech and Language Therapist
- Public Health Nurse

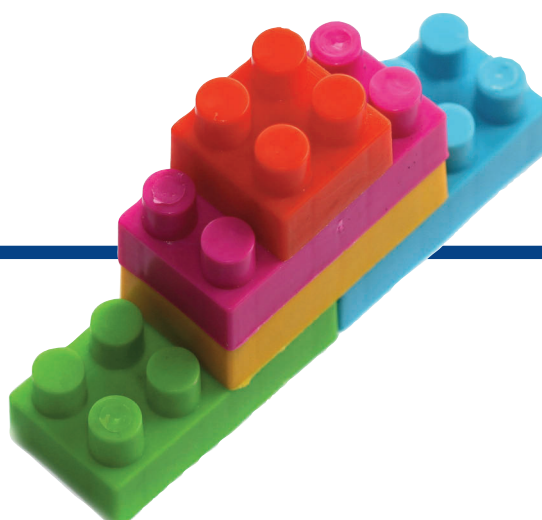
Particular attention was given in the programme to supporting the Early Years (crèche and pre-school) as compared to the statutory sector it was under-resourced in relation to investment, salary levels and professional development, and sector support. In planning and implementing the programme, the development and empowerment of the Early Years Sector required the transfer of knowledge and skills. More importantly, the Start Right staff knew that to do this successfully it would require not only knowledge and skills, but also behavioural competencies. Throughout the programme staff reflected on these behaviours and developed the following competency model for professionals supporting the sector.



Issue	Response	Behavioural Competence
Isolation	Manager's Network, shared training, exchanges, visits	Positive and Encouraging
Training too broad		Listening
Training costs	Responded to individual training needs	Supporting others
Training can be intimidating	Training together and in-situ	Listening
Settings have different needs and require tailored support	On site training, mentoring and support	Supporting others
Staff feel under-valued		Listening
Professionals have pre-set agendas	Needs were identified through discussions and observations	Open minded, took time to listen and get to know practitioners
Feeling assessed and judged	Made clear support was not conditional	Non-prescriptive, non-judgemental
Working with parents	Build relations with parents	Respectful to all
Child centred	Being Me Project	Encourage Expression from Children Making clear commitments
Design workshops after listening		Non-directive non-threatening Identifies needs
Staff Training	Encourage managers' ideas Encourage site exchange visits	Seeks solutions Support peer learning



Issue	Response	Behavioural Competence
Consistency in training	Start Right presence	Accompanies practitioners
Personal Reminders	Simple text messages	Values individuals
Recognises staff	Certificates of attendance	Celebrates achievements
Managers and staff attend same training	Improve Manager - Practitioner relations	Encourages reflection
Goody bags/materials	Encourage learning into practice	Motivating others
Upskilling Staff	Encourage adoption of Síolta	Motivating others
Mentoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- On-site visits consulted, listened and acted on what they needed</li><li>- Supporting services to evaluate, assess, plan and document practice</li><li>- Support services to develop and implement policies and practice</li><li>- Provide advice and support</li></ul>	







## The Competency Framework

The core behavioural competency framework is based on three Clusters of Behaviours. These Clusters are: Leading Others, Working Effectively with Others and Self Management. For each of the clusters Start Right has identified a number of behaviours that have contributed to the success of the programme, as well as indicators for these behaviours that appeared regularly during implementation.

### Leading Others

Under this cluster, Start Right identified two key behaviours:  
Motivating Others and Developing Others.

**Motivating Others** Is about inspiring and encouraging others to achieve. It involves demonstrating enthusiasm for tasks and being supportive.

**Developing Others** Is about acting to help others do their job better and progress personal learning. It involves giving feedback, and making training and support available.



# Motivating Others

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Inspires others to want to do things

*“Managers usually know how to solve the problem, but may need support to do so. That support might just be verbalising the problem. They just need someone to listen to them, to reflect on it with them”* (Mary-Development Worker)

One manager, explains how she *“used to love, if I was doing a walk up and I’d see her [SR coordinator] car... I’d know she was here, and not that she was sitting out there waiting for me, she’d probably be below and Mary would be below, all the kids knew them. All the kids, they all know Mary now when she comes. It was a case of I might come on and Mary would say, carry on and I’ll be up there to you in a little while to you, but that was, that’s what it was about. It was a full partnership with us and the staff, you know... and it was a partnership with parents as well... She spoke to everybody. She often went in and sat down took off her shoes and went into the room and sat down...and I never felt threatened by their involvement with the staff. Because if it’s not working for them I want to know and we (manager & practitioners) have a great relationship because of them as well. Because they would often say to me ‘Mary was telling me there now that if we were to move that there now’...”* (Sinéad)

Provides appropriate support

*“Friendly...welcoming...approachable...supportive...willing to help out”*

Shows personal enthusiasm for the job

*“Mary is just remarkable, as in her ability to get on the ground and take it running”* (Sinéad)

*“You know she’s going to come back to you, she will always come back to you”* (Tara)

*“I found the positivity to it, their approach even when they were in the rooms with the staff, I found it really helpful. It would give you a boost to, a kick start again”* (Tara)

Gives praise when due

*“You can get all the answers, but to thrash something out and get that mental support, for someone to say, yea, that’s a good idea, maybe we should think about that”* (Sinéad)

Acts as role model for behaviours

*“She talks very calm, you know and I have been watching her, how she talks with them, she has experience anyway you know, how to talk with them, be kind with them”* (Pamela)

*“Reading stories properly to them or expanding on the story and using puppets and things like that”* (Katie)

# Developing Others

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Is aware of strengths and limitations of staff

*"I had an issue with one child and she came...and she sat there for a good hour observing the child and how we interacted with the child and she gave us some feedback. Some of it wasn't nice to hear either, like she was honest and gave us some tips on how we could deal better with that child...she was good at taking her time...she was very helpful in that regard and suggested working with parents and she even offered to speak to parents if we wanted to and offer them some help and suggestions if they wanted it, so that's something we would see probably more of"* (Claire)

Looks to develop potential in others

*"You know she would always say to me, [Aisling] let me be your sounding board. You know it doesn't even have to be the negatives, it's the positives as well"* (Aisling)

*"They've also helped motivate me to do the Siolta... which wouldn't have gone near at all...Start Right got me in contact with Siolta Co-ordinator and Mary was there for the first meeting...having Start Right there just made me connect to the Early childcare setting (ECCE)"* (Gillian)

Demonstrates understanding of EY Practice to stimulate improved performance

*"We'd ask her opinion on the layout and when we were laying out the other place, she'd guided us there as well, Mary would come and help us out that way"* (Emer)

*"[Mary] Said, if you had a photograph of the equipment that's in the boxes, it might be more accessible to the children, and it did, it made such a difference...they all put them back properly...suggested putting equipment in different places...that has been a great help"* (Emer)

*"They might come in and have an idea about doing something...'how are ye here?', 'how are things working?'..."* (Kay)

*"It's important that they come from a childcare background because in childcare, I think you can have so many people, 'experts' telling you what you should and shouldn't be doing and they've never spent a day in a childcare settings, so I think it's important"*

*Interweaves theory into conversation, focuses on outcomes for children. Considers the knowledge, educational level and experiences of the manager or practitioner when discussing theory*

*"Others don't see that there's work going on for that transition...but they did, it's just the way Mary came across. Not just talking about [Early Years], talking about early childhood in the school"*



Allows people  
space to learn  
and make  
mistakes

*"There are set boundaries as well, which works really well...there's mutual respect for each other's roles in what Mary does and what I do and never have we crossed that. Mary wouldn't say to me, 'No you should do it this way Sinead'. It's never been that sort of way" (Sinéad)*

Makes  
training,  
advice,  
support  
available to  
everyone,  
using  
practical  
examples and  
resources

*"When the RTE primetime...just having someone who knows about crèche and early childcare and give me that support, my staff freaking out, people thinking this is what goes on in all crèches...that was useful, having that level of support, and she was like, 'do you need anything else...do you want me to come up'. Even having someone on the phone" (Gillian)*

*"It's very day-to-day stuff. It's not here's the content now go and read it. It's very very practical strategies Mary is using...the benefits are definitely visible throughout your day to day work, from strategies they're giving you to the information they're giving you and everything else. It's just all round support really" (Aisling)*

*"Mary gave me a great set up that you would do. How you would lead your observation then to planning you know for individual needs... a programme... I mean when you see the theory its fine but then to give examples. We used photos from past years about you know adults interacting with children- it was evident and it just kinda brings it all back. So there was a good format that you would do a child a day and the following week you would link up with their interests" (Aisling)*

*"I remember [Mary] picked out in the toddler room... one child wasn't interacting, and staff hadn't seen it...not only did she identify it and came back with information on. She didn't just come out and say... she actually had information to help, and you would never get that" (Joanne)*

Checks to  
ensure that  
appropriate  
supports and  
opportunities  
are available

*"Last year now we had a couple of children...issues with behaviour... We were at out wits end...I got onto Mary and she would just come back to you with a few strategies that might be worth trying" (Joanne)*

*"It's probably the most vital part is the follow up" (Aisling)*

*"When asked for support or information come back as quickly as possible"  
(Mary- Development Worker)*

# Working Effectively With Others

This cluster of behaviours is about the way staff supporting Early Years Services and parents work with, and relate to, others. In the Start Right context the key behaviours are:

- 1 Following
- 2 Supporting Others
- 3 Communications
- 4 Interpersonal Awareness and Influencing.

**Following** is about supporting, and being committed to, the goals of the services. It involves effective participation in initiatives and being aware of own contribution to the team.

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Shows commitment by active support

*"I emailed frequently...and she responds quite quickly, or pick up the phone, it's very instant support"* (Gillian)

Works to support decision making by Services/ Parents

*"Asking open ended questions is the best way to encourage managers to come up with their own answers"* (Mary-Development Worker)

Is able to give priority to others

*"Is warm in greeting and welcome on arrival, but follow managers'/ practitioners' lead. Staff Blended in with normal day-to-day practice, so practitioners don't feel observed"*

Celebrates success

*Observes signs of change- give specific feedback rather than general praise, i.e. 'I see ye have moved the coats, it looks like ye have cracked that one'*





# Working Effectively With Others

## Supporting Others Through Inter-Personal Awareness

is about using initiative to help practitioners to do their job effectively, while taking into account their perspective. It is about listening and empathy.

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Is aware of issues that may affect the work of others

*"With Start Right, they are very familiar with the setting...very familiar with the children"* (Aisling)

*"Familiarity, we'll say with Mary she would come every so often. We've a relationship with Mary now, and Ailish as well, that they know where we're coming from, and you need to have a face, there's no point in having someone on the phone... once we got to know who they were, they'll do anything we ask them to do, to be honest with you. Anything we need help with, it's great to be able to do that. I consider them an asset to the area to be honest with you"* (Emer)

Shows sensitivity to other people's feelings and concerns & makes time to build relations

*"Very friendly, open, in for the chat, that's where you build your relationship"* (Sinéad)

*"That was the hook...Start Right was a bit more personal and that's why it worked"* (Gillian)

*"It's very hands on, personalised, very personalised"* (Sinéad)

*"It's like communication with somebody that actually knows what you're doing. First of all, we would have met quite a few times and that would have developed a relationship"* (Joanne)

*Carried out frequent on-site visits to enhance familiarity.*

*"Her getting to know us. It's really because of her getting to know us, is where it all developed from"* (Gillian)

Takes time to listen to others

*"If there was one skill it's just listening... it wasn't always what you could pull out of the bag in terms of resources...the single biggest thing I would think is listening to them and that the manager felt that someone would listen to them"* (Mary-Development Worker)

Demonstrates an open minded and non-judgemental attitude

*"Even though I'm doing this for a long time, I don't mind. They don't criticise, they just help and guide us. 'Whatever works for you' as they say"* (Emer)

# Self Management

This cluster of behaviours is about the way in which staff manage themselves in their interaction with different services.

## Self Awareness

is about being aware of own strengths and limitations, of own style of working, of own deeply held convictions and the source of these convictions, of own particular biases.

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Knows, owns  
and  
acknowledges  
own limitations  
and biases

*Mentoring is “a gradual process that needs time. You have to give the relationships time to develop” (Mary-Development Worker)*

Understands  
impact of  
behaviour on  
others

*“You have to be adaptable, every relationship is different” (Mary-Development Worker)*

Is willing to  
adapt  
behaviour  
where  
necessary

*Engaging at others’ levels (i.e. sit on the floor, etc.)*

*Adapts and adjusts communication style to suit personalities:*

*“(Mary) has been for me, my kind of personal connections with (Mary)” (Gillian)*

*“She’s just warmer, she’s easier to discuss things with” (Joanne)*

*“As accommodating as they possibly can be” (Claire)*





The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Demonstrates an attitude of 'mentor as learner'

*"From speaking to the girls, they have confidence in Mary that she knows what she's talking about, but that also she knows, she's coming from a child centred perspective and you have to respect that because that very much comes across in training and stuff like that and the same with Ailish when we'd see her, that comes across... It's all about how we can help the children and help the families and then that will improve the service. You know if we think of the children and families and then the service will improve naturally, and that very much comes across but it is important that they come from a childcare background because in childcare, I think you have so many people, 'experts' telling you what you should and shouldn't be doing and they've never spent a day in a childcare setting so i think it's important. I don't know. I personally would value the fact that they have the experience". (Claire)*

*Models 'wondering': "I wonder if..."*

Is aware of own team role and inclusive style of working

- Collaborates and works directly with the practitioner in working with children
- Works in an Inclusive way with all stakeholders; managers, practitioners, children and parents

*"To consider all staff really, because there's no point just working with the manager... You know like Mary has a good relationship with the girls inside. Definitely that!" (Aisling)*



# Self Management

## Adaptable and Flexible

is about being able to respond to changes in work schedules and patterns when necessary with sufficient flexibility and resilience to avoid letting frustration hinder progress.

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Accepts the need for quick response in certain situations

*“Mary was in next door...and she just popped in to know I was alright...it’s nice like. She would be available in that kind of way” (Claire)*

*“[Mary] made herself available whenever I needed her to, so she could interview with me, so that was another, for me personally that was a very practical support that I needed at the time” (Claire)*

Is willing and able to adapt working style to context

*“Even when she was in the rooms, she sat down and interacted with the children. You didn’t feel she was watching you. We worked away and she interacted with the kids. You didn’t feel you were being watched” (Tara)*



# Self Management

## Respect for Others

is about understanding others and appreciating differences. It is about valuing the contribution of each person to their organisation, as well as to the project.

The following are key indicators:

Evidence from Start Right

Has underlying trust in others to be professional

*"You've someone I feel isn't judging you, they're there to help"* (Joanne)

Is honest with other people

*"She gave honest feedback...she identified steps we could take to help so it was great"* (Joanne)

Respects parents and practitioners equally

*"When Mary used to come in, the one thing that I'd notice about them when they come in, they'd say hello to everybody, every parent and then because they used to be here quite a lot, they'd pop in... it was a partnership with parents as well."* (Sinéad)

*"The key to developing relationships with parents is knowing their child"*  
(Mary-Development Worker)

Organisations tend to rely heavily on knowledge and activity-based frameworks in terms of staff roles and responsibilities. Little, if any, attention is paid to the importance of interactions and the impact this has on any kind of effective programme/project. Quality services can only be achieved through the development of a competency model that focuses on behaviours and which provides practical examples of effective interactions. Qualifications don't always equate to quality – as Start Right has evidenced in its work in the Early Years, behavioural competencies are the foundation of effective programme implementation.



## Looking Back: Perspectives on Start Right

Early Years Managers' perceptions of Start Right is, ultimately, the deciding factor in their level of engagement with the project. Managers were asked how they would describe Start Right and what the programme represents for them. The consistent theme in their responses was that Start Right is people dependent – it is about making professional partnerships through personal connection. Managers described the personalised approach to support and the significance of having a Mentor who could engage in a very real sense with them. Principles of partnership, collaboration, consistent and reliable communication, trust and mutual respect underpin the work of Start Right. The programme is not just represented by a website, online support, or a service in the traditional sense. It is a living mechanism represented by a distinct approach to partnership that puts human interaction at the centre of change. It is the tangible outcomes and legacies of the behavioural competencies discussed in the previous section.

Managers describe Start Right staff as *“friendly, supportive, approachable, welcoming and very willing to help out”*. Start Right are people *“that you could go to if you wanted information or if you have a problem...probably before you went down more official routes”* (Claire- crèche manager)

Having engaged with Start Right for a three-year period, managers were invited to summarise what Start Right represents for them:

1

*“Their goal was to bring up the standard of the Early Years setting...and with that to bring you on a journey that would, you know, allow you to do that through training, through mentoring, through again consulting, to actually just having a basic chat with you, to telling you things were normal in the childcare setting and like it felt that their main aim was to bring the standards of the learning outcomes to give children experiences that they deserved... I would say they are partners in delivering learning, quality learning outcomes for children, and experiences and that's what they're about”* (Sinéad- crèche manager)

2

*“Start Right's goal is up-skilling staff and improving services... support...mentoring”* (Joanne- crèche manager)

3

*“Start Right has been a backbone to us really...they represent help, somebody to visit us and to guide us... and to give us a helping hand that would be it really...very much support really...I consider them an asset to the area to be honest with you”* (Emer- Preschool manager)



4

*“A support and a link. To link the services to find out from one another...they were about child outcomes and ...the focus they wanted to have on parents and families”* (Maeve-Preschool manager)

5

*“Start Right was a bit more personal and that’s why it worked...I really look at them now as that consultant agency... and for me that gives an extra layer of support”* (Gillian- EY manager)

6

Start Right fostered a sense that continuity of care is important for child transitions: *“they did seem to be aware of that importance because the preschool was based in the school. Whereas others don’t see that there is work going on for that transition, but they did, it’s just the way [Mary] came across. Not just talking about [Early Years], talking about early childhood in the school.”* (Maeve-Preschool manager)

What emerged from interviews and discussions with managers and practitioners is that their relationships with Start Right unfolded, evolved and strengthened over time as needs were identified and met. Partnership development is an ongoing process and was not fully developed once Start Right produced the ‘quick wins’. Start Right staff listened to what managers were saying about the challenges they experience and they worked together to put structures in place to address them. What Start Right was aiming to achieve and how services saw Start Right was a process that evolved in each stage of partnership development.

*“It seemed like the agenda evolved a lot more organically”* (Claire- crèche manager)





## Outcomes for Children

Building partnerships with Early Years settings is a process that takes time and commitment, as highlighted throughout this case study. Through Start Right's approach to building and maintaining relationships, EY settings in the Southside (Start Right model area) are better placed to provide high quality Early Years services for children and families.

*“The child’s needs should always be considered as the most important factor when developing working partnerships”.* Since January 2012, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have been working towards developing an Early Years Strategy which will focus on the lives of children aged from 0-6 years. An Early Years Strategy presents an opportunity to apply learning from projects such as Start Right and connect that learning to outcomes for children. In the absence of such a strategy, outcomes for children will be linked with the 5 National Outcomes for Children and Young People as outlined in ‘Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020’. Early Years settings are important environments that impact directly on all five outcomes for children. The following section highlights how outcomes for children are being enhanced through the Start Right approach of collaborative working with EY services.

### Children are active and healthy and have physical and mental wellbeing

High-quality early childhood experiences promote the health and well-being of children and families.

Trained Staff are more prepared to identify developmental concerns.

1

High quality EY settings help children develop:

- Good social networks
- Resilience
- Self-esteem
- Early experiences of friendships and positive relationships with adults

This is a protective factor in emotional well-being and lays the foundations for positive relationships later in life. These promote good mental health, social and cognitive development.

2

### Children have economic security and opportunity

Equality of access to quality, affordable and accessible EY services can play an important role in protecting children from poverty and social exclusion.

## Children are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development

High quality supports and services enhance early learning and development.

Through continuing professional development activities, managers and practitioners have increased knowledge and skills required to deliver a high quality service based on children's individual needs and interests.

3

- Staff who are motivated to up-skill and engage in continuing professional development, support children's educational and developmental achievements.
- Good relationships between the Early Years settings, parents and other community services and supports improves children's engagement in learning, behaviour, educational achievement.
- High quality mentoring in Early Years practice increases practitioner's ability to be responsive to children's needs. Staff who are more responsive to children, are more equipped to support their social and emotional development, which means children are more able and ready to learn.
- Early Years settings who work with other Early Years settings and who link with agencies and supports such as Start Right, Speech and Language Therapy, Tusla and Art Therapy provide children with a better chance of achieving positive outcomes in all areas of learning and development.

## Children are safe and protected from harm

Through Start Right's support of the Southside Early Years Managers Network, there is now a forum where managers discuss and plan for a broad range of issues relating to their settings, such as:

4

- Garda vetting procedures
- Early Years Inspections
- Training in child protection
- Health, safety, welfare and first aid.
- Healthy eating
- Indoor and outdoor play spaces

High quality, safe EY environments support children's all around development. They also provide opportunities for children to take risks and to think independently.

- Trained staff know how to respond to situations of child safety and protection
- Early Years settings are important environments where children can feel and be safe, explore and represent their own thoughts and feelings, learn how to deal with conflict, develop friendships, and are consulted about matters affecting them.

## Children are connected, respected and contributing to their world

Start Right has provided on-site mentoring, support and training to enable more effective engagement with parents.

5

Better outcomes for children are achieved:

- When information sharing between staff and parents is regular
- When parents are involved in decisions relating to their child's learning, care and education

Good relationships between Early Years settings, parents and the community improves children's engagement and educational achievement.

# Recommendations for Building Partnerships

- 1 Understand and respect the diversity of provision in the Early Years sector.
- 2 Become aware of Early Years managers previous experiences of being consulted and supported and understand how this may impact on the relationship.
- 3 Take time to listen to what managers and practitioners are saying, their experiences and what they need. Respond in a way that shows you heard. Partnerships are not built on 'experts' preconceived ideas of what settings need. They are built on foundations of collaboration and trust.
- 4 Build trust. This is the key to good working relationships .
- 5 Engage in shared decision making. This is an important factor in the long term sustainability of any change .
- 6 Provide as much information about the project as possible and as soon as possible. This reduces fear and uncertainty and promotes openness to change.
- 7 Acknowledge challenges experienced by EY managers and in the developing partnership.
- 8 Be prepared to engage in a 'dance of partnership' that is based on invitation, takes time and is a tailored match between what settings need and what the project can realistically provide.
- 9 Every Early Years setting is different. They have different management committees, managers, practitioners, children and families and operate in different contexts. Be prepared to engage with services differently, based on their needs.
- 10 Work towards engaging management committees. Working in full partnership with an Early Years setting means engagement with management committees, managers, practitioners, children and families.
- 11 Projects that aim to improve outcomes for children must work cooperatively with other agencies and supports such as the local City and County Childcare Committee, local Family Resource Centres, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency and Voluntary Childcare Organisations to provide the most consistent, coordinated and effective support to EY settings.





- 12 Children's Care and Education include aspects of their health, well-being, learning and development. In order to reflect the broader needs of children and families, Early Years settings need to be linked with each other and with other services in the community. Projects like Start Right have a role to play in connecting EY settings with wider services and supports and in supporting their essential engagement with families.
- 13 Regularly communicate the common purpose: enhancing positive outcomes for children.



# Recommendations for Training Provision and Mentoring

- 1 Encourage Early Years settings to collectively address barriers to up-skilling such as time, cost, location, venues and staffing. This prompts them to make the best use of their own resources and instils confidence that they can seek out new and creative means of professional development.
- 2 Motivate staff to engage in training opportunities and provide conversation around why training is important.
- 3 Consult EY managers and Practitioners about their training needs. Training that suits their particular needs will be most beneficial to them and the children in their service and will most likely be implemented in practice.
- 4 Understand the challenges experienced by practitioners when there are large numbers in attendance at training events. Lower numbers create a less intimidating and more interactive environment.
- 5 Having someone familiar either delivering training or co-facilitating is beneficial for practitioners.
- 6 Personal reminders of events and recognition of attendance are small but essential parts in building confidence in EY practitioners and managers and promoting their sense of professional identity.
- 7 Using and providing practical resources and materials in training and workshops events, motivates practitioners to carry out activities and to implement learning in practice.
- 8 Mentoring plays a key role in the continuous learning process that is professional development in EY practice. On-site mentoring is what managers and practitioner feel they need most.
- 9 An effective mentor has excellent communication skills, the ability to build and maintain relationships and demonstrates a flexible and adaptable approach to working with others.
- 10 High quality mentoring lowers staff turnover, decreases isolation, and increases responsiveness in practitioner interactions with children.

# Recommended Key Areas of Knowledge for an EY Mentor

The forthcoming National Early Years Quality Support Service will see Early Years Specialists working in partnership with Early Years managers and practitioners to implement both *Síolta* and *Aistear* and to enhance the quality of early care and education experiences for children and families. Start Right's mentoring process holds particularly important lessons for the personal qualities and workplace behaviours required of an effective mentor. The three identified competencies and related behavioural indicators are particularly useful tools in the recruitment and ongoing appraisal of Early Years Specialists and cover the following key areas of knowledge:

- Early Childhood Care and Education: babies, toddler, preschool age children (inclusive practice, Special Educational Needs, welfare, child development, child psychology, feeding, changing, toileting, care routines, sleeping)
- Importance of observations and planning, curriculum, routines, transitions, play environments
- Behaviour management
- Language, pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills
- Knowledge and understanding of the local context of EY practice. The local area, history of support and collaboration between EY settings and other services and supports
- Knowledge on government funding programmes (ECCE, CETS, and CCS)
- Knowledge of key quality, policy and regulatory documents (e.g. *Síolta*, *Aistear*, child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006, *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers*)
- Knowledge on building partnerships with families and the wider community
- Awareness of practitioner internal motivators and barriers: self-confidence, time, literacy, available support, learning style (visual, auditory, verbal, etc.)
- Knowledge on Human Resource (HR) practices (recruitment, policies, procedures, staff appraisal)
- Knowledgeable on changes within the sector, both nationally and locally.

## Final Thoughts

Start Right began working with Early Years services in a way that was new to managers and practitioners. Initially, managers were apprehensive about working with Start Right and wondered where the catch was. Through open and honest communication, Start Right slowly built relationships with managers. Over time as Start Right staff listened to what managers were saying about the challenges they experience, they were better able to support managers in a range of ways in order to provide a better quality service which would improve outcomes for children.

Start Right's approach is fully inclusive of all stakeholders involved in Early Years settings. They provide support and up-skilling opportunities for both managers and practitioners and they emphasise the vital role of management committees in supporting quality practice. It is essential, when providing support to Early Years services that work does not just focus on managers and practitioners, it must involve everybody.

Start Right emphasised the importance of working in partnership with parents and supported this in a number of ways.

Key features of the partnership process - consistency, adaptability and flexibility - meant that Start Right and Early Years services together could weave an approach to up-skilling and support that was tailored to the specific needs of these services and that will, ultimately, lead to better child outcomes.







# Appendix A

Recommendations for Policy



## Policy Note 1: Continuous Support

The new National Early Years Quality Support Service is a dedicated service provided nationally which is currently in the process of being rolled-out. With only 30 specialists being recruited for over 4,300 Early Years settings it is unclear how many settings the service will extend to, how closely the Early Years Specialist will be able to engage with settings and how settings might be prioritised for support. While every EY setting should be offered support, the danger would be that settings such as those in the Start Right model area would be seen to now not need support, when quite the opposite is true.

Gaining access to services and creating 'buy-in' is a process that takes time. This pre-development work creates an essential foundation and a culture of engagement that is necessary in order for support and up-skilling of staff and implementation of *Síolta* and *Aistear* to take place.

## Policy Note 2: Voluntary Management Committees

The Early Years specialists will be one element of the National Early Years Quality Support Service (NEYQSS). The objective of the NEYQSS is to enhance the quality of practice in early childhood care and education settings. This quality agenda will be achieved by effective coordination of 'state funded support services' being made available to the sector.

It is further recommended that those who work to 'coordinate state funded support' address the issue of inadequate Voluntary Management Committees. Clearly documented, well-developed and functioning management structures and operating processes provide the backbone of Early Years Settings. There needs to be a strategy which strongly encourages Voluntary Management Committees to have an Early Years professional or expert on the committee. While qualification requirements for the sector have improved in recent times, it is also essential that Management Committees engage in 'quality training' so they can support effective managers in providing a high quality service. Quality Early Years care and education is a whole service issue. The new Early Years Specialists would be well placed to set a precedent for Management Committee engagement. There is scope to work in an inclusive way with the full service: management committees, managers and practitioners.



## Policy Note 3: Investment

The international benchmark of investment needed for a high quality Early Years system is 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the OECD, Ireland spends only 0.4% of GDP annually in early childhood care and education (0-5yrs), compared to the OECD average of 0.7% GDP. This 0.4% takes in all services for children aged from 0-5years, including those in primary school. Two thirds of Early Years spending is in the infant classes of primary schools. Ireland therefore invests less than 0.2% GDP for services where children are not in school, and this is mostly done through the new free preschool year.

Increased investment in the sector is necessary in order to increase and maintain quality in early childhood care and education services. The research evidence shows that high quality services and supports in the early years enhances positive outcomes for children. Quality support and services can only exist where there is quality staff, and quality staff can only exist where there is quality training and support. Dedicated funding to support training for staff and development of the necessary infrastructure must be a priority. A survey carried out by Start Right in 2011, when the project began, identified accredited training opportunities to be a priority. As one of the NEYAI projects, Start Right was in a position to provide funding to assist in the up-skilling of staff and provided other non-accredited essential professional development opportunities which contributed to enhanced practice.

Managers and practitioners in Early Years practice need opportunities for continuous professional development opportunities in order to provide a service that enhances outcomes for children. Both accredited and non-accredited education and training opportunities are essential features of professional development. Training and professional development activities are mostly done on managers' and practitioners' own time and with little or no funding. Early Years practitioners are generally only paid for contact time with children. Other non-contact elements of quality practice such as planning, documenting, reflecting, evaluating, meetings and networking are usually carried out on their own time. Working conditions, pay, and availability of relief staff are key factors in quality services and impacts on practitioners and managers motivation and availability for professional development.

The National Early Years Strategy must be accompanied by increased public investment for training and ongoing professional development opportunities.



## Policy Note 4: Bring services together

Services with similar objectives to improve the standards of quality in Early Years services must be linked, cooperating and collaborating. The Early Years Inspection Service is at a critical stage in its restructuring. In acting now, there is an opportunity for strategic alignment of its structures with the new National Early Years Quality Support Service and with other supports such as the ABC Programme. This case study has documented how the Early Years Inspection team accommodated a peer learning exercise in the form of staff site-exchange visits. This is one example of how working together benefits the quality of the services. It provided opportunities for practitioner professional development. When knowledge and practice is enhanced, quality of practice can improve and therefore will most likely lead to increased compliance with regulations. Ultimately better outcomes for children will be achieved. Working together is a 'win-win'.

## Policy Note 5: Working partnerships

This case study highlighted how informal meetings between Early Years Managers and the Early Years Inspection Service, provides opportunities for managers to give feedback to the Inspection Service outside of the normal procedures. This can have a positive impact on their relationship. Visits of an inspection nature can bring tension for Early Years settings. While it is critical that settings who have serious breaches of quality receive bigger sanctions (larger fines and de-registration) there is real opportunity to support settings who are actively engaged in quality improvement and who are committed to achieving high quality care and education. Increased public funding in the sector should be linked to quality improvements and inspection reports. However the relationship between the Inspection Service and EY settings must be more collaborative, minimising tensions and focusing on positive outcomes for children.

"Essentially, working together is about putting the child's welfare first – above professional and personal differences and other considerations. The child's needs should always be considered as the most important factor when developing working partnerships"\*

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Start Right Limerick aims to improve outcomes for children under 6 years of age living in the Southside of Limerick City. Start Right is governed by 3 core principles:

**1 Sustainability:**  
The programme will leave a strong legacy of improved quality of practice and service capacity, as well as through the introduction of new practice.

**2 Service integration**

**3 The involvement of parents**

The Start Right Programme serves children by applying these principles in

- a Building quality and professionalism in early years services
- b Offering an improved range of services accessible through both statutory and voluntary services, such as Art Therapy, Infant Massage, and Home-based supports to parents
- c Improving communication and coordination between agencies to ensure that the children are at the centre of needs led, rather than supply led, service provision.

These case studies aim to highlight what statistics cannot: that for practitioners, parents and carers the quality of relationships and interaction between people is as important as the changes being introduced. Whether in the context of improving quality through a practice manager, building confidence in early years practitioners to engage with parents and other services, and learn from each other, or taking the time to support parents who would not have otherwise engaged with services, the stories contained in the case have two common themes:

- Parental engagement is essential to effective intervention
- Quality services require quality relationships

We hope you find these studies both interesting and practical.



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