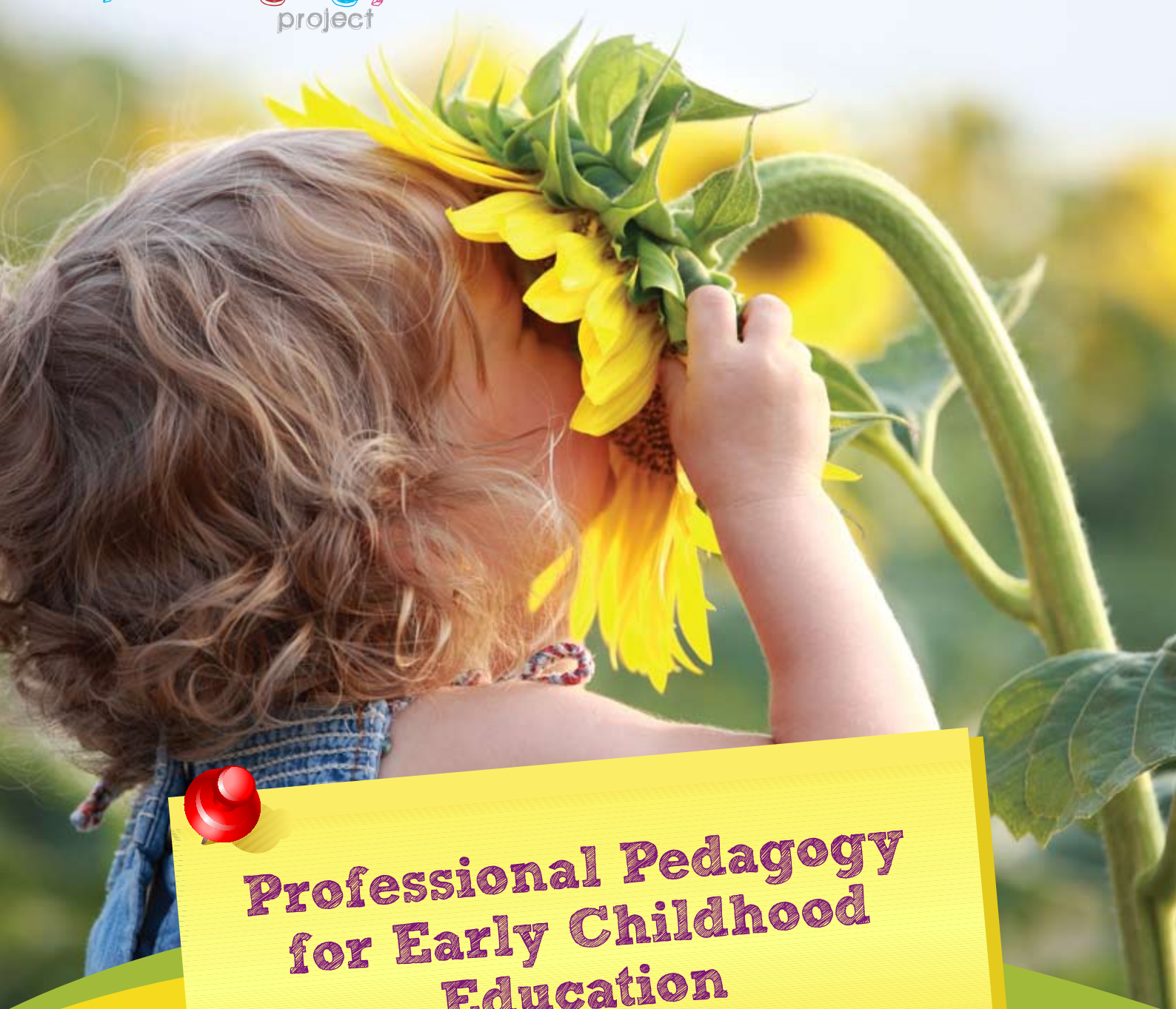


professional
pedagogy
project

NEYAI National Early Years
Access Initiative
Promoting Better Outcomes for Children & Families



Professional Pedagogy for Early Childhood Education



D.C.C.C.

Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd.
Coiste Cúram Páistí Chontae Dhún na nGall Teo.



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project

Supporting Every Child's Right to Early Education

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By Avril McMonagle

The Author

Avril McMonagle has worked as Manager of Donegal County Childcare since 2008 and before this she worked as part of the team that developed Aistear; the first national curriculum for early childhood education in Ireland.

Avril is the author of a range of early childhood education publications including *Building Pictures of Learning: Meaningful Assessment in Early Childhood* (2010) and was the development supervisor and editor of *Naíonáin le Chéile: Early Childhood Identity and Belonging Programme* (2011) and has had articles published in the OMEP Ireland peer reviewed *Journal of Early Childhood Studies* and the *Education Matters Yearbook*. She has written and presented a range of academic papers on early childhood care and education at national and international conferences and has written core modules for the Degree in Early Childhood Care Education and Health.

She has been responsible for the development of a range of innovative initiatives to enhance and support the work of the early childhood sector locally, regionally and nationally. Not least she was the driving force securing a significant investment in the form of the National Early Years Access Initiative funding to develop a new training and parental support programme aimed at informing future early childhood policy in Ireland. Donegal was only one of 11 projects nationally to secure funding and the only county north of Dublin to be successful.

Avril holds an Honours Degree in Early Childhood and a Masters Degree in Education from Queens University Belfast.



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Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd (DCCC)



D.C.C.C.

Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd.
Coiste Cúram Páistí Chontae Dhún na nGall Teo.

Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd. (DCCC) is a local government-supported agency that works for the development, sustainability and advancement of high quality early childhood care and education in County Donegal.

DCCC Mission Statement:

“Proactively working in partnership and effecting positive change with our partners, providers and key stakeholders and implementing the National Childcare Funding Programmes and Quality Standards on behalf of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs at local level in County Donegal.”

Background to the Professional Pedagogy Project



The National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) is a collaborative partnership between The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Mount Street Club Trustees, The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, The Early Years Education Policy Unit, The Department of Education and Skills and Pobal. This tailored initiative funded 11 projects nationally that collectively had the capacity to demonstrate innovative inter-agency responses to the provision of early childhood care, education and development, inform a community-based model to underpin the local delivery of joined up services to children and families; influence early years' mainstream practice and provision and contribute to the ongoing development of early years' policy. To read more about the NEYAI, please access the Pobal website www.pobal.ie.

Following a competitive funding application process between July 2010 and May 2011, the Donegal NEYAI Consortium successfully secured funding for an innovative 3-year professional development project under the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI). DCCC was the lead partner in a consortium project made up of representatives from a variety of local agencies with an interest in early childhood care and education to develop a new initiative called the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP). The Professional Pedagogy Project is one of only 11 demonstration projects nationally to be funded under a newly developed programme specifically devised for the advancement of early childhood care and education from 2011-2014.

Engaging with Siolta and Aistear through the Professional Pedagogy Project



The NEYAI is based on the recognition that Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) and Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) are the fundamental bedrocks and reference points for the future

growth and development of early childhood care and education in Ireland. Together they provide a framework of quality and practice guidance to inform the work of the early childhood care and education sector in working with children 0-6 years.

As Ireland's economic environment finds itself in a challenging situation, the need for quality, appropriate early intervention for children has never been more important. Early childhood service providers, educators and parents are feeling the strain with young children as vulnerable recipients of the negative impact on their immediate and wider social environment. The practical application of *Síolta* and *Aistear* through the Professional Pedagogy Project has the potential to provide consistent and appropriate care and education for children, both in out of home settings. The meaningful link with parents promoted by the PPP will value parents as partners in the child's learning and development and support parents in their role. Therefore the PPP reflects various aspects of the *Síolta* and *Aistear* frameworks but can be tailored to suit the individual capacity of early childhood service providers, parents and children.

The methods, practice and processes promoted within this document are underpinned by the principles and philosophy of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. Engagement with early childhood pedagogical practice as outlined will enable educators working with children 0-6 years to practically implement *Aistear* through their everyday practice and to use *Síolta* as a mechanism by which to measure their success in areas relating to professional pedagogical practice.

Acknowledgements

The Donegal Consortium would like to thank the following agencies and individuals who have contributed to the success of the NEYAI Professional Pedagogy Project:

- Project funders namely The Atlantic Philanthropies, The Mount Street Club Trustees, The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Early Years Education Policy Unit, Dept of Education and Skills and Pobal.
- The Donegal NEYAI Consortium and NEYAI Strategic Planning Group
- The NEYAI PPP Team - Claire McMonagle and Louise Toner - NEYAI Quality Mentors, Orán MacSuibhne - NEYAI Communications Officer and Avril McMonagle - Project Manager, DCCC.
- The NEYAI Team at Pobal
- The National Evaluation Team, Kieran McKeown and Trutz Hasse
- Participating early childhood services namely Little Stars Pre-School, Merville; Bizzy Bees Crèche/Playschool, Clonmany, Donagh Crèche Ltd, Carndonagh; Quigley's Point Community Centre Playgroup; Bomany Nursery and Montessori School Letterkenny; Errigal Montessori School and Crèche, Letterkenny; Raphoe Community Playgroup; Crossroads and Killygordon Community Playgroup Ltd; Little Stars, Laghey and Bundoran Community Childcare.

Terminology

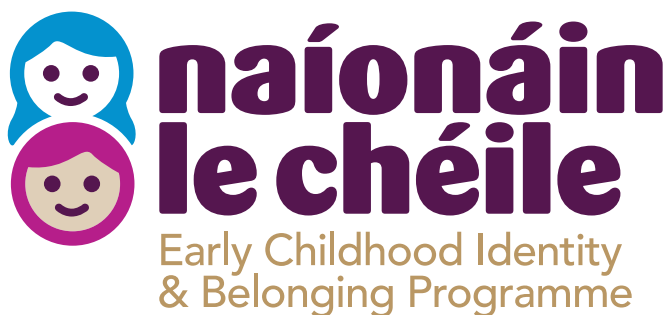
Children: The reader should assume that when the term 'children' is used, this is meant to include children with a range of abilities, personalities, strengths, needs, backgrounds and interests. The terms 'His/'Her' or 'He/She' are used intermittingly throughout the document to represent both boys and girls equally.

Parents: The term 'Parent' or 'Parents' is used to represent the people who care for the child, that is mothers, fathers, foster carers, step-parents, grandparents, single parents, heterosexual or same sex couples.

Early Childhood Educator: This generally used term describes all those who work in early childhood care and education services including Practitioners, Childminders, Teachers, Special Needs Teachers/Assistants, Playworkers and Volunteers.

Additional Resources to Support the Delivery of the Professional Pedagogy Project

The tools and templates required to support the Assessment, Documentation, Planning and Transition elements of this handbook can be found in Donegal County Childcare's **Building Pictures of Learning: Meaningful Assessment in Early Childhood** (2009). Building Pictures of Learning is a practical resource that aims to assist early childhood care and education services to implement meaningful assessment procedures to inform, support and enhance children's learning and development. The Learning Story Approach is used throughout the different sections as an effective, child-centred assessment approach that integrates, supports and enhances all aspects of learning and development; informs the provision of appropriate learning opportunities and reveals the uniqueness of the young child as a learner.



Guidance, information and practical examples of Child Well-being and Identity and Belonging can be found in Donegal County Childcare's **Naíonáin le Chéile: Early Childhood Identity and Belonging Programme** (2011). Naíonáin le Chéile is an innovative programme that provides practical training, meaningful activities and appropriate educational resources for early childhood educators working with children 0-5 years around the areas of diversity, individuality and identity and promotes a sense of belonging through the mediums of art and drama.

The delivery of the Professional Pedagogy training programme will draw upon all of or some elements of these existing DCCC training programmes.

Prologue: National Early Childhood Policy as Mechanisms for Quality Practice

It is clear that there is good political will for the development of high quality early childhood care and education in Ireland and the increased visibility of children in government policy in recent years is a welcome development. The forthcoming National Early Years Strategy will be a mechanism to build on the foundations of the preceding National Children's Strategy in a way that will require targeted and measurable outcomes for children.

Ireland now has at its disposal a range of contemporary, forward thinking frameworks on which to build quality early childhood practice including Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. These frameworks, used in conjunction with the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy and the Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Sector have the potential to transform early childhood care and education for the benefit of children, families, society and the economy as a whole.

Síolta is a quality assurance process which addresses all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education services. It



is designed to support all those concerned with the provision of quality early childhood care and education to participate in a developmental journey towards the improvement and enrichment of young children's learning experiences. The benefits of a set of overarching standards include assurance that there is consistency in the quality of provision for children between the ages of birth to 6 years, lending itself to an integrated approach to early childhood care and education.

Aistear is a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years. It provides information to help adults to plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners. Aistear describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding) that are important for children in early childhood and offers ideas and suggestions of how this learning can be nurtured. Aistear also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions with others, play and assessment.

The development of *Síolta* and *Aistear* represent important milestones in early childhood care and education in Ireland. For the first time, childcare services can avail of guidelines that have been developed to suit the unique and diverse needs of children growing up in Ireland. *Síolta* and *Aistear* build on and work in harmony with Irish legislative requirements, specifically the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (no 2) Regulations 2006, to enhance the quality of early childhood care and education services to children and families.

July 2011 saw the launch of a National Strategy to improve Literacy and Numeracy among children and young people called 'Literacy and numeracy for learning and life' 2011-2020. The Strategy acknowledges that children will develop good literacy and numeracy skills if those abilities are fostered in a consistent way from early childhood to the end of second-level education. This is a significant if not long overdue recognition of the importance of learning from birth and of the role of early childhood education in building solid foundations for all future learning.

The strategy is focussed on actions that the education system can take to ensure early childhood education services, primary and second-level schools provide the best possible opportunities for children to acquire good literacy and numeracy skills. The strategy seeks to address the significant concerns about how well children are developing in terms of literacy and numeracy skills that they need to participate fully in the education system, to live satisfying and rewarding lives, and to participate as active and informed citizens in society. Highlighted in the strategy is the need for the early childhood care and education sector to take charge of instilling literacy and numeracy skills into their curriculum plans as a means of ensuring that children are being supported through this area of learning and development right from birth.

Early Childhood - a distinctive and unique chapter in a child's life

A socio-cultural view of learning

Síolta and *Aistear* are built upon a socio-cultural perspective of child centred learning which highlights the social and cultural nature of learning and development in early childhood. A socio-cultural view suggests that learning leads the developmental process, with children acquiring the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understanding of their immediate environment as they interact with others.

Síolta and *Aistear* support a socio-cultural view of learning and development as it promotes the child as a competent learner from birth and as an active agent in his/her own development through his/her interactions with the world. Both frameworks promote the uniqueness of the child and embrace the notion of active learning, where children learn by doing things and through respectful and meaningful relationships with others. Although *Síolta* and *Aistear* are two separate frameworks, there are many benefits to using them together. *Aistear* will enable early childhood educators to develop their practice around many of the *Síolta* quality standards including curriculum, partnership with parents, identity and belonging, interactions and play.

Both frameworks are built upon a set of common underpinning principles that celebrate early childhood as a distinctive and

unique chapter in a child's life that will lay the underlying foundations for all future learning and development. In order to complement this view, the assessment response needs to be consistent with a socio-cultural view of learning and development where the child is a valued, active agent in the learning process. This requires a meaningful assessment approach such as the Learning Story Approach (section 4), to reflect the complexity of interactions between the child, the context and the people or objects that contribute to learning at any given time.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Aistear is a **curriculum framework** for children from **birth to six years**. It provides information to help adults plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners. Aistear describes the **types of learning** (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding) that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions for how this learning might be nurtured in children.

Aistear is based on 12 broad **principles**. There are many connections between these and the principles of Síolta. Each principle is presented using a short theoretical statement, which is then explained from the child's perspective. Aistear uses **four themes** that connect and overlap with each other to outline children's learning and development. The themes are:

Well-being

Identity and Belonging

Communicating

Exploring and Thinking

Guidelines offer support in using Aistear's principles and themes in working with children. These guidelines describe good practice in:

- building partnerships between parents and educators
- learning and developing through interactions
- learning and developing through play
- supporting learning and development through assessment.

Aistear is a distinctive curriculum framework as developmental domains and/or curriculum subjects are not used to frame learning opportunities. This type of curriculum framework overarches the whole of early childhood, a practice endorsed by the OECD in 2004. Aistear uses the 4 learning themes to present the content of children's learning and development. This reflects the holistic nature of young children's learning and development where each aspect of learning is interconnected and interdependent. In addition, each theme connects with most, if not all developmental domains and the subjects in the Infant Curriculum in primary schools.

Although Síolta and Aistear are two separate frameworks, there are many benefits to using them together. Aistear will enable early childhood educators to develop their curriculum and pedagogical practice around many of the Síolta standards including curriculum, partnership with parents, identity and belonging, interactions and play.

What does learning and development in early childhood look like?

When we think of young children, we tend to think of them in terms of their small physical size. It is important to remember that, although children will develop physically over time, they are whole human beings from birth. Therefore, learning and development in early childhood is **holistic** – meaning all aspects are interconnected and mutually dependent.

Aistear at a glance

Well-being

The theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy. Well-being has two main elements: psychological well-being (including feeling and thinking) and physical well-being.



Children's relationships and interactions with their families and communities contribute significantly to their sense of well-being. Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for and included. They also need to respect themselves, others and their environment.

Children become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are. This helps children to become resilient and resourceful and to learn to cope with challenge and change. Being flexible and having a positive outlook on learning and on life is crucial.

Physical well-being is important for learning and development as this enables children to explore, to investigate, and to challenge themselves in the environment. A growing awareness of their bodies and abilities is also part of this. The adult supports children's psychological and physical well-being by helping them to make healthy choices about nutrition, hygiene and exercise. The adult also helps children towards independence by providing them with choice in their activities and by giving children opportunities to make decisions and to take the lead.

In partnership with the adult, children will:

- gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements
- discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills
- show good judgement when taking risks
- express themselves creatively and experience the arts
- enjoy themselves and have fun through a variety of types of play
- develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe
- become reflective and think flexibly
- care for the environment
- show increasing independence and be able to make choices and decisions
- demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance.

Identity and Belonging

The theme of Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community.

From birth, children develop a sense of who they are. Children's sense of who they are is shaped by their characteristics, their behaviour and their understanding of themselves, their family and others.

Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or a connection with a particular group of people. When children feel a sense of belonging and sense of pride in their families, their peers and their communities, they can be emotionally strong, self-assured and able to deal with challenges and difficulties. This creates an important foundation for their learning and development.

Giving children messages of respect, love, approval and encouragement enables them to develop a positive sense of who

they are and a feeling that they have an important contribution to make wherever they are. Positive messages about their families, backgrounds, cultures and beliefs give them confidence to voice their views and opinions, to make choices and to help shape their own learning.

In partnership with the adult, children will:

- have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals
- feel that they have a place and a right to belong to the group
- be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures
- see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people
- express their views and help make decisions in matters that affect them
- understand the rules and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour
- interact, work co-operatively and help others
- demonstrate the skills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation and conflict resolution.
- see themselves as capable learners and show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning
- demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility
- experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests and linked to their home, community and culture
- be motivated and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.

Communicating

The theme of Communicating is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.

Communicating involves giving, receiving and making sense of information. Children do this by using non-verbal means of communication, talking, listening, thinking and understanding. Children communicate in many different ways including facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds and language. Children's language is more than words, phrases and sentences. It includes art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing and stories.

Being a good communicator is crucial to children's development. The adult encourages children to communicate by listening to them, interpreting what they are saying, responding to them and by modelling good communication. The adult also provides an environment which motivates children to interact with others and with the objects and places in it. By capturing children's interest and curiosity and challenging them to explore and to share their adventures and discoveries with others, this can fuel their thinking, imagination and creativity, thereby enriching communication. These early experiences support children in becoming confident and competent communicators.

In partnership with the adult, children will:

- use a range of body movements, facial expressions and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information
- explore sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition in language
- use language with confidence and competence for giving and receiving information, asking questions, requesting, refusing, negotiating, problem-solving, imagining and recreating roles and situations, and clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings
- be positive about their home language, and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations.
- use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world
- have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way
- share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, moving to music, role-playing and responding to these experiences
- express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing or painting
- listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments.

Exploring and Thinking

The theme of Exploring and Thinking is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning and refining their ideas.

Children use their senses, their minds and their bodies to find out about and make sense of what they see, feel and experience in the world around them. They gather information and develop new skills, including thinking skills. They form ideas and theories and test these out. They refine their ideas through exploring their environment actively and through interacting and communicating with adults and with other children.

Much of this happens through play and other experiences that allow children to be creative, to take risks and to make discoveries. As they learn, they retest their theories adjusting them to take on board new discoveries and new experiences. As well as building knowledge and developing skills, children also need to develop positive dispositions and attitudes towards learning. They have an innate drive to get to know the workings of their world. The adult can foster learning by planning activities for them through which they can experience success as learners. This means planning activities that are suited to children's individual needs and connect with their experiences and interests while at the same time challenging them to extend their knowledge and refine their skills.

In partnership with the adult, children will:

- engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials
- learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals and plants and their own responsibility as carers
- come to understand concepts such as matching, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length and capacity, in an enjoyable and meaningful way
- develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, negotiating and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers
- collaborate with others to share interests and to solve problems confidently using their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems
- make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas
- use books and ICT (software and the internet) for enjoyment and as a source of information
- demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves
- address challenges and cope with frustrations
- make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning.

Where do I find out more ...



The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009) NCCA

www.ncca.ie



The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006)

www.siolta.ie



Section 1:

Play is Work, Play is Learning

“Children have the right to play. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”

(UNICEF, 1989).

This section will consider:

- * **What is Play?**
- * **Learning and Developing Holistically through Play**
- * **Types of Play - What does play look like?**
- * **Promoting a Curriculum for Play**
- * **Supporting Language, Literacy and Numeracy through Play**

What is Play?

Play is a natural channel for young children's thinking, learning and development and is central to their holistic well-being. All children need and have a right to play. Play is what children do when they follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way and for their own reasons. Play physically strengthens children's bodies, expands their minds and influences many dimensions of development and is a powerful tool for learning. For young children, play is a way of strengthening meaningful relationships and co-operation with others and supports the development and use of language. An enriched play environment, indoors and outdoors, will stimulate children's imagination, extend their sense of wonder, enable them to experience success and develop a positive attitude towards learning. To achieve this, children need appropriate periods of time for learning through sustained involvement in play.

What do we know about Play and Learning in Early Childhood?

Play is not easily defined. It has many dimensions and can be many different things. Play can be frivolous, serious, absorbing and captivating. Play can be gentle or demanding, it can be simple or amazingly complex. Play is very personal to the individual child and is without rules.

What is easily defined though, is that play enables the child to make sense of the world in which she lives, the people in her world, concepts, reality, language and relationships. Essential to high quality play is that the child's play is freely chosen, self-directed and based on his personally meaningful interests. In other words, the play is owned by the child with the adult as a partner in learning. Play enables the child to extend her sense of wonder, experience success and develop a positive attitude towards learning.

As parents and early childhood educators, we need to provide the best play opportunities possible for children. Opportunities that are full of potential and possibilities to enable the child to explore, engage, question and discover. First-hand experiences through play are the primary means for the child to actively engage with his environment and to construct knowledge, meaning and understanding. The development of the child's self-image and feelings of self-worth are also accessed through play. Therefore, multiple opportunities for sustained involvement in play alongside opportunities for shared thinking, discussion and talk between adult and child are essential for learning, growth and development.



Play brings a wealth of benefits in all areas of the child's well-being, learning and development.

Physically, play enables children to gain small and large motor control and to practice and refine skills. Regular physical activity promotes a healthy attitude towards nutrition and physical well-being.

Cognitively, play stimulates memory, imagination, concentration and creativity. Play provides a vehicle for the child to explore ideas, question, predict and solve problems.

Linguistically, play leads to the development of verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of their experiences through language.

Emotionally, play enables children to name, recognise and talk about their feelings. When children are able to do this, they are better able to cope in times of stress, react appropriately to difficult situations and interact with their peers.

Socially, play makes it possible for children to form relationships, learn the rules of behaviour, share, negotiate, cooperate and be part of a group.

Spiritually, play nurtures spiritual growth as a natural process for children as it follows their natural instincts and curiosities. Play facilitates children's sense of wonder and facilitates the development of respect and value systems.

Learning and Developing Holistically through Play

Together with a sound knowledge of the child's individual stage of development, the educator can ensure that even the most everyday activity can become a valuable holistic learning experience for the child. When we think of the young child, it is important to see him as 'whole' in terms of his learning and development. For example, if different aspects of a child's development are divided into individual strands, the child can be seen as a collection of different bits and pieces instead of a whole person. When the young child is developing physically, he is also developing ideas, feelings and thinking skills at the same time.

Development and learning are therefore interconnected, interdependent and inseparable. When educators view child development in this way and plan play and learning opportunities accordingly, a holistic approach is being utilised. The physical, social and emotional context in which children live has a powerful influence on the effectiveness of learning opportunities. For example, children's ability to develop relationships with others is affected by their self esteem, their ability to communicate, to move and to think. It is important to remember that while children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved through sensitive and timely intervention.

Aistear provides a framework for holistic learning and development brought to life by an adult who creates a meaningful play environment, interacts with children when appropriate, co-constructs learning through questioning, suggestion, demonstration and encouragement, and monitors and assesses both the children and the activity to inform future planning.

Types of Play and their Value to Development and Learning

Good quality play provision begins with providing activities to stimulate all the areas of development and learning. This includes **Imaginative (Pretend) Play, Construction (Manipulative) Play, Creative Play and Physical Play.**

What is Imaginative Play?

Imaginative play includes pretend, fantasy and symbolic play, often referred to as role-play. Through imaginative or **pretend play**, children can practice and come to terms with different aspects of daily life. Role reversal is very common in imaginative play and many children like to use dressing up clothes as part of their imaginative play-these are wonderful props and allow children to extend imagination and play. **Fantasy play** is common between the ages of three and eight, when children pretend to be, for example a superhero or an action figure. This type of play decreases as a sense of reasoning increases. **Symbolic play** happens when children use an object in their play but pretend it is something else, for example pretending buttons are money.

How does Imaginative Play benefit Development and Learning?

Imaginative play develops self-expression as well as giving children the opportunity to explore their experiences. Children solve problems during imaginative play, as they act out things that have happened or could happen. Imaginative play helps children to see things from others' point of view. It develops social skills, as children often play together for such activities, and fine and gross motor skills – for example dressing up will require children to use fine manipulative skills, whereas running around pretending to be an action figure will help develop co-ordination and balance.

What is Construction (Manipulative) Play?

This type of play can use a range of materials including bricks, lego, and train sets. There is usually an end product but for young children this is not the most important thing, as they are more interested in the process of what they are doing and often do not have an end product in mind when they start. Young children will often not decide 'what it is' until well into the work. Older children are more concerned about the end product and will often set out to make a particular thing. Some older children find it difficult to work constructively without knowing what end product they are aiming to produce-they cannot get started until they have a clear idea in mind.

How does Construction (Manipulative) Play benefit Development and Learning?

Manipulative play is suitable for all stages of play as it can be an individual activity such as puzzles, activities carried out alongside each other such as building with bricks (parallel), or done in groups such as train sets or large floor puzzles (co-operative). Children can become fully engrossed in an activity and this strong concentration should not be broken as it disrupts their train of thought and reduces potential satisfaction. It is important that there is adequate time for a child to complete an activity once started. In this type of play the adult should offer suggestions and encourage children to complete their task. The adult can develop language skills by actively encouraging children to describe what they are doing.

What is Creative Play?

Creative play covers a wide range of activities from art and craft work such as drawing, modelling and painting, to self expression through music, drama, puppetry and dance. Similar to manipulative play, activities can be carried out alone or as part of a group.

How does Creative Play benefit development and Learning?

A lot of learning takes place through creative play – children can learn about the properties of materials, they see and can create pictures, patterns, shapes and symbols. When a wide range of materials are offered, children can learn about different colours and textures. Creative play offers the opportunity for children to develop fine manipulative skills because of the precise nature of many of the movements involved in activities such as painting, cutting, sticking and drawing. It also allows children to experiment and make discoveries for example through colour mixing. Adults should not attempt to make a child's creative work seem more acceptable to adult eyes. They should avoid interfering and making statements such as 'if you put this here it will look more like a house'. This can lead to a child becoming dependent on an adult for ideas and reduce a child's creativity. It is much more important that adults praise children for their attempts and make them feel proud of their work. Work should be displayed without being altered, but by using the skills of display an adult can present the work effectively.

What is Physical Play?

Physical Play covers many different activities, which can be indoor or outdoor. It can involve the use of equipment like climbing frames, balls or hoops or may require no equipment at all. Children enjoy climbing, running, jumping and balancing either in natural environments such as woods or parks, or on manufactured large equipment such as balancing beams and tunnels.

How does Physical Play benefit development and Learning?

Physical activities are not only healthy, as they encourage children to eat and sleep well, but also develop self-confidence and physical confidence. Physical play develops both fine and gross motor skills as well as muscle control. It develops an awareness of space and develops an ability to take risks. Outdoor play often involves others and so it develops skills of turn taking and co-operation. It is important to provide opportunities for physical play which are not too challenging for children but not too easy as they quickly become bored. Too often, adults supervising physical play do so from a distance and do not become involved with the play. Closer attention would allow the adult to anticipate the next stage of development and make suitable provision for it while ensuring a safe and secure environment is maintained.

Promoting a Curriculum for Play

Teaching young children is a creative process. Educators do not need to follow a prescribed programme as might someone teaching adults a class in biology or history. Nor can teachers simply react to what happens each day, without any goals or plans in mind. Rather, early childhood educators depend on a curriculum framework that sets out a philosophy, goals, and objectives for children as well as guidelines for teaching that address all aspects of a child's holistic development. An early childhood curriculum provides the framework for what actually happens in a planned environment where children interact with materials, their peers and adults. The primary goal is to help young children use the environment productively and see themselves as capable learners - as individuals who are developing the skills and understandings that will enable them to make sense of the world and to succeed in it.

A curriculum is a written plan that sets out:

- **The goals for children's development and learning**
- **The experiences through which they will achieve these goals**
- **What educators and parents do to help children achieve these goals**
- **The materials needed to support the implementation of the curriculum.**

There are many comprehensive approaches to the early childhood curriculum designed to promote young children's learning and development. Over the past twenty years, many countries, including Ireland, have adopted a national early childhood curriculum to support early childhood educators to provide appropriate early learning experiences for children. Aistear represents Ireland's first curriculum framework that captures the early childhood phase – from the time a child is born to the time she completes her first year in primary school.

Each curriculum approach puts forward its own particular view of the child, childhood and the learning and development process. However, play-based curriculum models have much in common. Play-based models such as Aistear are based on the idea that children learn through active involvement with their environment and that this is best achieved through play. They merely differ in the structure and framework provided for children's learning and the emphasis they place upon certain aspects of that learning. All play-based models acknowledge that childhood is a sensitive learning time and that children are highly receptive to all experiences.

Adopting a specific approach to the delivery of the early childhood curriculum promotes a shared framework for understanding of learning and development for educators and parents. It is essential that Early Childhood Educators are not only familiar with their own national early childhood curriculum but that they also familiarise themselves with the theory and practice relating to other models of early childhood education. This enables educators to critically analyse different approaches and to gain a broader perspective of their own practice.

Providing a Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers

One of the key strengths of the Aistear curriculum framework is that it provides consistency for learning experiences across the age range from 0-6 years. The broad learning themes can be adapted to suit children's differing ages and abilities. When planning an Infant-Toddler curriculum, it is useful to consider the following factors:

1. Infants learn holistically. Infants do not experience social, emotional, intellectual, language, and physical learning separately. Adults are most helpful to the young child when they interact in ways that reflect an understanding of the fact that the child is learning from the whole experience, not just the part of the experience that the adult gives attention.
2. Relationships are primary for development. The infant is dependent on close, caring, ongoing relationships for positive physical, social, emotional and intellectual growth. Infants develop best when they are sure of having trusted caregivers who can read their cues and respond to their needs.
3. Infants are developing their first sense of self through contact with others. An infant or toddler learns most of how he or she thinks and feels by imitating and incorporating the behaviours of those who care for her or him—how they first see themselves, how they think they should function, how they expect others to function in relation to them.
4. Home culture is an important part of a child's developing identity. Because an infant's sense of self is such a crucial part of a child's make-up, early care must ensure that links with family, home culture and home language are a central part of the curriculum.
5. Infants are active, self-motivated learners. Environments and activities that keep motivation, experimentation, and curiosity alive must be constructed to facilitate the infant learning process.
6. Infants are not all alike—they are individuals with unique temperaments. Because of these differences, educators need to see each child as an individual.
7. Language skills and habits develop early. The development of language is particularly crucial during the infant-toddler period. Quality education and care provides many opportunities for infants to engage in meaningful, experience-based communication with adults and have their communications acknowledged and encouraged.
8. Environments are powerful. Infants and toddlers are strongly influenced by the environments and routines they experience each day. This is particularly true for very young infants who cannot move themselves from one environment to another. The physical environment, group size, daily schedules, plans and routines must foster the establishment of small intimate groups in which relationships with trusted adults can develop.

Supporting Language, Literacy and Numeracy through Play

“ Literacy and numeracy are among the most important life skills that our schools teach. No child should leave school without having mastered these skills to the best of their abilities. Literacy and numeracy skills are crucial to a person's ability to develop fully as an individual, to live a satisfying and rewarding life and to participate fully in our society. Ensuring that all young people acquire these skills is one of the greatest contributions that we can make to achieving social justice and equity in our country. ”

(Ruairi Quinn, TD Minister for Education and Skills, 2011).

Early experiences that support the development of children's communication skills (such as their awareness of verbal and non-verbal communication; their knowledge of sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition; their awareness of symbols such as print and pictures; the opportunities that they have to become familiar with and enjoy print in a meaningful way; and the opportunities that they have to use mark-making materials) play a key role in the development of their literacy skills. Their awareness of materials, shape, space, pattern and difference, classifying, matching, comparing and ordering are important for the development of numeracy. A range of skills are developed by exposing children to language, nursery rhymes, pictures, objects to compare, measure and count, books and environmental print. Through meaningful and timely interventions, the educator supports children to build their understanding of literacy and numeracy through natural play experiences in their day to day lives. The knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions developed in these early years impact significantly upon their later literacy and numeracy learning experiences.

What do Síolta and Aistear say about language, literacy and numeracy?

Síolta and Aistear place a particularly strong importance on the acquisition of language, literacy and numeracy in early childhood. **Communication, Partnership with Parents** and **Interactions** are all cornerstone considerations in promoting early literacy and numeracy skills and are interwoven throughout both frameworks.

Attention is given to the importance of encouraging children to communicate through a wide variety of mediums such as books, songs, nursery rhymes, drawing and painting helping children to communicate and understand many of their daily experiences. One of the four central learning themes of Aistear is dedicated to **Communicating** which highlights the crucial role of the adult in being an effective role model so that children develop a positive and meaningful outlook on literacy and numeracy provided through meaningful and stimulating learning opportunities in early childhood.

In promoting children's literacy and numeracy development, the aims and goals of the **Exploring and Thinking** theme of Aistear also play an important role. When children are enabled to explore the environment and are given a chance to problem solve and investigate, they can make sense of the world around them and develop new skills. Children will naturally explore experiences that they are interested in therefore it is important that educators and parents ensure that activities are fun for children when exploring concepts and skills such as early literacy and numeracy so that positive dispositions are developed for lifelong learning and enjoyment.

Aistear and Síolta both highlight the significant role that parents play as a child's first educator. Many early reading and literacy skills are developed in the home and continued in the early childhood environment. Through an active partnership between parents and Early Childhood Educators, the development of each child's attitudes, dispositions and skills in this area can be supported and strengthened. *(For further information, see Síolta, Standard 3: Parents and Families and Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice: Building partnerships between parents and practitioners).*

Interactions are fundamental in learning to communicate. Aistear places particular importance on this area and in particular the importance of regular adult/child and child/child interactions. Interactions are at the heart of good quality learning experiences. Whilst many early reading and early literacy dispositions and skills are promoted through interactions, it is also important to remember that it is positive and meaningful interactions that make a child's experiences enjoyable and fun! *(For more information on interactions see Síolta, Standard 5: Interactions and Aistear Guidelines for Good Practice: Learning and developing through interactions).*

Supporting Children to become Readers for Life

A child will become a reader for life not by merely learning to read but when he has developed an interest and passion for the process of reading. The most successful way of supporting a child to develop the dispositions to become a lifelong reader is by making the process of reading something enjoyable and interesting from the earliest age possible. In helping children to become readers for life, many skills need to be developed; and in developing these skills children are also exploring many of the basic concepts of numeracy development. Although these are two very different concepts they are interconnected in the manner which they can be explored by children.

Reading is essentially the ability to recognise and understand words or sentences but is not a solitary skill. 3 key interconnecting elements are crucial to the process of supporting literacy and numeracy development:

1

Communication

(verbal or non-verbal) to acquire, understand and use a wide base of vocabulary

2

Early literacy and numeracy

(writing, drawing, number concepts and language) to develop skills necessary to recognise and recreate letters, numbers and awareness of numeracy concepts such as shape, size, measurement, space and one to one correspondence

3

Reading skills

to be able to interpret what letters, words or sentences mean when put together.

1

Communication: the ability to give, receive and make sense of information

Communication is essentially how children acquire an understanding of everything around them right from birth, ranging from vocabulary that represents objects, to methods of expressing themselves. Communication can be through verbal means such as babbling, talking / conversing, singing or saying nursery rhymes. It can also be through non-verbal means such as dancing, musical instruments, art, facial expressions, pointing, body movements or gestures.

From birth, a child's communication skills undergo vast developments and changes. Initially, infants communicate through methods such as crying, cooing and babbling. At around 8 - 10 months of age, children can begin to understand what words mean, progress to saying their first words at around 10 – 15 months of age and continue to build up to multiple word sentences and an understanding of a wide range of vocabulary.

Why is communication important for literacy and numeracy?

Communication provides children with the necessary tools to question, understand and represent all that they see, hear or experience. Having an understanding of a wide base of vocabulary plays an important role in children's abilities to understand what they are reading later on. Right from an early age, as their vocabulary base begins to build up, children begin to link what they see in books, signs and print to words they know or an experience they may have already had. Communication skills are also crucial in further extending children's knowledge for example, reading books can be used to help a child deal with a new experience such as the arrival of a new sibling or to explore different lifestyles and cultures.

As children progress and develop, they learn to communicate verbally, understand language and recognise that objects and words in print have meaning. Positive adult/child interactions are crucial to the acquisition of language, vocabulary and communication skills. It is through interactions that adults can explain what words mean and also extend what children are learning through open questions and information sharing.

- **What do you think...?**
- **How do you think...?**
- **Why do you think....?**

How can I support early communication skills?

1. Point to and name objects/people for babies and toddlers within their environment for example, door, dog, cup, bus, Mammy, Jack etc. Use picture books and day to day experiences to build up their understanding and use of vocabulary. Name concepts and use them in general communication with children, for example the very heavy bucket, up high in the sky, low on the ground.
2. Use nursery rhymes, songs and poems that rhyme to encourage children to play around with new words/sounds and to become more secure and confident in using their newly acquired language and to reaffirm numerical concepts, for example 'twinkle twinkle.....up above the world so high....' Children usually enjoy rhyming words and sentences as they are easier to pick up, remember and use in sequence.
3. Talk to children, take time to listen to what they say and answer their questions. Avoid surface communication, ask open ended questions and give children the opportunity to lead the conversation. Engage in intellectually stimulating conversations with children, use books, themes and topics to explore new words and support children to understand these new words and relate them to their environment.

The importance of songs and rhymes

Nursery rhymes are often regarded as irrelevant to young children today. This is a grave mistake. Not only do nursery rhymes support children to understand numerical concepts, singing and reciting nursery rhymes is one of the best - and easiest - ways of helping children to develop good reading and writing skills. Why is this? The answer lies in the rhythm and rhyming words. For a child to become a successful reader and writer he/she needs to develop sensitivity to rhythm and rhyme – and nursery rhymes are packed with both.

The ability to detect the sounds that make up words (phonological awareness) is essential to literacy success. The rhythm of the nursery rhyme helps phonological awareness by breaking up the words into syllables, for example In-cy Win-cy Spid-er ... The child who hears lots of nursery rhymes from an early age will develop the ability to segment words without even realising it. When the child starts to write, he/she will have a head start in breaking down words into their separate sounds in order to represent these sounds with letters or letter clusters.

Successful literacy development also depends on the ability to detect rhyme. This leads to the more refined skill of breaking up a word into its initial sound and the end unit which produces the rhyme. For example, w-all/f-all, J-ill/h-ill, p-eep/sh-eep. Regardless of modern electronic gadgets and novelty toys, nursery rhymes are the perfect way to stimulate and develop a child's confidence in using language. Traditionally, nursery rhymes have been passed on orally from adult to child. Adults need to continue this tradition, safe in the knowledge that they are making an extremely important contribution to a child's language and literacy development.

2 Early literacy and numeracy

Early Literacy: a child's emerging reading and writing skills before they are able to read or write independently for example, scribbling/drawing, identifying, naming and sounding letters.

Early Numeracy: a child's emerging recognition of number and mathematical ideas for example, building, sorting, counting and measuring.

Early literacy and numeracy development does not simply happen; rather, it is a social process, embedded in children's relationships with parents, grandparents, extended family members, siblings, teachers, caregivers, friends and the wider community. Even though we can classify the different stages of literacy and numeracy development as two separate pathways, these pathways are interlinked to such an extent that we cannot take each one in isolation. Children are developing literacy skills while at the same time, through the same experience can be understanding a numeracy concept. Early literacy skills are the starting blocks which help a child be able to understand that letters are made up by a combination of lines, curves and circles and that when combined together, make up specific sounds, which make words with a specific meaning. Early drawing and writing begins with a lot of experimentation by children using large arm movements. Over time,



these movements become smaller and more controlled by the hand. As this type of hand control and strength builds up, a child's ability to make shapes, lines, curves and circles emerge, which later combine to represent letters.

Early numeracy skills involves having the skills to use numbers and mathematical ideas such as problem solving, measurement and spatial awareness. Children should have access to fun experiences where they are learning how to classify, measure, identify and recognise numbers, count and become familiar with shapes and size. These skills can be encouraged and achieved by involving children in various every day activities in the home such as sorting the shopping, measuring or weighing the ingredients whilst baking or cooking and singing finger rhymes and songs.

Whilst reading a book, drawing attention to text going from left to right, a number on a page and positional words such as 'under/over/behind/on top of/beside' will not only build the child's vocabulary, but also introduce early mathematical language.

Interactions and relationships are also central to all children's learning and development. Good quality interactions between the key worker/ staff and children will help build strong relationships especially when the activity is meaningful and enjoyable. Spending one to one time with a child to read them a story which also introduces number concepts such as big, small, colour and number, or activities such as stacking cups, sorters, jigsaws and water or sand play will ensure that concepts are being explored in a fun and meaningful way, in a manner which is comfortable for the child.

Why is early literacy and numeracy important for lifelong readers?

Early exposure to writing materials such as crayons, paint, markers combined with regular exposure to books helps children to become visually familiar with letters/words and how to draw and write them. Exposure to number and mathematical ideas from an early age will also build a firm foundation for children to become confident with numeracy concepts which will ensure they develop a positive disposition towards future numeracy experiences.

How can I support early literacy and numeracy skills?

1. Provide materials such as paper, cardboard, chalk boards, crayons, markers or chalk to explore scribbling, mark making, writing and drawing.
2. Be a good role model for reading and numeracy. Read out information on signs or posters, sing counting or memory songs, draw attention to the time on the clock.
3. Provide an environment that enables early numeracy skills to flourish, encourage opportunities for children to interact with activities that explore skills such as measuring, predicting, sorting, sequencing, patterns, matching and counting. Have a picnic with your child and ask them to sort the resources needed. Help them count how many plates, cups and forks that are needed and to pick a blanket that is big enough for everyone to sit on.
4. Activities such as shape sorters, treasure baskets, sand and water play and looking at picture books can be used with younger children to help strengthen early numeracy and literacy skills as spatial awareness, shape, numbers and language are encouraged.
5. Exploring nursery rhymes can also promote both literacy and numeracy concepts for example the nursery rhyme of 'The grand old duke of York' will develop new vocabulary, explore rhyme whilst also developing an awareness of space and position in the rhyme, "when they were up they were up and when they were down they were down".

3 **Reading:** the ability to recognise, understand and make sense of words, print or sentences.

Reading needs several skills such as letter/sound recognition, language/vocabulary skills, and the ability to understand what a word means by sounding out letters and interpreting its meaning. It is through reading with an adult that children learn the difference of sharing information through conversation and reading, for example, sharing information through the medium of print or picture format as opposed to verbal communication and sharing of information.

Encouraging children to read and to enjoy books from a young age enables them to develop a positive, lifelong interest in the process of reading as well as being a more successful reader. Reading is a skill that if developed early in life, will give a child a sense of accomplishment and enjoyment for years to come.

How can I support early reading skills?

1. Encourage children to notice print, number and symbols around them and try to guess what it means for example, road

- signs, signs on doors, maps, etc
2. Read together often, on a one to one basis or in small/large groups as appropriate to the children's ages.
 3. Use a variety of types of reading materials such as books, newspapers and comics.
 4. Use books as part of daily routines in an early childhood setting and as an enjoyable experience between adults and children. For example, have an allocated time each morning when you sit down to read a child's favourite story or before they go to sleep. Remember that it is the children who enjoy reading that will enjoy it throughout their lives.
 5. Provide a print rich environment for example, names on coat hooks, picture and names on toy boxes, labelling of environment features.
 6. Let children choose their favourite book, even if they choose the same one often. This is the book they enjoy most and helps children associate reading as something fun and enjoyable. Children often feel secure in knowing what to expect. Encourage children to retell their favourite story or to guess what's coming in advance.
 7. Provide a wide variety of books for children that are suitable for their age and stage of development.

How do communication, early literacy and numeracy and reading skills relate to each other?

A range of communication, literacy and numeracy skills are interconnected and crucial in developing enthusiasm for reading for life. As each skill develops, it has a knock on effect on the other skills. Through the build up of vocabulary, scribbling/drawing/writing, singing and exposure to books, pictures and print as a baby, toddler and pre-schooler, the foundations are being laid for children to make a connection between what words mean, what letters and numbers look/sound like, how words are made up of different letters being put together and what these words mean.



It is important to note that all of these skills are best developed during day to day routines and don't need to be 'taught' For example, pointing out animals while out for a walk to extend vocabulary, writing a shopping list together and reading as part of a sleep routine for enjoyment. Focussed or 'taught' reading in the early years may deter children from actually enjoying these processes if they feel pressured.

Using Books for Second Language Acquisition

Learning a second language (Gaeilge or any other language) is a great way to boost children's brain development. Educational studies have consistently shown that children who are regularly exposed to a second language:

- have better general reading and comprehension skills
- appreciate diversity and cultural differences
- have increased creativity and problem-solving skills
- have a better grasp of their first / native language and vocabulary
- have an improved ability to communicate
- have better job opportunities.

As Gaeilge

But how do you begin teaching a young child a second language (Gaeilge), especially if you can't speak it yourself or if you only have a 'cúpla focal'? A great and easy way to introduce a second language to children is through Irish books

- Start to introduce Irish books when the child is learning their first language. Children, at a very young age, have a great ability to absorb language and in today's world a second language is not a luxury but a necessity
- Don't ever force it. Gently guide children into the new language journey. Be confident in what you are doing
- Picture books can be used to begin with, which will give you the opportunity to give children Irish vocabulary
- Teach the Irish words alongside the English words. It's as easy as pointing to a dog and saying 'dog' followed by 'madra'
- Read often with the child. Many Irish books now have CD's that accompany them
- Read a variety of materials including picture books, big books and small books, poetry books.

Planning for Early Literacy and Numeracy in the Early Childhood Setting

The Learning Environment:

Provide a range of reading/writing/numeracy materials in all areas of the learning environment, for example magazines, newspapers, books, pens, crayons, paint, chalk, blocks, objects that can be compared and matched for size, weight, shape and pattern.

- Are there reading and writing materials available in all areas of the environment?
- Are there resources available to children to measure, weigh, count and divide?
- Are there ICT experiences available to children on a daily basis?
- Are all materials labelled with both the name and the picture?
- Are there opportunities for children to explore a range of mark making materials?
- Are there books/signs/ labels in different languages including Irish?
- In what areas can children explore shape, size and pattern?

Play

Provide a range of play experiences that centre around literacy and numeracy which can be adult or child led, give children the opportunity to explore concepts through play.

- Are play experiences with literacy or numeracy learning outcomes planned across different areas of the learning environment?
- Is there an opportunity for child-initiated play centred on literacy and numeracy learning?
- What mechanisms are in place to scaffold children's literacy and numeracy learning?
- Is literacy and numeracy learning included in the assessment process?

Relationships and Communication

Understanding the adults role and the importance of building strong relationships in the development of literacy and numeracy.

- Are staff engaging in open ended communication with children?
- Are conversations meaningful?
- What opportunities are available for one to one and group communication?
- Do adults demonstrate how to use literacy and numeracy, when to use them and for what purpose?



1. **Facilitate children's right to play:** all children have a fundamental right to play.
2. **Respect play:** respect the culture of children's play and the diverse background and life experiences of all those in the early childhood setting as a positive resource to inform play.
3. **Model inclusive behaviour, practice and attitudes:** ensure that play opportunities are fully inclusive, identify and respond to any physical or organisational barriers to play for all children.
4. **Enable a culture of participation:** consult with and listen to children, respond to their perceptions, views, interests and involve children in planning play experiences.
5. **Use play as a learning vehicle:** use play to develop a deeper understanding of the child and his unique needs and interests and to deliver a curriculum appropriate to all children in the early childhood setting.
6. **Develop professional knowledge, skills and abilities:** responsive communication skills, effective interaction strategies, keen observational and scaffolding skills will enable the educator to maximise the potential of children's play experiences.
7. **Use Aistear and Síolta to inform your practice:** link play and learning experiences to the themes and goals of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and reflect on your progress through the Síolta Standard 6 on Play.
8. **Supporting Children to become readers for life:** the most successful way of supporting children to develop the dispositions to become lifelong readers is by making the process of reading something enjoyable and interesting from the earliest age possible.

Where can I find out more ...

The following will provide educators with additional information on the areas discussed in this section and provide a broader knowledge for participating in the training and development element of the programme.

Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, 2009 (NCCA, Dublin).

- **Learning and Developing through Play** is a section within Aistear's Guidelines for Good Practice. Here you will find information on how to prepare the play environment and using play across Aistear's four themes.
- Aistear underpinning research paper entitled **Play as a context for Early Learning and Development** is available to download from www.ncca.ie
- **Aistear Toolkit** is available to download from www.ncca.ie

Ready Steady Play: A National Play Policy (2004) available at www.dcy.gov.ie

With the launch of Ready, Steady, Play! A National Play Policy in March 2004, Ireland became one of the first countries in the world to produce a detailed national policy on play. The reason for the development of such a policy by Government was to honour commitments made in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the National Children's Strategy (2000) and the Programme for Government (2002). The publication of the National Play Policy was an acknowledgement that in the past children's play had not been given the priority or attention it deserved.



Section 2:

Enabling Children to Learn

Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning and development when children learn through relationships, communication, exploration and play. Personal and emotional ability, rather than intellectual ability, is the primary goal of early childhood education. Therefore, learning and development in early childhood is not solely about academic learning - such as reading, writing or maths. The primary goal for learning in early childhood is to enable children to be ready, willing and able to engage with learning.

This section will consider:

- * **Nurturing Dispositions, Skills, Attitudes, Knowledge and Understanding**
- * **Emotional Well-being as a Cornerstone for Learning and Development**
- * **Supporting Emotional Well-being through the Key Person System**

Nurturing Dispositions, Skills, Attitudes, Knowledge and Understanding

Positive Learning Dispositions

To enable children to be ready, willing and able to engage with learning requires the early childhood educator to pay attention to the child's acquisition of positive dispositions to learn. Dispositions are attitudes or tendencies to respond in a particular way. They can be positive or negative and can have long term effects on lifelong learning. Dispositions are acquired in early childhood through everyday interactions and experiences. Positive dispositions such as confidence, curiosity, self-control and self-motivation can be nurtured, learned and strengthened particularly in early childhood.

It is also worth remembering that the dispositions and attitudes of the early childhood educator are also crucial, as his/her actions and attitudes send important messages to children on how they should behave. An effective early childhood educator can be described as stimulating, patient and encouraging. When the early childhood educator displays curiosity, imagination and respect, they will appreciate and encourage the same attitudes and dispositions in children.



What happens if children do not develop positive dispositions?

A child's ability to try something new and to explore and learn is greatly inhibited if they lack confidence and motivation or if they are afraid to take risks or make mistakes.

A child who has not developed positive social dispositions, such as co-operation or taking responsibility for their actions, may struggle to gain social acceptance thereby inhibiting social learning opportunities.

It will be more difficult for a child to become a successful reader for life if he/she has not had time to develop a love of the process of reading and to enjoy books in early childhood before moving on to formal reading and writing.

The child's ability to make a confident transition from pre-school to primary school may be compromised if he/she has not developed positive dispositions such as independence, responsibility and resilience.

Recognising Dispositions, Skills, Attitudes, Knowledge and Understanding

When deciding what to look for and what information to document, it is worth remembering to focus on all aspects of the child's learning and development that are helpful in showing progress in developing **positive learning dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding.**

Positive Dispositions towards learning include:	Skills that children can practice include:	Children demonstrate positive Attitudes to learning and to life by:	Children demonstrate Knowledge and Understanding by being able to:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being confident • Being absorbed and purposeful • Being able to concentrate • Being curious and showing an interest • Using imagination • Being resilient • Demonstrating independence • Persevering with challenge and difficulty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing sociability • Using communication skills • Developing listening skills • Using language • Developing problem-solving and negotiating skills • Manipulating objects, tools and materials • Using technical equipment such as cameras and computers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking risks, trying out new things • Demonstrating caring, and respectful attitudes towards others • Caring for the natural environment • Being responsible for themselves • Exhibiting a positive attitude to investigate, explore and learn 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show and talk about feelings • Share information with others • Express themselves creatively and imaginatively • Ask questions, predict and justify • Understand pictures and symbols • Respond to music, stories and drama • Count, classify, order, size

Emotional Well-being as a Cornerstone for Learning and Development

When the early childhood curriculum pays attention to the development of positive dispositions towards learning, a solid emotional foundation for all future academic, skills and knowledge based learning will have been created. Children who have successfully developed positive dispositions have conquered the most fundamental component of learning for life – they have learned how to learn.

Social competence and emotional well-being are central to children's educational achievements. Regardless of the learning opportunities presented, a child who feels emotionally insecure, afraid or anxious will struggle to reach their optimal stage of learning and development. Children develop social competence through stable, caring and responsive relationships with adults. These relationships form the foundation for learning and development.

It is essential that the early childhood educator has a highly developed awareness of the following five emotional building blocks, how to support the child in these areas and their importance for the development of positive dispositions towards lifelong learning.

- 1 **Self-Identity and Belonging**
- 2 **Secure Relationships**
- 3 **A Language for Feelings**
- 4 **Inner Strength and Resilience**
- 5 **Self-confidence and Self-Esteem**



1 Self-Identity and Belonging

Children's self identity is their understanding of who they are and their place in the wider world. In the years from birth to eleven, children's sense of their own identity develops; they come to understand their unique place in the world and the many different roles they have within their family, school and community. It is important that children develop a positive sense of their own identity and that they feel valued and respected as a unique individual. This contributes to children's understanding of themselves, relationships with others, self-esteem and self-belief. This is particularly important for children with additional needs, physical disabilities or speech and language difficulties, as they are more vulnerable to being excluded.

Why is it important that the child's self-identity is valued?

The child's sense of self is closely linked to his family, home environment and community. For most children, the home environment is a safe, protective place where they are accepted for who they are. However, the transition to a new environment (pre-school or school) can challenge this sense of acceptance. For the first time the child's name, speech, behaviour and traditions may not be the same as the rest of the group. The child's name may be mispronounced, his speech may sound different and he may be surprised to find that everyone is not the same skin colour. Just at a time when he may be missing his family and familiar, protective surroundings, he may struggle to find a firm foundation for his individual sense of identity.

Helping children understand and value who they are and feel a sense of belonging outside the home

When the child's transition to a new environment is handled with respect and understanding, it broadens her sense of self and leads to a positive developmental experience. A skilled adult can help the child to understand and articulate her own identity and to foster spiritual connections by learning to respect the perspectives of others and recognise the responsibilities to the world in which she lives. It is important for the child's emotional strength to feel a sense of connection and belonging to a particular group. Belonging provides a framework for her sense of security. It is difficult for a child to feel comfortable or secure if customs or things that are familiar to her at home are not apparent in her wider surroundings.

To promote a sense of belonging in the childcare setting, provide learning experiences that are meaningful to each individual child. It is important that the curriculum should develop from a blend of children's abilities and interests and the intended learning outcomes. In this way the curriculum can be adapted to meet the individual needs of the children within the setting.

2 Secure Relationships

From the moment children are born, they begin to form relationships with the people around them. These relationships are an essential part of their early life and contribute largely to their overall development. Initially children's main relationships are with their parents, but as children grow older, other relationships begin to form and become a significant part of their lives. These relationships can include people both inside and outside the family, for example, close family members, educators or caregivers. The most important aspect of any relationship for children, especially babies, is that it is a secure relationship. Essentially, secure relationships are those which are responsive to all the needs of a child. These needs can include their physical, emotional and developmental needs. With the help of secure relationships, children can explore the world around them and be confident that if anything happens, they can rely on the adult to be there, to help them and make them feel safe.

Why do children need secure relationships?

Children bring their experiences of early relationships with them in life and this can affect their long term behavioural and emotional development, for example, how children react and adapt to new experiences, situations or people from an early age. Being part of a secure relationship enables children to develop a sense of who they are and a sense of being important in the lives of others. The benefits for children who enjoy secure relationships are vast, including self-confidence, motivation, independence, good peer relationships, social skills and an understanding of emotions. Secure relationships also develop a foundation for empathy (being able to understand how someone else is feeling), an openness to two way interactions with peers such as taking turns and enhanced thinking and reasoning skills.

3 A language for feelings

When we use a language for feelings we are naming, acknowledging and dealing with the different feelings we all experience throughout our daily lives. Children, like adults, may feel angry, sad, lonely, guilty or any of a huge range of emotions, depending on the circumstances surrounding them. It is important that adults help children recognise and understand these emotions by providing them with a language to communicate their feelings to others and in turn empowering children to cope with more difficult emotions. Children's understanding of their emotions contributes, not only to their understanding of themselves, but also an understanding and awareness of the emotions of those around them.

Why help children with feelings?

When children are able to name, recognise and talk about their feelings they are better able to cope in times of stress, react appropriately to difficult situations and interact with their peers. Their behaviour can also be heavily reliant on their ability to communicate their feelings. For example, if a child is feeling angry it is important that the adult recognises this and does not label him as 'bad tempered' or as 'playing up', but rather acknowledges the feeling 'I can see that you are angry but it does not make it ok for you to...'. When naming and defining feelings, it is important for adults to recognise that children develop an understanding of emotions at different stages. Some children are more emotionally literate (able to understand emotions) than others. Children may begin to understand basic emotions like fear, sadness, happiness and anger at quite a young age, however, more difficult emotions such as pride and shame may not come quite as easily. Respecting and understanding children's basic emotions gives them the space and trust to explore and express more difficult emotions. It is important that adults learn to recognise these emotions; particularly for very young children. For example, a young toddler may feel embarrassed if their nappy is being changed in front of others, and therefore it is important that adults are observant and sensitive to his emotional expressions.

Emotional understanding is a developmental stage like any other in children's lives. Just like children learn to walk and talk, they also learn to recognise and express their feelings appropriately. As with any other skill, the age at which children develop this skill can vary; some appear to develop this skill quite quickly, while others develop it at a slower rate. Adults have an important role to play in helping children understand their emotions.

4 Inner Strength and Resilience

Inner strength and resilience refers to a child's ability to cope with the changes, challenges and adversities she comes across in life. These can range in severity and frequency for a child. For example, it could include a subtle adaptation such as an unexpected change in her daily routine to something bigger such as moving house or a change in family structure. Essentially, developing children's inner strength provides them with skills to be able to cope and deal with the unpredictable. It enables children to adapt and move forward in life.

Why support inner strength and resilience?

The main reason for supporting inner strength and resilience is that it creates opportunities for positive cycles in life for children. It enables children to cope with the challenges they face in life, deal with such challenges and come through them with a positive outlook to their future. Children who develop resilience and inner strength are more inclined to have a positive self-image. They are more open to being aware of what they are good at and in turn creating positive cycles for themselves. Children who lack inner strength can often fall into a negative cycle of thinking. Children with emerging inner strength and resilience are more likely to experiment and find a skill they are good at which can help them form a positive cycle of thought for themselves. This can then further promote and support resilience. For example, in the case of a child who struggles academically in school, if he lacks inner strength, he may be inclined to think he is not going to achieve in general. However, a child who is resilient may be more open to experimenting with a variety of challenges and may discover he is good at music, sport or art. By trying to develop and succeed with new skills, children can feel better about themselves which can promote a positive cycle and further support their inner strength.

5 Self-confidence and Self-esteem

Self-esteem is the value we place on ourselves. It is a personal perception of ourselves and how this makes us feel. It is the knowledge that we are lovable, capable and unique. Good self-esteem in children means:

- They have established a sense of identity
- They have a sense of self-worth
- They feel they are accepted and valued by adults and peers around them
- They feel confident and have self knowledge.

The foundations of self-esteem are laid early in life when babies develop attachments with the adults who care for them. When adults readily respond to their cries and smiles, babies learn to feel loved, valued and accepted by the people they look up to. Parents have the greatest influence in shaping their child's sense of self-worth, as they are her first and most important teachers. The child's self-esteem is further influenced as she develops relationships with other family members, educators, peers and other adults.

Why is self-esteem central to children's well-being?

Healthy self-esteem is imperative to children's well-being. It is a prominent factor in building and supporting social, emotional and mental well-being. These factors also play a major role in children's academic achievements and physical health. Self-esteem in babies and young children will influence and develop a child so that they can become ready to learn, conquer challenges, take risks, cope with mistakes, set realistic expectations and develop positive relationships with others.

Supporting Emotional Well-being through the Key Person System

What is a Key Person System?

The key person system is a way of supporting close meaningful relationships between children, their families and educators. The key person is a designated member of the staff team assigned to an individual child in their care attending the setting to support the child's physical, emotional, and developmental needs and to act as the key point of contact with his/her parent/carers.

The key person plays an essential role in supporting the child's holistic development, especially their emotional well-being. In doing so, they take responsibility for those aspects of the child's day which have the greatest impact on their well-being, which include personal care routines – nappy changing, toileting, rest times and meal times. These care routines provide special times to build up the secure attachments and develop meaningful relationships which underpin healthy emotional, social and cognitive development.

Benefits of the Key Person Approach

For babies and young children

A key person gets to know their key child really well and is aware of all the special details of how s/he is cared for. Essentially this helps each child to feel cherished, able to express themselves fully, relax, and become confident and valued. The key person develops an understanding of their key child's current skills and interests and can engage with them in and extend their play. They also provide a safe, secure and consistent base for babies and young children to return to, physically or emotionally, when they need to. This provides them with confidence to explore the world around them and be confident that if anything happens they can rely on the key person to be there, to help them make them feel safe.

For Families

The key person gets to know each child, their family and their circumstances really well, listens and values what families have to say about their child. The key person is 'tuned in' to the child and family, and actively builds positive relationships and communications. It benefits the child as a consistent approach, interests from home are noted and strengthened and also parents are kept informed about child's learning.

For the Key Person

The key person has a powerful impact on the well-being of their key children and the children's ability to develop and learn. They are also able to support their key children's all-round development and in particular their long term behaviour and emotional development through providing a secure relationship.

For the Early Childhood Setting

The key person system may be difficult to arrange at the outset but the outcomes will be: improved care and learning for the children; parents and families who are better-satisfied and more trusting, engaged staff, and more enthusiasm for professional development to support children's individual needs.

What are the Key Persons Role and Responsibilities

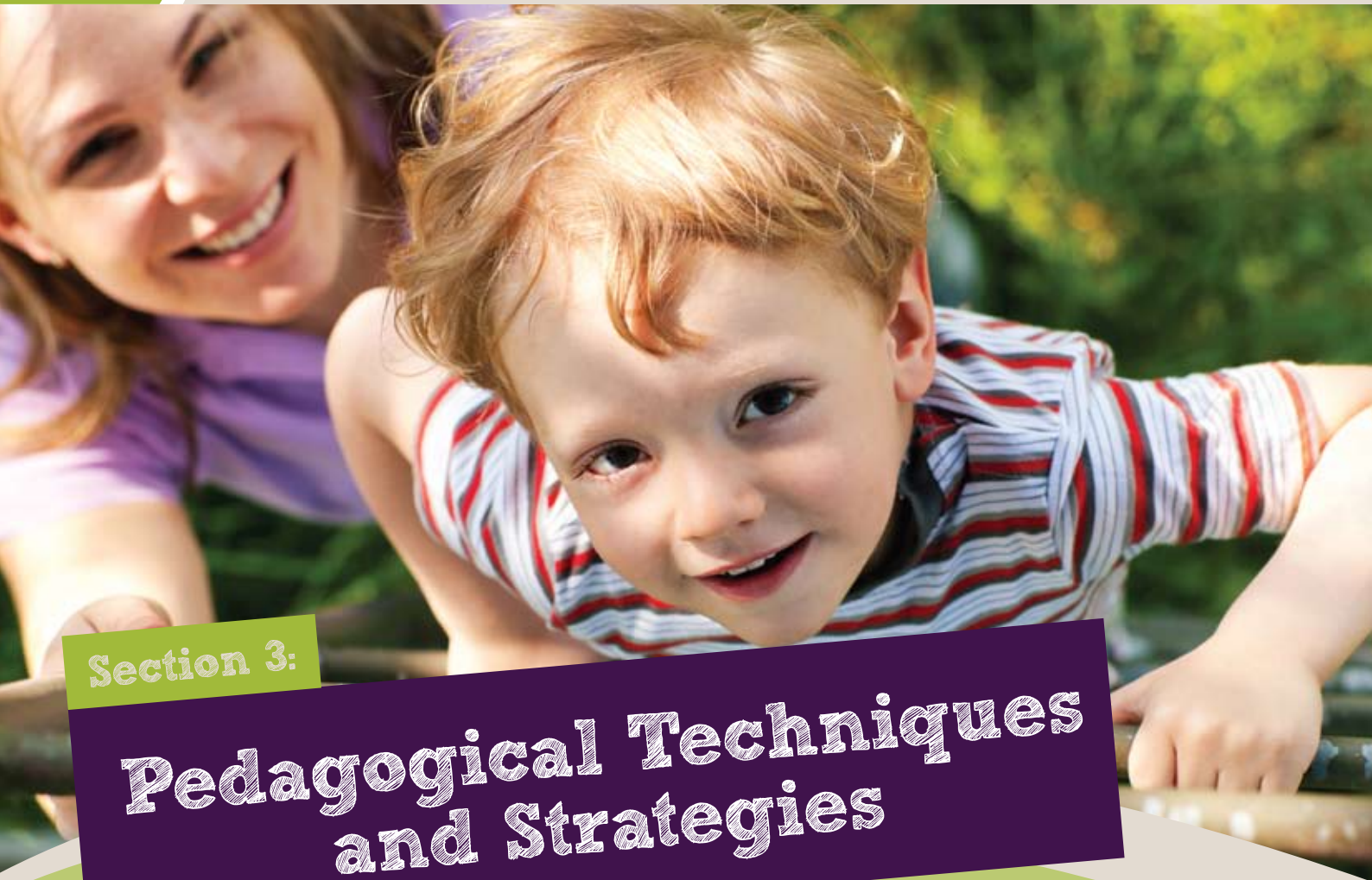
- Settling new key children and families into the setting.
- Developing secure, trusting relationships with key children and their families.
- Spending time with each key child's family to learn about the child's changing routines, interests and dispositions.
- Settling key children in as they arrive each day, updating parents on their progress during the session.
- Changing and toileting key children, using sensitive handling and familiar words/actions/routines.
- Dressing and washing key children, offering help as needed but also supporting their growing skills and independence.
- Eating with key children in small groups or bottle feeding babies on your lap, maintaining eye-contact and conversations.
- Regularly observing, documenting and assessing key children's progress, sharing information with other staff and the child's family.
- Planning to develop key children's interests, skills and schemas.
- Supporting key children through various transitions, for example moving play rooms and routines during the day.

Important aspects of Key Person Role

- Using body language, eye contact and voice tone to indicate that you are available and interested, gauging these according to the child's needs and culture.
- Understanding and 'containing' children's difficult feelings by gentle holding, providing words for feelings, showing their expressions in a mirror and showing empathy in a way suited to each child's needs.
- Comforting distressed children by acknowledging their feelings, offering explanations and reassurance calmly and gently.
- Acknowledging and allowing children to express a range of feelings: anger, joy, distress, excitement, jealousy, disappointment, love.
- Providing a secure base for your key children by supporting their interests and explorations away from you, perhaps by nodding and smiling as they explore and draw your attention to things.
- Providing a secure base for key children by being physically and emotionally available for them to come back to, by sitting at their level and in close proximity to them.
- Interacting with key children with reciprocal sounds, words, facial expressions and gestures, according to their individual temperament and age.



1. The primary goal for learning in early childhood is to enable children to be **ready, willing and able to engage with learning**.
2. The development of **positive dispositions** in children is closely linked to **secure relationships** with adults and **emotional well-being**.
3. Dispositions can be **negative or positive** and can have long-term effects on lifelong learning.
4. The implementation of a Key Person System supports emotional well-being by providing children with **consistency**. It gives them the confidence to explore the world around them, to be confident that if anything happens; they can rely on a key person to be there to make them feel safe.



Section 3:

Pedagogical Techniques and Strategies

Pedagogy (or teaching) is the interactive process that takes place between the early childhood educator and the child to enable learning to take place. The educator is responsible for articulating not only what she/he does and the impact of this, but also how, and why they do what they do, to parents, colleagues and to society. An understanding of the educator's pedagogical foundation will support a spirit of enquiry and professional dialogue and ensure that pedagogical approaches develop, evolve and are effective.



This section will consider:

- * **The terminology of Pedagogy**
- * **Pedagogy in relation to early childhood education**
- * **Pedagogical techniques and strategies.**

The terminology of Pedagogy

Different approaches to early childhood practice is informed by different educational philosophies, values and theories about how young children learn and develop. Consequently, early childhood practice is informed by a variety of approaches to curriculum. It is not surprising then to learn that there are a variety of approaches to pedagogical or teaching practice as well. Differences in pedagogical practice mainly refer to the degree of influence that adults should have over the early childhood curriculum. Although most early childhood settings offer a play based curriculum, this does not mean that there is pedagogical uniformity in the balance of involvement between children and educators.



A range of terminology surrounds pedagogy. These are explained below:

Pedagogy: The practice (or the art, the science or the craft) of teaching. Pedagogy is the interactive process that takes place between the educator and the child to enable learning to take place.

Pedagogical interactions: Face to face interactions educators engage in with children; they may take the form of cognitive or social interactions.

Pedagogical framing: Is the 'behind-the-scenes' work that educators do with regards to provision of materials, arrangement of space, and the establishment of daily routines to support learning through play, exploration, cooperation and the equitable use of resources.

Pedagogical techniques and strategies: practices which support learning, for instance, social interactions, assessment, scaffolding learning.

What is Pedagogy?

Pedagogy refers to that set of instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place and provide opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions within a particular social and material context'. In other words, **Pedagogy (or teaching) is the interactive process that takes place between the educator and the child to enable learning to take place.**

Pedagogy is distinct from and complementary to curriculum. In other words, curriculum describes the 'what', that is, the learning opportunities on offer and pedagogy describes the 'how', that is, how the educator can assist the child to learn.

The pedagogical interactions between the educator and the child will be greatly influenced by the early childhood curriculum model in place within the early childhood service.

Pedagogical practice can be defined through three main types:

- **Structured Approach**
- **Open Framework Approach**
- **Child-led Approach**

A Structured Approach describes a highly adult directed curriculum and largely didactic pedagogical techniques, providing for little initiative on behalf of the child. The rationale for this method is based on development theory where children are expected to learn skills and concepts in sequence. This approach sees curriculum objectives very clearly defined and the educator in control of the child's learning.

An Open Framework Approach provides the educator with a broad framework for learning, the ability to use endless pedagogical techniques and strategies. As curriculum classification within this approach is less structured, the child has the freedom and flexibility to make choices between the various learning opportunities on offer. As learning opportunities provided span across all areas of learning and development, a balanced range of experiences is encouraged over a period of time. This enables a process of 'active learning' where the child constructs his own understandings within a social and physical environment.

A Child-led Approach is where the educator responds entirely to the child's interests and activities. Topic or project themes are adopted based on the child's interests. The main curriculum emphasis is based on developing the child's independence, social and emotional growth, creativity and self-expression. The learning environment is designed to open-ended exploration and discovery.

The three approaches described are merely 'types'. In reality, many early childhood services adopt a combination of all three.

What does research say about Pedagogy?

Over the years, numerous research studies have demonstrated powerful justification for early childhood education. However, this is not to be misunderstood to mean that all early childhood education is beneficial or effective. The effectiveness of early childhood education goes well beyond the physical environment or the resources on offer. When we consider that learning comes from a process of cognitive construction, achieved when the child is motivated and involved, the crucial role of the educator is clear.

Research findings from a longitudinal study in New Zealand, 'Competent Children' (1998) suggests that by six years of age children gained higher or lower educational outcomes depending on the age they commenced early childhood education (below 3 had more impact) and the quality of staff and interactions with children. Other longitudinal studies have shown that children provided with direct instruction (for example, a structured approach) sometimes do better in the short term than those provided with other pedagogical techniques. However, the research also found that these gains were short lived, with all significant differences having disappeared within a year of the pre-school phase ending.

Other studies have shown that formal approaches to teaching young children are counterproductive and can hinder young children's learning, generating higher anxiety and lower self-esteem. Overall, research emphasises that outcomes are best in those early childhood settings that emphasise a balance between child-initiated and teacher-directed activities. Most importantly, research suggests that the long term effects of early childhood education lies not with IQ gains, but with children remaining in mainstream education and developing positive views of themselves and their futures.

Pedagogy in relation to early childhood education

Considering pedagogy can help us to be aware of the impact we have on children

To support the vision of every child as an 'active agent' in society, we need to be aware of the experiences that children have in their early years that help them to develop as confident, powerful, competent individuals. We know that children are born with powerful motivations to learn and that in order to learn effectively, they need people to interact with.

How can we be sure that we are engaging with young children appropriately and, most importantly, engaging in meaningful ways? We understand that children need active support from adults who:

- are well informed about child development
- are respectful of and interested in children
- are knowledgeable about and value the importance of play and the powerful contribution it makes to children's development and learning
- understand the importance of relationships with other children and with adults
- recognise learning contexts that are real and meaningful to the child.

We know that children learn from adults, from other children and from the environment around them, but also that children very often are more knowledgeable across a range of interests and experiences than the adults with whom they are interacting. This latter knowledge is crucial in our image of the child as a rich and resourceful individual, in whose abilities we need to trust.

Educators that develop the ability to self-reflect and learn in different ways are constantly adding to what they know. Educators learn from:

- practical research
- general evidence from practice
- Individual and group reflection
- exploration and enquiry
- being comfortable accepting that they are still learning.

Pedagogical Techniques and Strategies

All children deserve excellent teaching. Teaching in early childhood is a highly skilled process where there is no single correct way to respond to children in order to optimise learning. It is the teaching skills and practices of the early childhood educator that make interactions educational. Skilful educators draw on a wide repertoire of pedagogical techniques and strategies during their interactions with children. This section will explore some of the common techniques by explaining what the technique is and how it enhances children's learning and development, how the technique is used and what the technique looks like in practice. The following eight techniques are discussed:

- 1 **Positioning**
- 2 **Empowering**
- 3 **Scaffolding**
- 4 **Co-constructing**
- 5 **Modelling**
- 6 **Questioning**
- 7 **Encouraging and Praising**
- 8 **Problem Solving**
- 9 **Documenting**



1 Positioning

What is Positioning and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Positioning is the process of placing objects in relation to each other or in relation to people. As a teaching technique, positioning involves placing learning materials to safely and ethically support and enhance children's learning.

How do I Position?

Staff need to decide how to place materials and equipment in the physical learning environment to best assist children's learning. Specifically, they need to decide:

- the equipment, materials and spaces they will make available in the inside and outside play areas
- the balance between the different types of closed and open spaces and materials
- the boundaries between the different areas within the centre
- the ways in which materials will be grouped together
- the ways in which the placement of materials will encourage movement and interaction between children
- the ways in which the placement of materials will allow for quiet moments of reflection
- the ways in which spaces will allow for robust physical exploration of materials.

There can be considerable advantage to having flexible, multi-use spaces that can be quickly adapted to children's changing interests and projects and that allow staff to respond flexibly to what emerges during a day with children.

Educators need to decide with each other or with the children how they will place materials and equipment to facilitate social interaction in the learning environment. For instance, they can make places available for adults and/or children to sit individually, sit in groups, sit on the floor, sit on chairs, stand and move about. They need to decide what equipment will be placed within easy reach of the children, what equipment only adults will be able to access, how possible it will be for children to work in small and large groups, how large the groups will be and what spaces will encourage individual exploration and thinking.

Positioning in Practice

When deciding how to place people and materials, staff should seek to create and maintain a safe, secure, interesting and pleasurable learning environment for children and adults. To do this, educators need to:

- place people to ensure safe supervision of all children and safe work conditions for all
- place equipment to meet children's and their own health and safety needs. For example, a member of staff can make a safety check every day before the first child arrives and a staff member can always be scheduled to be near the climbing equipment to assist children if needed
- place equipment to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the environment, thus maximising children's, parents' and staff's enjoyment of it
- place equipment to ensure that children gain a feeling of security and competence in their learning environment
- place equipment and materials to stimulate children's curiosity and interest by providing elements of surprise and novelty
- place equipment and adults to support equity of access to and participation in the program by all children
- place equipment to stimulate brain development.

Placing Equipment to Enhance Children's Sense of Security and Competence

To achieve this, educators need to ensure that:

- there are regular major traffic paths in the environment
- children can readily access child-safe cleaning materials and equipment
- everyday materials which children use, such as sticky-tape, glue-sticks, scissors, etc. are readily accessible to the children
- everyday materials are placed to avoid congestion when several children at once want access
- materials used regularly have an obvious home. All containers, shelves and storage bins should be labelled with names or symbols to show children where everything belongs
- children have a personal storage space for their special projects and personal belongings

- children have access to child-sized furniture and equipment when needed
- spaces that promote security and competence are generous in size and allow for child involvement, for children to spread out for moments of peace, and reduce the need to share continuously.

Placing Equipment and Materials to Stimulate Children's Curiosity and Wonder

There are many ways to do this. One simple method is to position some materials 'out of place', such as placing a book in the block corner to stimulate particular types of building, or placing paints near the nature table to suggest painting nature, or using nature in paintings. Another method to stimulate children's curiosity is to place materials with which children may not be familiar in the space. This can prompt experimentation and questioning. A more complex change can also prompt new discoveries and learning. In spaces that promote curiosity and wonder there is flexibility, open-ended materials, easily moved furniture, nooks and crannies and lots of different levels at which the children can physically work.

Placing Equipment to Support Equal Access and Participation by all Children

Staff can create equity of access and participation by ensuring that:

- children of differing physical abilities can move around easily. For example, consider how readily a child using a wheelchair or a walking frame can move around the area
- children of differing physical abilities can participate in a range of experiences
- children of differing abilities, sizes and ages can easily see and touch display areas
- children from differing cultural backgrounds can recognise their own culture in the materials and staff available to them.

Placing Equipment to Stimulate Brain Development

There is increasing evidence that the early years really do matter to young children's learning and that brain stimulation enhances brain development in very specific ways. More broadly, placing equipment to encourage child choice and play and to stimulate children's questions can benefit young children neurologically by fostering new brain growth, and novelty in the environment also stimulates brain functioning.

The Early Childhood Educator should:

- Ensure children have access to plenty of water to reduce the likelihood of brain dehydration, which can lead to children being 'bored, listless and drowsy'.
- Introduce aromas into the room to increase children's learning in several ways. Floral odours can increase the ability to learn, create and think ... Peppermint, basil, lemon, cinnamon and rosemary are linked to mental alertness. Lavender, chamomile, orange and rose are used for relaxation and calming.
- Introduce novelty into the environment to increase children's memory. Schiller suggested rotating toys, equipment, books and shelving and placing things in surprising places.

Disability and Additional Needs

The placement of materials and pathways should enable children with disabilities to move about safely and with comfort. Materials and equipment should be positioned to ensure that children with disabilities can participate in the key experiences. The nature and type of each child's disability will determine what this means in practice.

Careful positioning of images within the centre can challenge children's understandings of what is normal male and female behaviour. Consider creating similar challenges to children's understandings of disability by placing images of children and adults with different disabilities performing a variety of potentially unexpected tasks alongside images of non-disabled people performing these tasks. An example of this would be using images from the Para Olympics. Staff can use such images to interest the children in people's differing abilities and disabilities and challenge their understandings about what is a normal way to be, think, see, move, hear and feel.

Careful placement of materials can also enhance engagement between children with autism and their environment.

Improving Pedagogical Practice

1. Sketch the layout of the inside and outside learning areas in an early childhood centre and take photographs of these areas.
2. How well did placement of equipment support easy supervision of children?
3. How well was equipment placed to support a safe and healthy environment?
 - Were play spaces well lit?
 - Was there fresh air and were temperatures comfortable?
 - Was there room to move around freely (for example, when using a wheelchair, callipers, walking frames, guide dog, etc.)?
 - Could equipment be reached easily and safely by children?
 - Were sharp edges kept away from areas where children might knock against them?
 - Was there ready access to a space for recycling of material and clearing rubbish from the floor?
 - Were there non-slip surfaces in the 'wet' areas?
 - Could staff readily access all equipment without straining muscles?
4. To what extent did the current placement of equipment enhance the aesthetic appeal of the centre?
 - Were equipment and materials deliberately and carefully placed?
 - Was the careful placement of materials and equipment maintained?
 - Did the environment evolve over time?
 - Were there soft areas that encouraged children and adults to relax, reflect and rest?
 - Were sounds placed as carefully as objects?
 - Were texture, shape and colour used with care and thought to provide enjoyment, stimulation and relaxation?
 - Were visual images hung and treated with care and respect?
 - Were artefacts, crafts, art and memorabilia culturally familiar to the children and adults?
5. Was equipment placed to enhance children's sense of security and competence?
 - Were there regular major traffic paths in the environment?
 - Could children readily access child-safe cleaning materials and equipment?
 - Were everyday materials such as pencil sharpeners, sticky-tape, glue-sticks, scissors etc., readily accessible to the children?
 - Were everyday materials placed so as to avoid congestion when several children want access at once?
 - Did materials used regularly have an obvious home?
 - Did children have a personal storage space for their special projects and personal belongings?
 - Did children have access to child-sized furniture and equipment for several of their experiences?
6. How was equipment placed to stimulate children's curiosity?
7. Did the placement of equipment and adults support equity of access and participation?
 - Could children of different physical abilities move around easily?
 - Could children of different physical abilities participate in a range of experiences?
 - Could children of different abilities and ages easily see and touch display areas?
 - Could all children in the group, irrespective of their cultural background, recognise their own culture in the materials and staff available to them?
8. How and how well were developmental considerations taken into account in the placement of equipment and materials?
9. Did the placement of equipment and materials express the values that were intended?

2 Empowering

What is Empowering and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Empowering is about helping children gain a sense of inner confidence, courage and strength to successfully surmount whatever life presents. The act of empowering children is a process of guiding them to feel and believe that they are powerful. As an early childhood teaching technique empowerment involves giving children the power to develop strong personal dispositions such as confidence, self-image, and resilience. For example, empowering a child from a minority culture to feel included, empowering a child with SEN to participate equally, empowering a child who is shy to build relationships. This enables the child to take actions, make decisions and choices for themselves.

This has a positive influence of young children's learning dispositions in the following ways:

- Develop resilience
- Take increasing responsibility for their own learning and care
- Enhance confidence, self-worth, identity and independence
- Develop special strengths and interests
- Develop creativity of learning and explore individual learning style.

How do I Empower?

In order to empower young children, the educator needs to:

- Through observation and documentation, decide what skills the child needs to experience greater control over (for example, self-help skills, working independently, social relationships)
- Choose techniques and strategies that will enable children to gain greater control over their learning in this area, for example, questioning, modelling, etc.

Empowering in Practice

The Educator helps children to:

- feel good about themselves (I am special activities)
- build children's capacity (what are they good at/interested in)
- build positive relationships with others (sharing, friends activities, stories)
- solve problems as part of the daily routine (explore concept of fair/unfair in developmentally appropriate way)
- learn to stand up for themselves (using words to say how they feel)
- through meaningful curriculum activities and resources, help children learn to appreciate and respect difference in culture, ability, race and gender.

Disability and Additional Needs

For children with additional needs to be empowered to participate to their maximum potential it is important that educators and children actively display non discriminatory attitudes towards differing abilities. Stories, images and puppets offer opportunities for developing positive images and ideas about children and adults with a disability.

3 Scaffolding

What is Scaffolding and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Scaffolding is a pedagogical technique that has developed from the work of Vygotsky. Jerome Bruner developed the metaphor of 'scaffolding' to describe the process where a more competent peer or adult helps the child achieve something that he cannot achieve alone.

Scaffolding enhances children's learning and development as the process offers temporary guidance or support to enable children to move from one level of competence to another. The guidance can be either verbal or non-verbal and increases the child's level of competence in all areas of learning and development.

How do I Scaffold Children' Learning and Development?

Educators need to be 'tuned-in' to children's abilities, interests and strengths and to respond by providing appropriate scaffolding techniques.

3 Steps to Successful Scaffolding

- Closely observe the child's competencies, abilities and skills. Ask yourself, What can she do alone or with a little assistance? Has she tried to do this before? What activity would challenge her and take her to the next level of competency?
- Spend time with the child. Support and guide the child to move from one level of competency to the other. Provide the necessary resources, equipment or verbal guidance.
- Continue to observe the child's progress, extending understanding, competency and skill through other techniques such as questioning, praising, modelling, confirming.

Scaffolding in Practice – Baby 11 months.

Clara's Key Person has observed that Clara is enjoying her new skill of throwing objects but is becoming frustrated when she throws them out of reach and cannot reach them again. During an exploratory play session on the floor, Clara was shaking a cube activity box and lost her grip on the toy. It landed near to her but not within easy reach. Clara expressed her displeasure at this and the educator lifted the toy and placed it a little nearer to her. In order to reach the toy Clara had to move onto all fours and reach forward whilst balancing herself with the other hand. The educator praised Clara's efforts by clapping and cheering and smiling at her. The educator demonstrated her knowledge of Clara's individual stage of development by not simply handing her the toy but by challenging Clara just enough to motivate her to reach for the toy herself.

Scaffolding In Practice - 3 year old child

Michael: 'How do I draw Mammy?'

Educator: 'Well, you could start off by drawing her head' – the educator motioned a circular movement around her own head and around Michael's head.

Michael draws a round shape on his page.

Educator: Great, now what shape is her body. Again the educator indicates the length of her body and encourages Michael to do the same.

Michael draws a long shape below the circular head.

Educator: That's great Michael, now, let's think, what else does your Mammy have? Michael holds out his arms and points to his legs and smiles. He draws lines for arms and legs.

The educator employs further pedagogical strategies such as warm praise, questioning, and further discussion about additional body parts such as fingers, toes, eyes etc.

The two examples above demonstrate how the child was at a particular level of competency and how the skilful educator recognised what was needed to challenge the child and bring him/her to the next level. The ultimate aim is to enable both children to carry out the respective tasks independently in the future. This is scaffolding.

4

Co-constructing

What is Co-constructing and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

As a teaching strategy, co-construction describes how the educator and the child form meaning and build knowledge about the world with each other. Co-construction promotes the collaborative nature of children's learning as it motivates children to enter into meaningful activities and discussions with the adult, to explore shared meanings and build knowledge together through a range of learning opportunities and activities. This belief in this idea as a teaching strategy comes from Social Constructivist (Vygotsky, Bruner) theories of learning and development where children learn as a direct result of meaningful interaction with his/her environment.

How do I Co-Construct?

Co-construction happens when you explore multiple ways of explaining something or working out a problem. The mutual involvement between the educator and the child makes the process exciting, stimulating and enriching. Therefore, co-construction is an effective teaching technique for extending children's level of understanding and the ability to express this understanding in any area of development. Co-construction techniques emphasise meaning and understanding rather than the acquisition of facts. Through a gradual, shared building of knowledge and understanding between the educator and child, the child co-constructs knowledge, through symbolic languages such as music, drama, art, story or movement.

Co-constructing in Practice

The educator has three key functions in enabling co-construction.

1. Uncover, read and acknowledge the child's understandings
2. Enable the child to express and share their understandings with others
3. Collaborate children's understandings with others
4. Build on the child's understandings

Babies co-construct knowledge and awareness of their environment by stimulating their senses. Provide interesting things to see, hear, smell, touch and taste. Support the baby to explore scented water in a shallow tub with interesting items floating on top. Hang wind chimes from the ceilings and place low-level mirrors around the room. The floor is also an interesting landscape of humps and bumps for babies to roll on, crawl across and explore – big fat cushions, textured rugs, shiny objects and colourful throws.

Toddlers are finding out about water. Educators and children co-construct knowledge together by splashing in the puddles, making mud pies and collecting rain water. They explore different colours and textures in the indoor water tray. The adult talks about water when washing hands and faces before snack. A walk in the park/trip to the beach allows children to explore water in the environment. The educator provides materials and resources to enable children to make water collages/paintings/handprints. Children participate in simple songs about water, ducks and rain. Older children can help care for goldfish, water plants and learn about preserving water.

Pre-school children co-construct knowledge about trees and forests. They climb trees, explore the texture of trees and leaves. They smell trees and leaves and listen to sounds made by the leaves. They consider the height of trees and identify different trees. They discuss the different places where trees grow and share their understanding of trees with others. From their observations of trees, the group enters into a shared activity of making a model of a tree for the hallway and adding leaves and they make clay models of trees and leaves. Children take photographs of trees and make a book about trees. They measure and consider the size of trees. Children participate in music, movement, drama and storytelling to build their knowledge of trees. They share their thoughts, interpretations, experiences and knowledge with educators and peers.

5 Modelling

What is Modelling and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Modelling is a process by which children learn how to behave by copying the behaviour of others. Educators play a crucial role in acting as a model for children. The value of educators modelling appropriate language, behaviour, skills and attitudes is especially recognised as such modelling is consequential in terms of cognitive, social and dispositional outcomes. Modelling takes place when children copy these appropriate behaviours.

How do I act as a Model?

This pedagogical strategy does not require direct intervention, rather, the educator leads by example over a period of time. For example, if the educator wants to encourage children to share resources or materials, the most effective way of doing this is to set up opportunities where children can observe the educator participating in sharing behaviours with children and other adults. Children will be more motivated to imitate adult behaviours when they have developed a secure positive relationship with the educator.

Modelling in Practice

Learning and Development

Modelling techniques can be used with just about any behaviour the educator wants children to learn. Modelling is particularly effective in teaching appropriate social behaviours such as helping children to play cooperatively, to listen or to resolve problems and conflict. Educator role modelling is also used to promote good eating habits and a positive attitude to healthy food, to encourage children's interest in books and reading, and to build socially inclusive learning environments where everyone that participates is valued and involved.

It is important for young children to spend time with older peers (For example, toddlers spending some time in a pre-school room) to enable them to model skills and dispositions of children more competent than themselves.

Disability and Additional Needs

Meeting a child with a disability in the early childhood setting may be a first encounter for many children. Educators model positive attitudes towards children/parents with disabilities by modelling respect, tolerance and acceptance. This is demonstrated through positive behaviours such as maintaining eye contact and speaking directly to the child instead of the person with them. Model patience by allowing time for speech or movements. Provide positive role models of living with a disability through for example, inviting visitors to the early childhood setting to talk about their achievements and by using posters, books and puzzles that include positive images of a person with a disability.

Gender, Ethnicity and Culture

Many of the activities and resources promoted by the early childhood setting provide children with clear representations of how males and females should behave. Many of these are gender stereotyped. Many posters, games, puzzles, stories and rhymes portray males in a dominant way. It is essential that educators are mindful of this and include resources that present boys and girls with positive role models that portray females in non-traditional roles such as a Firefighter or Doctor. Place equal value on indoor and outdoor play and promote equally to boys and girls.

Likewise, children need to have access to positive role models from their own ethnic and cultural group. Provide an inclusive learning environment where different cultures, family types, abilities and occupations are reflected across books, posters, play equipment, cooking utensils and dress up clothes. Reflect the home language of all children in the setting through dual labelling of areas, belongings and play resources.

6 Questioning

What is Questioning and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

From an early age, children use questions as a means of communicating with each other and with adults. Therefore, questioning is an effective pedagogical technique for the educator to promote learning and development with all children.

There are two types of questions that can be used to gain information from children – open questions and closed questions. Each type of question makes different demands on children's cognitive and language skills. Early Childhood Educators use open ended questioning as a pedagogical technique as this form of questioning assumes that there is no right or wrong answer. There are many possible answers, levels of understanding and openings for children to express what they actually know, think and feel. Open questions encourage children to endlessly hypothesise about how the world works, or to predict outcomes of a particular activity or event.

Closed questions limit the answer that the child can give – it 'closes off' options to elaborate or share further thoughts or ideas. Closed questions are beneficial when seeking factual information, when the educator requires a short answer – for example, to find out the names of flowers, a pet's name or the rules of the early childhood setting.

How do I use open questioning techniques?

- Avoid questions that require a yes or no answer. Ask children how, when, where, what or why.
- Ensure that questions follow a logical sequence and are pitched appropriately for the age and ability of the child.
- Use short sentences - this is particularly important for toddlers and younger children.

- Ask one question at a time – asking a number of questions together will only confuse children.
- Focus questions on a single task or event – avoid double-barrelled questions, for example ‘what did you have for lunch and who is taking you home today?’
- Limit ‘whole group’ questioning as children can become bored – questioning is more effective if carried out in small groups or on a one to one basis.
- Allow children adequate time to answer questions; this is particularly important for toddlers and younger children and children with speech and language difficulties.
- Value children’s answers and contributions. Demonstrate interest and warmth in responses to children.
- Use prompting techniques to encourage children’s thinking. For example, rephrasing or simplifying the question or summarising what the child has said will act as a scaffold for the child’s thinking.

Questioning in Practice

In addition to extending children’s communication and language skills, skilful questioning can promote and enhance children’s thinking and learning. The early childhood educator can become a skilful questioner of children by adopting a range of questioning techniques as follows:

Share ideas and understandings ... encourage children to question themselves, others and their environment. The educator is facilitating a small group discussion on recycling rubbish. She uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage children to share ideas and their understanding of the topic. Why do we do this? What would happen if we did not do this? What do you think about people that ... ? What happens in your house? Have you any ideas about ... ?

Voice feelings ... extend children’s communication skills and encourage the development of empathy with others. The educator is preparing children for a new child joining the group the following week. She uses this event as an opportunity to employ open-ended questioning techniques to discuss this with the children ... What do you think about Ciara joining our group? How do you think Ciara will feel when she comes to our pre-school? Can you think of any words to describe how she will feel? What can we do to help Ciara feel welcome?

Guess and predict ... involve children in active learning through discussion. The educator is reading a familiar story to a small group of toddlers. She uses open ended questioning techniques to encourage the children to guess and predict ... Where is the fox going? What is going to happen next? How will he get home? The educator is working alongside pre-school children making models from magnetic blocks. She uses open ended questioning techniques to extend their thinking and enable them to hypothesise their ideas ... What would happen if ...? What do you think this part does? How does it work? Is there another way we could do this?

Recall experiences ... help children reflect on information, feelings or events. The educator is calling out a small group recall activity with toddlers at the end of the day. What did you do this morning? What was the best thing about it? Who did you play with today? What are you going to do tomorrow? The educator is encouraging 3-5 year old children to recall a story featured the week before ... Who were the people in the story? How many of them had pets? What kind of trouble did the pets get into? What happened when the farmer came home early?

Age and ability appropriate questioning

Educators need to be aware of the different ages and abilities of children in order to frame questions appropriately. The child’s age and stage of development will act as a guide for the appropriate style of questioning.

Babies and pre-verbal children mainly ask questions using body language such as pointing or gesturing. In turn, the adult verbalises the babies question which in turn develops language and communication competence.

Toddlers under two mainly use single words to ask questions. However they can understand simple, short questions asked of them.

Children between two and five are persistent questioners – a favourite being ‘Why?’ The educator can introduce more complex question as the child develops across this stage.

When the educator questions a child with additional needs, as with all children at different stages and levels of development, they should frame their questions accordingly. Educators may need to modify specific questioning techniques to take account of a specific disability. For example, to speak face to face with a child with a hearing impairment.

7 Encouraging and Praising

What is Encouraging and Praising and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Using praise to teach children what is expected of them is a relatively new kind of teaching and parenting technique. Less than a century ago, it was commonly assumed that praise would spoil children and that criticism and disapproval would strengthen children's character and turn them into good citizens. In reality, this method served only to imprison creative energy; damage self-esteem and leave individuals feeling that they could not put anything of themselves into the world unless they knew for sure it will meet with someone else's approval.

It is no wonder we have looked for alternative ways to teach children in a more humane manner. Today, many consider the use of praise to be 'self-esteem building' and it is now commonly accepted that self-esteem is the root of strong character and good performance. Praise is undoubtedly an important and powerful form of communication.

How do I Encourage and Praise?

As a teaching technique, praise shows children that they deserve recognition, acceptance and approval. Praise can be verbal or non-verbal. Educators use encouragement as a teaching technique to support children when attempting new or difficult activities. Encouragement helps children persevere with a task, learn new skills or to develop positive dispositions such as respect or co-operation.

However, there is a flip side to this argument. What we sometimes fail to realise is that, because children value the opinion of adults so highly, frequent evaluative comments, even when positive, can foster undue dependence on the external judgement of others, causing children to devalue their own perceptions about their competence and capabilities. Used indiscriminately, praise loses its potency and becomes empty and meaningless.

Nevertheless, studies have shown that praise does in fact increase intrinsic motivation so we shouldn't be afraid to use it. We do however need to ensure that our positive comments to children are effective and **non-judgemental**.

Encouraging and Praising in Practice

Non-judgemental praise can be achieved through '**reflective listening**' (also called encouragement or genuine praise). A reflective listening comment tells the child **how and what his behaviours look like regardless of the performance level**. When adults use reflective listening techniques, children feel like their behaviours and their sense of self are validated. This is built on the idea that children deserve **confirmation, not approval** from adults.

- Most often, these statements begin with 'you' or 'I' and a description of what the adult saw the child doing, e.g. "I saw you carry all the dirty paint brushes to the sink, Tom. I really appreciate your help"
- or
- "You had to make three trips to the sink to get all the dirty paint brushes. I really appreciate your help".

Other tips include:

- **Name the behaviour you want to reinforce** - *You put the puzzle back on the shelf when you finished, now someone else can play with it*
- **Focus on specific attributes of the child's work rather than on the piece in general** - *You have used some beautiful colours in your picture*
- **Emphasise the process, not the product** - *Can you show me how you made your tower so high?*
- **Help children appreciate their own behaviour and achievements to please themselves rather than others** - *You must feel very proud of the way you shared your pencils with Sam*

Encouraging and Praising the Under 3's

There are many non-verbal ways in which the educator can encourage young babies. For example, verbal encouragement supports emerging language competence and communication skills. When the educator responds to sounds made by the baby by repeating them, the baby is strongly encouraged to repeat the sounds and to experiment with new sounds.

Toddlers are extremely sensitive to the reactions of adults in their environment. Therefore educators need to be especially careful to encourage rather than to praise toddlers. As with older children, too much praise can quickly lead to the toddler becoming dependent on the adult to approve of their performance.

There are a number of ways of offering encouragement and physical help to the under 3's. For example:

- Moving a toy closer to the child
- Sitting beside the child to offer support when needed
- Smiling or nodding at an appropriate moment
- Clapping and cheering when the child has achieved something.

Using praise as a Behaviour Improvement Technique

It is commonly felt that children who display challenging behaviour don't deserve praise. This is a worrying mistake. In reality, the confidence of children with behaviour difficulties is such that they need encouragement and praise far more than other children who are receiving it already.

People often think that the best way to change a child's behaviour is to criticise and scold them when they misbehave – pointing out the error of their ways, so to speak.

However, this approach has a number of drawbacks: excessive criticism can damage a child's confidence and ability to change; it leaves the child and adult upset; and it gives attention to the misbehaviour.

What is far more effective is for the adult to encourage examples of good behaviour that they see. There is a simple rule in psychology that what we give our attention to grows in significance. Adults should use this rule to their advantage and notice the times when the opposite of the inappropriate behaviour occurs.

For example if you are concerned about a child repeatedly fighting with other children, notice the times they get along with another child, or they start to share and encourage this instead.

8 Problem-solving

What is Problem-solving and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Children's lives are full of dilemmas and problems to solve. As a teaching technique, problem-solving describes how the educator helps children to find answers to problems, questions, dilemmas and issues that children face every day. Problems can be either physical or social. Physical problems are those relating to the physical world – How will you reach the top shelf? How will you make a tunnel without the castle falling down?

Social problems are those relating to peers, adults or situations – Can you think of anything that will help Mary to stop crying? How can you tell the other children you want to join in? How will you decide what book to take home?

Problem-solving skills are the foundation of all areas of learning and development. In addition to developing mathematical and scientific competence, learning to problem-solve will support children to develop a range of positive learning dispositions including:

- Initiative
- Self-confidence and social skills
- Responsibility
- Resilience

How do I Problem-solve?

It is a fundamental basis for all children's learning and development that they learn how to problem-solve. To enable this, educators:

- Facilitate a problem-solving climate
- Allow time and space to problem solve
- Provide materials to encourage problem solving
- Prompt appropriate problems to solve

Problem-solving in Practice

Educators enable children to problem solve by facilitating an environment where children can plan, predict outcomes, make decisions and reflect on the results of their actions.

Open-ended questioning techniques will help stimulate creative problem-solving. For example:

- What will we do to fix this?
- Can you think of what we will need?
- What will happen if?
- How will we find out?

Using 'Thinking' Language

An effective pedagogical strategy to assist problem solving is to place emphasis on using 'thinking language'. Educators can draw children's attention to the importance of thinking, for example, "Let's Stop and Think"; "That is very good thinking"; "I am going to give you some thinking time"; "I am looking out for the best thinkers today"; and "I want you to think carefully and think back on yesterday/last week".

9 Documenting

What is Documenting and how does it enhance children's learning and development?

Documenting children's learning describes all the ways in which information is gathered and presented to build a **unique and lively picture** of the child including their progress in learning and development over a period of time. The early childhood educator gradually builds a picture of the child's interests, strengths and competencies across a range of learning opportunities and social contexts.

Meaningful assessment through the Learning Story Approach

Documenting children's learning experiences in the form of a story gives the early childhood educator an opportunity to do justice to the uniqueness of the individual child and to write with enthusiasm and humour in a way that gives a sense of who the child is as a learner. Whilst report cards and checklists highlight what a child has mastered, the written narrative captures conversations, unique learning moments and relationships which give a sense of how learning came about, where and when it took place and who was involved. This type of assessment is a process rather than an end in itself, a process which can foster and enhance children's learning and development.

How do I Document?

The Learning Journey Portfolio

The Learning Journey Portfolio is a **large folder, scrapbook, box or wallpaper book** and contains a collection of observations and 'work' that tells the story of the child's efforts, progress and achievement over a period of time. The portfolio complements meaningful assessment practice as it celebrates the child as a unique individual. A portfolio is an effective way of compiling and presenting information that will reflect who the child is as a learner. This includes the child's strengths, abilities and interests. Portfolios are useful for a number of reasons as they:

- Are **adaptable** to a variety of contexts, for example, the age and development of the child, type of early childhood setting, curriculum or approach to assessment.
- Capture the **multi-dimensional** aspects of young children's learning and development.
- Focus on the positive – **what the child can do**.
- Give children a sense of **responsibility** and **ownership** over their own learning, for example, in selecting content for the portfolio and reflecting on learning.
- Provide for **meaningful**, ongoing assessment which integrates assessment with teaching and learning.

- Are a practical source of information for **communicating to children, parents and colleagues**.
- Provide a complete and meaningful picture of the child and supports the **continuation of learning** when the time comes to move to another early childhood setting or school.

Portfolios demonstrate both the place (the context in which the activity took place) and the process of learning (how learning and development came about). The place and process of learning is documented using multiple sources and methods of collecting information. Portfolios offer a useful means of presenting evidence of children's learning and development for those external agencies carrying out evaluations of practice, for example, the pre-school inspectors or assessors for a quality award.

The Learning Journey Portfolio also includes the 'voice of the child' through self-reflections. Conversations with children about their portfolios engage them in the evaluation process and increase their motivation to demonstrate their increasing knowledge and skills. This type of documentation can be revisited and photographs can be 'read' by even the youngest children. Sharing portfolios with parents provides continuity of learning for the child and involves parents in their children's education. In addition, the Learning Journey Portfolio provides a meaningful and individual picture of the child when moving to a new setting.

The figure below provides an overview of the different components, including the different types of Learning Stories that make up a Learning Journey Portfolio.



Documentation in Practice

The Learning Journey Portfolio should:

- Be a positive record of the achievements and experiences gained during the child's time in the early childhood service.
- Demonstrate the uniqueness of the child.
- Include as many perspectives as possible (child, parents, early childhood educator).
- Reflect the wider interests of the child and not be confined to the pre-planned experiences of the service alone.
- Highlight the child's positive learning dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding.
- Strike a balance between being user-friendly and understandable for parents, and informative to follow-on early childhood educators and teachers.
- Facilitate the continuity of learning when transferring from one setting to another.



Section 4:

Advancing Learning and Development through Assessment

The issue of assessment in early childhood demands special consideration. In terms of assessment practice, what works for older children or adolescents is not appropriate for younger children. Assessment in early childhood requires understanding that young children have unique needs, grow and change rapidly. Young children do not learn and develop in an isolated manner; nor do they acquire knowledge or learn skills without learning other things in context. Consequently, measuring whether children have acquired specific skills or knowledge in a 'one fits all' manner, is largely invalid to the promotion of learning and development in early childhood (Sweeney, A. *Building Pictures of Learning*, 2003).



This section will consider:

- * **The Role of Assessment in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland**
- * **Meaningful Assessment for early Childhood**
- * **Capturing Uniqueness through Learning Stories**
- * **Building Meaningful Pictures of Learning**
- * **The Significance of the Early Childhood Professional**

The Role of Assessment in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland

As we become increasingly aware of the potential of early childhood education to build secure foundations for lifelong learning and educational success, requirements for greater accountability and enhanced educational performance within the early childhood sector have grown. One aspect of this is the requirement for more formal assessment of children's learning and development against childcare regulations, national quality frameworks and curricular guidelines.

Assessment practice based on the individual needs and abilities of the child is a widely recognised component of quality practice in early childhood education in Ireland. Legislative requirements in the form of the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (no 2) Regulations 2006 (and in particular obligations under Regulation 5), are aimed at ensuring all aspects of a child's daily experiences within a childcare service are planned and implemented to ensure the individual needs and interests of each child are best met. Specific to this, Regulation 5 refers to how a service ensures adequate preparation, provision and planning for the health, welfare and development of the child. It outlines how in order to do this, a childcare service must provide 'appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child's cultural context' Child Care (Pre-school Services) (no 2) Regulations 2006.

Síolta and Aistear emphasise the importance of assessment as a means to inform children's learning. For example, Standard 7 of Síolta states 'Planning for curriculum or programme implementation is based on the child's individual profile, which is established through systematic observation and assessment for learning' (CECDE, 2006). Aistear specifically highlights the potential of assessment practice to children's learning and development and defines assessment as 'the ongoing process of collecting, documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning' (NCCA 2009).

The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs Act (EPSEN) 2004 is also highly significant for those working in early childhood services. Where children may have a learning difficulty, the EPSEN Act highlights children's right to an assessment by professionals and to an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that will set out the child's educational needs and supports to be provided.

Meaningful Assessment for early Childhood - a special approach

Children are at their best when they are interested and motivated. Children understand and learn when things are meaningful and real to them. Therefore, the ongoing observation and documentation of children's actual performance whilst engaged in meaningful learning activities and situations in their day-to-day setting is the most reliable way of building a picture of what children can actually do.

Meaningful assessment refers to an assessment approach that is child-centred and individual to the child such as the Learning Story Approach. Information documented as a result of meaningful assessment practice builds up a holistic and real picture of the child and is a powerful mechanism to inform, support and enhance learning and development. This approach to assessment views the child as a competent, active learner and reflects a broad, holistic picture of the child. It requires an understanding of the child in context, enabling the early childhood educator to build upon learning from within the wider context of the child's family, home, interests and community background.

Early childhood is a crucial time for children to develop positive dispositions towards learning and towards life. Meaningful assessment in early childhood has valuable educational potential in understanding, supporting and extending this learning.

Assessment helps the early childhood educator to understand what and how the child is learning and how to support and enhance the child's learning in the future. Planning and assessing day by day ensures that a curriculum for babies, toddlers and young children is relevant and responsive to their emerging strengths, abilities, interests and needs.

Meaningful assessment practice takes place over time and in a variety of learning contexts, for example, indoors and outdoors, alone and with others, at different times of the day and engaging with different activities. Information gathered from meaningful assessment demonstrates the richness of what the child knows and can do, and enables the early childhood educator to support the child to build on his/her strengths and interests. This ongoing documentation of information gradually builds a picture of the child's unique learning dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding.

The difference between checking learning and supporting learning

Comparatively speaking, there are two different approaches to assessment:

- Assessment **of** Learning
- Assessment **for** Learning

Assessment of Learning is usually summative, meaning that an assessment is carried out at the end of a term or year. Typically there is an emphasis on comparing children, highlighting which children are doing well (in terms of predetermined goals) and those who are not. In Assessment of Learning, there is usually no indication of what the child needs in terms of support or future planning.

On the other hand, **Assessment for Learning** describes where the emphasis shifts from summative to formative. Formative assessment happens during the learning, on a number of occasions rather than at the end. Assessment for Learning is not about making comparative judgements; it is about informing, supporting and enhancing learning.

Formative assessment or Assessment for Learning is the most suitable means of assessing children's progress in learning in early childhood. However, developmental stage theory has provided a firm foundation for the viewpoint that skills and understandings have an early stage and that the task of early childhood education is to ensure that specific developmental skills are taught in an orderly sequence. Subsequently, the early childhood education curriculum has been informed by ideas arising from developmental theory, which describes children's development in universal terms, the same for every child, everywhere, across time. This means that development has been largely viewed as a predictable process, ignoring influences of children's wider environment, for example, their family, prior experience and culture. This has cultivated a model of assessment which views learning as a progression through a hierarchy of skills, for example, developmental checklists.

Few, if any, standardised group administered checklists or tests are responsive to the wide range of growth rates, abilities and experiences of young children. Children's backgrounds influence their dispositions, attitudes, skills, knowledge, understanding and ways of interacting with others. The knowledge a child has about the environment, sport, books or a holiday destination is directly related to the place of that knowledge in a particular family, social background or culture.

Checklists - a word of caution

Pre-determined developmental checklists have a long established tradition in early childhood assessment practice. At best, child development checklists are used to gauge developmental milestones, to identify specific skill deficits (as in diagnostic assessment), or to provide evidence of meeting curriculum goals. Checklists do not reflect the way in which young children learn. They do not describe the process of learning. They penalise children whose experiences and strengths are different from those of the dominant group and do not reflect the deeply reflective nature of young children's thinking. Developmental checklists are a method of segmenting the changes that take place as young children grow, into graspable chunks for adults to understand. Although this is a convenient option, particularly when applied to assessment, it does not provide meaningful information that will support the next steps in the child's learning.

The use of developmental checklists directly contradicts a child-centred approach. This is because checklists view the developing child as deficient, with pre-determined 'gaps' in their learning. This means that the areas in which the child is 'unable' become the focus point for the early childhood educator. Subsequently, the child's strengths, interests and preferred methods of learning can be ignored, losing out on potentially the most powerful vehicle for learning – being motivated to learn.

Assessment of the Past and Assessment for the Future

Traditional methods of assessment such as pre-determined developmental checklists can be described as assessment of the past. This means that assessment information focuses on what has already happened. Alternatively, meaningful assessment is assessment for the future, meaning the purpose of the assessment is to provide information to support future learning and development. The figure below demonstrates the difference between traditional methods of assessment, for example, checklists and meaningful assessment methods, for example, the Learning Story Approach.

Traditional Assessment: assessment of the past	Meaningful Assessment: assessment for the future
The same for all children regardless of ability, interests or background	Individual to the child, highlights their interests, strengths and abilities
Measures things that are relevant to the educator	Focuses on things that are meaningful and relevant to the child
Foregrounds specific isolated items of knowledge or skills like colour, shape, cutting or numbers	Describes the child's positive dispositions to learn and the process of learning
Isolates the child, promotes competition and comparison between children	Encourages collaboration between children and promotes a shared purpose
Makes a judgement about the child's learning without providing a context to the decision	Provides a lively picture of how and where the learning took place and who was present at the time
Measures what the child can do unaided and unsupported	Highlights what the child is capable of doing with the support of others
Is undertaken by one person	Is undertaken in collaboration with the child, parents and the early childhood educator
Checks learning that has taken place	Informs, supports and enhances future learning.

The relationship between assessment practice and the early childhood curriculum

A child centred curriculum goes hand in hand with meaningful assessment practice. Assessment practice is not something that happens following the delivery of specific elements of the early childhood curriculum. Rather, assessment practice is embedded within the early childhood curriculum to inform the provision of meaningful and appropriate learning

opportunities for children. These learning opportunities are guided by the overarching learning aims and goals of the early childhood curriculum. The continuous use of information gathered from assessment will shape an appropriate early childhood curriculum so that it remains challenging and responsive to the child's needs.

Assessment is a natural part of the early childhood educator's daily observations of and interactions with the child in a variety of different contexts and learning situations. When **stimulating experiences** are provided for the child and he/she is **engaged in active learning** and opportunities for assessment are **plentiful**.

The Early Childhood Educator:

- **Observes** children, **listens** to children, **interacts** with children
- **Documents** what children say, do and make
- **Responds** to children's learning, emerging interests and abilities by providing appropriate learning opportunities
- **Supports** and **enables** children to take their learning to the next level
- **Shares** information (with colleagues, the child, parents)
- **Plans** the next steps in children's learning.

Learning how to see children's learning

The key to effective assessment is to observe purposefully and document examples of learning that provide rich information about the child's experiences. This requires the early childhood educator to become very familiar with the aims and goals of the early childhood curriculum and in using it as a framework to plan learning opportunities for children.

When the early childhood educator documents learning and development, as opposed to a pre-determined outcome, the main focus is on the **process** of learning. Important processes are involved in everyday activities, such as the baby's response to a new toy, the toddlers' newfound ability to throw things or the young child's developing interest in making things.

Regular and ongoing observation is a particularly meaningful technique as it intrudes minimally on those activities that naturally integrate all aspects of learning and development. Early childhood educators working with young children can make judgements based on their observations of what children do and say in a variety of different contexts and play situations, rather than through formal assessments.

Capturing Uniqueness through Learning Stories

The Learning Story Approach is a **meaningful method of assessment** that captures the uniqueness of the individual child. Learning stories reveal a **positive image** of the young child as an active learner with distinctive strengths, abilities and interests. Learning stories draw attention to the child's positive learning dispositions, skills and attitudes and describe learning at a **particular time** and **place** and in the presence of **particular people** and **objects**. The Learning Story Approach considers learning as a **process or a journey**, which changes over time. Judgements are therefore made over a prolonged period and involve the child and other adults.

Early childhood educators gather information about children by observing them in **different situations** – playing alone, in groups, in conversation with siblings and peers and in the company of adults. The early childhood educator gets to know each child individually and uses assessment information to plan for progression in a way that is meaningful to the child.

The Learning Story Approach promotes **shared values** for the child's learning and there is an ongoing process of communication between families and the early childhood service relating to the child's well-being, development and learning. This provides a more accurate picture of the child as a learner and promotes a collaborative approach involving the child and key people in his/her life. A series of learning stories are compiled in a portfolio and used to build up a holistic picture of the child over a period of time.

Sample Learning Story

Bathing Babies'... a learning story**Name:** Mia Chambers**Date:** 10th November 2012**Learning context:** Group activity -bathing babies at the water tray**Assessment Method:** Observation**Adult:** AS**Story: the story of learning is:**

A new baby has just joined Mia's extended family. At group time the previous day, Mia asked 'can we bath the babies tomorrow?' The children were asked to bring in some old shampoo bottles, towels, combs and brushes.

When Mia arrived in the morning she was excited to see the water tray prepared for the activity. She chose a doll from the home corner, undressed it and got started straight away!

Throughout the activity she was completely self-absorbed – she purposefully played alongside the other children – only interacting to share shampoo bottles and water jugs.

She constantly talked to her 'baby' and demonstrated caring dispositions throughout. 'I am going to pour the water over your head nice and easy – I won't let it go into your eyes' ... 'I will put the towel around you to get you nice and dry and keep you nice and warm'.

Review: the key points of this learning story are:

- **Mia was able to communicate and express an interest in acting out a real life situation**
- **She was purposefully absorbed in this activity**
- **She shared resources easily**
- **She demonstrated caring dispositions**

Moving forward:

The new baby in Mia's extended family has clearly sparked her imagination. Enable her to explore different aspects of a new addition to the family through other activities such as stories, setting up a baby table containing baby items, bringing in photos of the new baby to share at news time, inviting her new family member to visit the setting.

Group ideas:

Plan a 'When I was a Baby' activity with the whole group. Ask children to bring in their baby photographs to enable Mia and the other children to reflect on how they have grown, things they did as babies etc. Involve parents by getting them to contribute a funny story of something each child did as a baby and use this information as a 'guess who' activity – e.g. When I was a baby, I Guess who I am?

The Learning Story – a 3 part structure

A Learning Story is a **narrative story of learning**, written to highlight specific key learning moments. Learning Stories are similar to narrative style observations, but they are more structured. Early childhood educators use observations, written like a story, to describe what the child **can do**, drawing attention to the child's **uniqueness** and **positive dispositions to learn**. A Learning Story provides a lively account of the child's learning experiences. They can be either **planned** observations (where the early childhood educator plans to assess the child's progress in relation to a specific skill or learning goal) or **spontaneous** anecdotal snapshots. Snapshot notes describe an instant 'picture' of the child at one specific time. The early childhood educator records anecdotal notes about a particular child or group of children as a result of an unplanned, spontaneous noteworthy behaviour or interaction. Learning Stories can also be presented using **photographs**, a record of a **discussion** with the child or parent or by writing the **child's comments** on his/her work (self-assessment).

Although Learning Stories can be presented in a variety of formats, they have a simple basic three part structure. This includes **a learning episode** (the observation narrative, the story of learning), **a summary of learning** (key dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding observed) and **a moving forward section** (further activities to inform planning). Learning Stories are usually accompanied by photographs and the moving forward can involve the early childhood educator, team colleagues, the child and the parent. Early childhood educators use photographs, copies of children's work and comments from parents to support the written narrative. Learning Stories are clear, to the point, informative and do not have to be long.

The Learning Story – a 3 part structure

Part 1: Learning Story

The learning episode can be:

- A brief description of what has been observed
- The outline of a conversation with a child
- A comment made by the child (child's voice)
- A sequence of photographs

Part 2: Review of Learning

The summary of learning/development includes:

- Key learning points that demonstrate progress in learning in either positive dispositions, skills, attitudes, knowledge and understanding

Part 3: Moving Forward

The moving forward section describes:

- How the early childhood educator intends to build on learning
- Further activities to consolidate learning
- The child's ideas for taking the idea forward
- Ideas to include in planning.

Sample Learning Story

I Can Communicate... a learning story

Name: Conor**Date:** 23rd May 2012**Learning context:** Exploring in the baby area**Assessment Method:** Interactive observation**Adult:** AS**Story: the story of learning is:**

Conor is extremely sociable and demonstrates an ability to communicate with others in a number of ways. He pays great attention to facial expression and makes eye contact with adults to initiate communication. He watches and imitates adults in clapping hands and peek a boo games frequently shaking his head or covering his eyes. His language is developing into conversation conveyed through a variety of jabber using different tones and pitches.

Conor takes great interest in what's going on in the room and can watch adults and other children intently for several minutes. He squeals or shouts to attract attention to himself, waits for the adult response and smiles or laughs when he gets it. He has also perfected a 'kissing routine' as a means of communication which he has now worked out always results in positive attention!

Review: the key points of this learning story are:

- **Conor has formed secure relationships in the crèche**
- **Conor can initiate communication and respond to adult interaction**
- **Conor can communicate how he feels through non verbal gestures and sounds**

Moving forward:

Build on Conor's communication skills by placing him in areas of the room where he can see plenty of activity – including outdoors. Play different types of music to stimulate a response from Conor – fast, slow, etc. Talk with Conor and involve him in small group activities with his peers and with slightly older children.

This learning story is presented in a basic three-part structure – firstly it outlines the story of learning, then it reviews the key learning points and finally it provides pointers that can be used for planning.

Building meaningful Pictures of Learning

Meaningful assessment is a powerful mechanism for learning. As we have seen, assessment in early childhood is not about 'testing' what a child can and cannot do, rather it is the process of 'tuning in' to the individual child, gathering information about the child's learning and development, and using the information to support and extend learning.

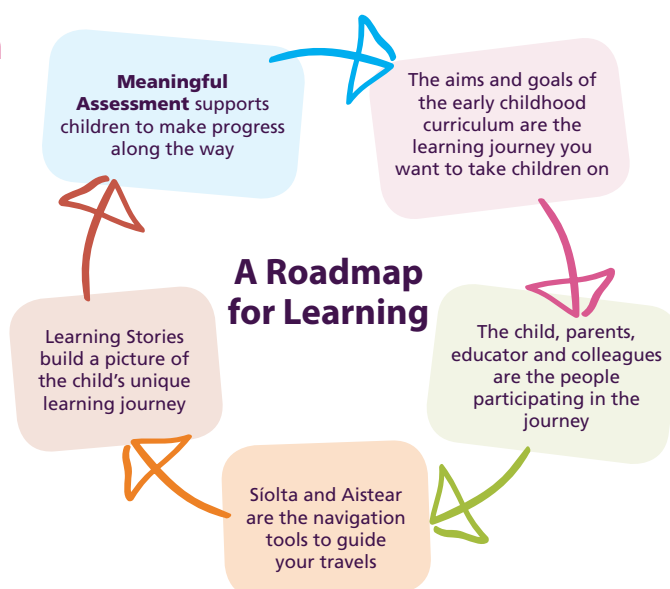
Documenting children's learning describes all the ways in which information is gathered and presented to build a **unique and lively picture** of the child including their progress in learning and development over a period of time. The early childhood educator gradually builds a picture of the child's interests, strengths and competencies across a range of learning opportunities and social contexts. Using a varied approach (observing children in a variety of different ways, in different places, and at different times) will build an accurate picture of the child, for example by:

- Carrying out **planned observations** (for example, setting tasks) and recording informal **anecdotal notes** (a snapshot of a child at a particular time) can be used to capture information on all areas of learning and development. Observations or snapshot notes can be used on their own to record a specific disposition or skill or combined with others to form a broader learning story. Observations and notes can also be used to contribute to a child's daily diary or record of care.
- Engaging with children in **conversation** is one of the most insightful ways of gathering information about their thoughts, interests and experiences. The early childhood educator records children's comments, using these to assess children's understanding and to plan the next steps in learning.
- Helping children to think about and reflect on their own learning through **self-assessment**. By revisiting activities, events and interactions, children develop understanding of and make connections with their prior and new learning. Self-assessment gives the early childhood educator insight into areas such as the child's self-esteem, motivation, understanding and perception of themselves as a learner.
- Using **photographs, video and audio records** to tell a Learning Story and over time record progression in children's learning. These also allow the child, the early childhood educator and parents to reflect on and revisit learning experiences.
- Examples of **the child's work** accompanied by their interpretations and comments promote the **child's voice** in the learning and progress. Sometimes samples of work can be chosen by the child and sometimes by the child and adult together.
- **Engaging and sharing information with colleagues and parents** is essential to find out about children at different times and in other places, especially in the home.

For a range of sample Learning Stories see Building Pictures of Learning and for more information on Documenting, see Section 3: Pedagogical Techniques and Strategies.

Partners in Learning - key people in the assessment process

Meaningful assessment requires a **collaborative approach** to gathering and building pictures of learning. It involves the parent, the child and the early childhood educator. This collaborative approach promotes shared values for the child's well-being, learning and development. Through meaningful and respectful relationships, the child's learning journey is supported and enhanced.



The Significance of the Early Childhood Professional

A framework for holistic learning and development is provided by the early childhood educator. He/she creates an interesting and challenging learning environment, interacts with children in a responsive meaningful way, enables learning through trusting and respectful relationships and 'tunes in' to the individual child to understand and provide for the next steps in learning. Central to the effectiveness of assessment practice is the early childhood educator's knowledge of how children learn. Assessment for the purposes of recognising, supporting and extending learning and development is a complex process requiring considerable professional knowledge, skills and expertise on behalf of the early childhood educator.

It is worth remembering that although observations and learning stories provide evidence of learning, they are only translated into assessments that support learning when the early childhood educator can appropriately interpret and respond to the information collected. This involves judging the nature and extent of a child's learning, the significance of this development and how best to support the next steps. A solid knowledge of child development and the ability to make informed judgments is then crucial to the process of assessment.

Central to the development of effective assessment practice for the early childhood educator is the continual expansion of professional knowledge in understanding child development, how young children think and learn, and in assessment techniques. Meaningful assessment practice is a proficiency that builds over time and is supported by both guidelines for good practice and ongoing professional development.

The early childhood educator also plays an important role in supporting and advising parents on what they can do to extend and reinforce their child's learning and to identify children whose learning requires additional support due to developmental delay and/or learning difficulties.

Valuing the voice of the Child and the voice of the Parent

The first steps in including the voice of the child and the voice of the parent is by providing a child profile booklet prior to the child starting in the childcare service. This enables the parent and child to pass on important information about the child's individual interests, strengths and family background to inform the first stage in planning appropriate and meaningful learning experiences.

Day-to-day conversations with children provide rich contexts for assessments of learning and development. Communication skills such as questioning, encouraging and listening, play a key part in gaining information as part of natural conversations with children.

Including the Voice of the Child

As we have seen, traditional methods of assessment did not include the child as part of the assessment process. Usually, the early childhood educator would compile the assessment and share it with parents, however, the child was not involved. The Learning Story Approach involves the child in the assessment process and enables him/her to see themselves as an active participant in their own learning. The child feels that their 'voice' is heard and that their opinion is valued by the early childhood educator.

It is also crucial that the early childhood educator is capable of developing and using effective interaction skills during day-to-day communications with children, since these will be necessary to ensure optimal learning and development. Some of the ways that early childhood educators can 'listen' and respond to the voice of the child include:

- **Truly 'listening'** to children – this includes 'listening' to their body language and non-verbal gestures, 'listening' to what they have to say, and 'listening' to what their behaviour is saying.
- Giving children the opportunity to make **decisions** and choices.
- Enabling children to take the **lead**.
- Recording children's **actual comments** on pieces of creative work or adding captions to photographs.
- Taking time to **discuss** with children what they plan to do for the day.
- Encouraging children to **talk about, record** and **reflect** on their plans.
- Supporting children to **choose** and **add examples** of their work to their Learning Journey Portfolios.

- Encouraging children to **self-assess** and reflect upon their learning.
- Recognising **emerging interests** and providing the appropriate resources to enable them to explore this interest.
- Ensuring that each child's interests are **reflected in curriculum planning**.

To maximise the potential of these conversations for assessment, it is essential that early childhood educators draw on a variety of interaction strategies and methods of communication, including the early childhood educators ability to encourage children to think more deeply and 'tease out' their ideas. Also, the early childhood educator's ability to engage and guide the child, for example, thinking together to help children make sense of experiences, learn from them and exploring alongside children to find things out rather than providing immediate answers.

Including the Voice of the Parent

Parents should be involved in the assessment process as soon as they register their child in the childcare service. One of the best ways of informing parents about assessment procedures is through an introductory information session for new parents at the beginning of the year. This process is assisted by providing parents with a clearly written Assessment for Learning Policy and an Information Leaflet outlining the rationale for the assessment approach employed by the childcare service.

Informing parents about their child's progress in the childcare service is a key responsibility of the early childhood educator. Regular and respectful communication between the early childhood educator and parents will enable parents to understand the benefits of meaningful assessment to their child's learning and development. Parents may feel apprehensive that their child will be subject to inappropriate 'testing' in the early childhood setting. It is essential that the early childhood educator is able to communicate to parents the difference between assessment of learning and assessment **for** learning.

The voice of the child's parents can be easily included by encouraging parents to view and make contributions to their child's Learning Journey Portfolio. This can be in the form of occasional brief written accounts of how they feel their child is progressing, a flavour of the things he/she shares about pre-school or any worries the child may have. Alternatively, the early childhood educator can offer to record a brief comment voiced by the parent and add this to the child's portfolio on the parents' behalf.



1. The ongoing observation of children's **actual performance**, whilst engaged in meaningful learning activities, is the most reliable way of building a picture of what children can actually do.
2. The Learning Story Approach is a **meaningful method of assessment** that starts with a positive image of the young child as an active learner with distinctive strengths, abilities and interests.
3. Documenting children's learning describes all the ways in which information is **gathered** and **presented** to build a **unique and lively picture** of the child including their progress in learning and development over a period of time.
4. Although observations and learning stories provide evidence of learning, they are only **translated into assessments** that support learning when the early childhood educator can appropriately interpret and respond to the information collected.
5. To maximize the potential of meaningful assessment, it is crucial that the **early childhood educator is capable of using effective interaction skills** during day to day communications with children.



Section 5:

Planning and Reflecting on Professional Practice

Responsive curriculum planning focuses on finding strategies to help educators search for, support, and keep alive children's internal motivation to learn, and their spontaneous explorations of people and things of interest and importance to them. This begins with meaningful observations and documentation of individual children's learning and development. Planned learning opportunities should not be static. Flexibility, adaptation and change are critical parts of the learning process in early childhood education. Once an interaction with a child or small cluster of children begins, the educator has to be ready to adapt his or her plans and actions to meet the "momentary" needs and interests of each child.



This section will consider:

- * Using assessment information - planning the next steps in learning
- * Differentiation - meeting the needs of the individual child
- * The Planning Process
- * Using Aistear's learning themes to plan children's learning
- * Reviewing and evaluating planned themes and activities
- * Enabling children to plan and reflect on their Learning
- * The Reflective Educator

Using assessment information - planning the next steps in learning

Information gained from assessment practice is **only beneficial** when it is put to **good use**. The planning process involves the full staff team thinking about and discussing what children are learning and deciding how this learning can be supported and enhanced. Each key person is responsible for ensuring that useful information about children **is included** in medium and short-term plans. This use of assessment information ensures that activities remain meaningful and appropriate for each child's interests, strengths and stage of development. It is worth remembering that planning documents should remain **flexible**, allowing the children's changing interests and responses to learning to be incorporated over time.

Good planning should:

- reflect activities that orient the educator to the role of facilitator of learning rather than the role of "director" of learning
- assist the educator in understanding the needs of each child (notes on individual interests)
- prepare the educator to communicate effectively with other adults in the child's life.

Differentiation - meeting the needs of the individual child

“**Differentiation is not a methodology or series of steps; it is a philosophy that is central to the ethos of the Early Childhood Service.**”

What is differentiation?

Curriculum differentiation is a broad term referring to the need to tailor teaching environments and practices to create appropriately different learning experiences for different children. Differentiation is one of the means by which children of all abilities and learning styles can access and learn from the structure of a common curriculum shared with their peers. It involves the modification and matching of curriculum objectives, teaching and assessment methods, learning activities and resources to children's individual abilities, educational needs and learning styles in a social learning context.

Successful differentiation requires that educators value the achievements of all children and recognise the right of all children to be socially included in school and community lives while acknowledging that children learn in different ways. Educators also need to maintain positive, open minds about possibilities for learning at all stages of children's development. These attitudes are essential for teaching all learners, for example, 'typically' developing children, unusually able children, children with behavioural difficulties, children with different social, cultural, emotional and economic experiences, children with autism, children with dyslexia, children with visual, hearing and physical disabilities and children with language and developmental delay, including those children who have Down Syndrome.

The main elements of differentiation include learning **content** (what children are learning, appropriateness to need and ability), **the learning process** (how learning is achieved) **and the learning environment** (how the learning environment is structured).

Planning for Babies and Toddlers

An essential component of planning is attention to a responsive learning environment and specific attention to how environments should be changed. The planning of learning environments is particularly important to infant-toddler development and more so than specific lessons or specific activities. The environment must be seen as part of the curriculum, creating interest and encouraging and supporting exploration. Research has shown that much of how infants and toddlers learn best comes not from specific adult-directed lessons but from educators knowing how to maximise opportunities for each child by providing a well planned play-learning environment.

Planning for Children with Additional Needs

An Individual Education Plan (IEP) can benefit a child who needs additional support in a particular area of learning or development either over a short time or longer term. This may be required as a result of behavioural difficulties or over a longer term to provide supports for specific learning needs.

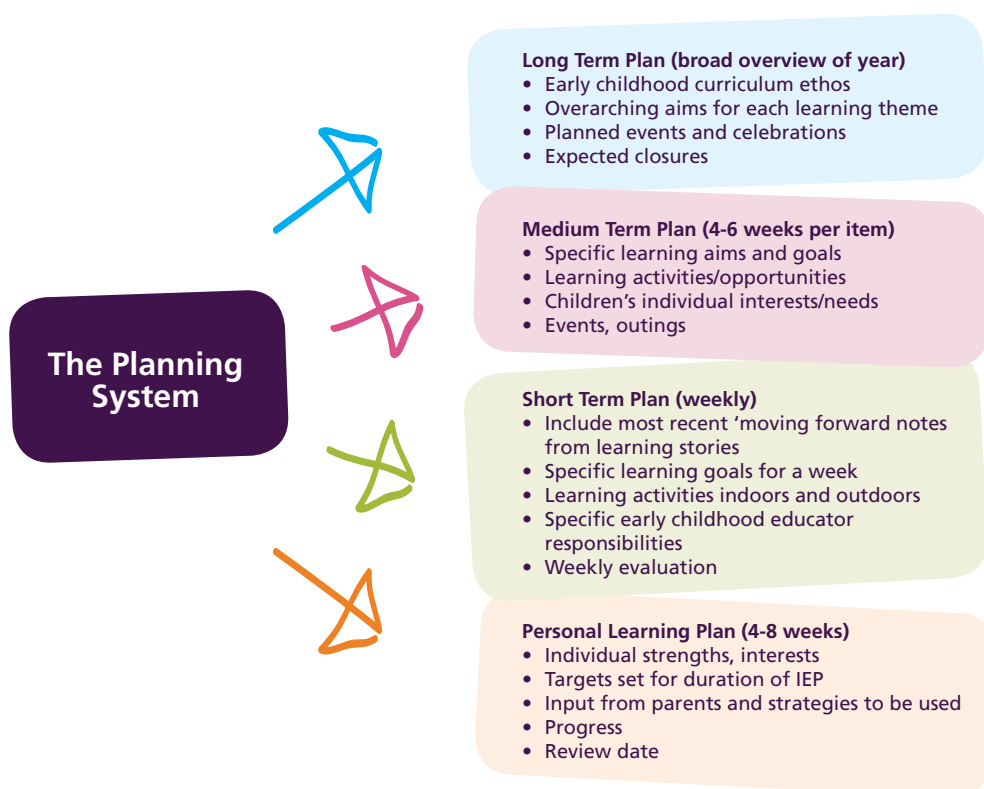
An IEP is a comprehensive record of the child's learning needs, goals and progress that is developed by professionals and parents in partnership. It is concerned with the priority needs of the child, and the resources and learning strategies required to work towards meeting those needs.

Using observations and information gathered about the child, an IEP is compiled, which aims to overcome the child's difficulties as far as possible. The early childhood educator, in partnership with the child's parents and other professionals where appropriate, sets targets for the child and reviews progress at agreed intervals. Reviews of the IEP should be carried out as appropriate. It is essential to nominate a key person within the team as the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in order to monitor and co-ordinate this process.

The Planning Process

Planning is usually organised over three different time frames – **long term, medium term and short term** – all of which link and follow on from each other (see The Planning Process). Plans include a broad overview of learning themes for the year (long-term), specific learning aims and goals for the duration of the plan, including information specific to individual children (medium-term) and details of how the indoor and outdoor environment will be organised, children's needs and who is responsible for particular activities (short-term).

The Planning Process



Using Aistear's themes to plan children's learning

Aistear's learning and development themes are holistic – meaning all aspects are interconnected and mutually dependent. The use of Aistear's four learning themes to plan a curriculum for young children will provide a balanced framework for all aspects of children's learning and development.

Listening to what children say and **incorporating their interests** into planning, actively involves them in the planning process. This can be achieved by planning **a holistic theme or special interest topic** which incorporates specific learning goals in relation to Aistear's four themes - Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking.

- **Well-being** is about children being confident, happy and healthy.
- **Identity and Belonging** is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community.
- **Communicating** is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.
- **Exploring and Thinking** is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning and refining their ideas.

Special interest topics linked to the overall aims of the early childhood curriculum can be used to provide a **framework or structure** for a medium-term or short-term plan. For example, Identity and Belonging is one of Aistear's learning themes. The topic plan on 'Where We Live' can be used to provide meaningful learning experiences as part of Aim 2: Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.



The 'Where We Live' theme **medium-term plan** includes the following:

- Aistear's four curriculum themes
- The specific learning goals planned under each curriculum theme (taken from Aistear)
- Brief notes gained from assessment practice to consolidate/support children's next steps in learning
- A flexible, interconnecting framework of learning and play activities for weeks 1-4.
-



Medium Term Plan - **Where We Live / Moving House**

The overall aim of the topic is to use 'Where we live' as a focus for a holistic theme which integrates the four learning themes in a meaningful, fun way.

Date	Well-being	Identity and Belonging	Communicating	Exploring and Thinking	
Learning Aims 	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Handle transitions and changes well.• Respect themselves, others and the environment• Develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe.• Become reflective and think flexibly• Be active citizens.	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a sense of who they are, describe their backgrounds and strengths• Share personal experience about their own family and come to know about diversity of family structure, culture and background• See themselves as part of a wider community	Learning goals: <p>Express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non verbal communication</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• share feelings, thoughts and ideas• emergent writing and early reading <p>Use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world</p> <p>sing songs, listen to stories, learn rhymes.</p>	Learning goals: <p>Demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in the community</p> <p>Make marks and use drawing, painting and model making to record objects, events and ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop a sense of time, shape• match, compare, order, size• draw, paint, make models• build awareness of symbols• recognise letters, numbers.	
Child notes  – across 4 weeks					
Jamie: support Jamie with transition of moving house this month.	Week 1 Where we live	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explore the wide variety of homes people can live in through discussion, my home posters, books and photos.• Look at an estate agent website and talk about the different kinds of houses. How much do houses cost?• Why do we live in houses?	Plan with children and gather information on where they live and the type of home they live in e.g flat, house, caravan. Let children decide on what the imaginary corner should represent e.g. a housing estate, home corner or caravan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make ideas board to represent various homes uses collage of magazine/ newspaper pictures• Introduce books: My home is a ..., Use the V-tech book with the follow the path home story.• Discussion – what do you know about where you live?• Creative- make a graph displaying who lives where – e.g. how many live in a• How many live in the country/town/village?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add building materials to construction corner: wood, building blocks, cardboard boxes, Styrofoam blocks.• Make a fiddle board of door knobs, door bells, brass numbers and letterboxes.• Discuss big buildings/small buildings/ tall buildings/small buildings.• What other kind of houses can people live in – e.g. igloos/ tents/apartment blocks/ wooden houses etc.
Ellie: extend on her interest on exploring height and size through housing theme.					
Mark: build on interest of trucks through use of removal truck.	Week 2 Who and What is in my house?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Who lives in my house?• How many people? How many pets?• Who lives outside and who lives inside- why?• What makes up our home? Roof, walls, doors etc.• Rooms inside, garden/ balcony/porch/yard.• How do you care for our home indoors and outdoors?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask parents to bring in photos of where we live.• Photocopy and make into lotto/picture matching game• Name the things you like best about where you live ...• How long have you lived there? How many houses have you lived in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use circle time discussion to explore the various structures we live in, explore associated language concepts: detached, two storey etc• Who lives closest to you – who lives furthest away? Use maps to investigate and find out.• How do we know where people live? – finding addresses – e.g. telephone directory, computer.• Books to be added to book corner: “Moving house”, “The lost Teddy”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Concepts of height through homes: which houses have stairs, which are tallest? Build stairs using blocks in home corner.• Make individual home cut outs along home corner wall of each child’s home (apartment block, bungalow, two storey)• How many rooms?• Which room is the biggest/ smallest?• What shape are the rooms? Windows and doors?• Provide mark making materials to create house signs, estate signs, door numbers, addresses.• ‘I have moved’ postcard
Shane: showing a keen interest in using pencils and writing his own name, extend to use of house numbers and addresses of houses					
Child notes – across 4 weeks					
	Week 3 Moving house	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What happens when we move house? Explore emotions of moving home• Discuss the important people in our lives• My new bedroom: explore what I’d bring to my new house, what makes me feel happy and safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Invite “Happy to Help” moving company to bring lorry to service,• Who’s moved house before?• Add boxes and wheelie trolley to home corner for ‘moving home’	Books to be added to book corner: “Moving house”, “The lost Teddy”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide mark making materials to create house signs, estate signs, door numbers, addresses.• ‘I have moved’ postcard
	Week 4 My Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a neighbour? Close neighbours and far away neighbours depending on where you live – town, country.• Neighbours – who do you live beside? How can we help our neighbours?	What buildings are close to where I live – post office, church, library, swimming pool, community centre, schools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discuss the use of addresses for people, post, deliveries being able to find us• Make your own phone book of friends using photos and addresses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Group creative – make a building from cardboard boxes – paint it and give it an name.• Drawing maps of where we live• Discuss the places we like to visit.

Medium Term Plan - On the Farm

The overall aim of the topic is: On the Farm

	Well-being	Identity and Belonging	Communicating	Exploring and Thinking	
Learning Aims	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make strong attachment & develop warm and supportive relationships with peers, family & adults in community.• Develop and nurture sense of wonder & awe Care for the environment• Respect life & know it has a meaning and purpose	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Express their own ideas, preferences & needs, & have these responded to• Know what members of their family & community are positively acknowledge & welcomed.• See themselves as part of wider community & know about local area• Understand the different roles of people in the community y	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Express themselves creatively & imaginatively using non-verbal communication.• Interact by listening, discussing & taking turns in conversation.• Use books and ICT for fun, gain info, & broaden understanding of world• Listen and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs, make music using instruments.	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Engage, Explore, experiment & use new physical skills-manipulate objects/materials• Learn about natural environment, features, materials, animals, plants and own responsibilities.• Recognise patterns & make connections between new learning and what they already know.• Make marks and use drawing, painting & model making to record objects, events, ideas.	
Child notes – across 4 weeks					
Chloe: support Chloe with her interest of caring for animals Ben: enable Ben to take the lead on ICT activities	Week 1 What is a farm, who lives on the farm?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is a farm and who lives on it?• Where the animals live on the farm• How the animals are cared for• (discussion using photos-barns, fields, sty etc)• Introduce various animal print and texture fabric in and outdoor-woolen, leather, cow print, fluffy etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Circle time: Experiences/ knowledge about farming-discuss & note interests/ knowledge.• Newsletter: give to parents on theme covering, songs/rhymes covered and how they can use at home and support theme during the month – photos of children at farm, sharing information if any are farmers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify farm animals from printed photographs/toy animals• Make graph of favourite animals• Recall activity of animals-recognition and feely bag• ICT-Animals on the farm• Story-Big Red Barn• Songs Old Mc Donald, 5 little ducks.• Dress up animal costumes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Animal sounds- (listen and imitate)• Develop interest area-discussion of what we need to develop it- animals needs, farm resources, vehicles etc• Keeping animals safe-explore how to keep them safe- use lollipop sticks to make models/ pictures of fencing.
Sarah: build on Sarah's interest of cooking and exploring food. Tom: showing a keen interest in making enclosures, strengthen through creative activity.	Week 2 What the animals give us	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How to care for the animals-clean, warm, fed- consider care during seasons• Chicken coops-egg laying• Cows-milking parlour/ sheds/fields• Pigs-in sheds/outdoors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage parents to send in farm produce from home for interest table/discussion- dairy products, wool, vegetables etc• Meat that comes from animals-favourite, least favourite. Discuss any farm foods in lunch box/crèche lunch• *allergies/preferences noted	Animals on the farm-online animation Animal puppets Use the various large fabric pieces to express themselves through animal characters-with and without sound cd. The Giving Farm poem-(what animals give us) Story-Big Red Barn Songs Old Mc Donald, 5 little ducks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tasting/touching activity with veg• *allergies/preferences noted• Discuss additions needed to interest area-can we make them?• Explore butter making using cream and bottle-(shake to form)
	Week 3 The role of the farmer	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planting crops/vegetables and care of them• Dairy/Livestock/Crop farming• Props-outdoor, sponges, basin, water, cleaning tractors/barn from pallets-brushes /dust pans/brushes etc	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share ideas on their view on farmers role-note through drawing and documenting words used, can be used as display of consultation on wall• Do children know any farmers-discuss roles• Prepare for visit to farm-safety, expectations, listening skills etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dairy farmer video-ICT• Explore animal sounds, have discussion on preference of farm animal, has it changed or remained same from graph-why?• Story-Little Red Hen, Big Red Barn• Song-Old Mc D, 5 little ducks, Farmer wants a wife.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vegetable picture prints• Additions/Changes to the Interest area-from home, outside, made-changes• Prop box indoor-outdoor (hay *allergies, gloves, hats, plastic food, basket, buckets, willies• Plant Vegetables-carrots, onions, tomatoes etc• Rubber glove activity-milk cow
	Week 4 How the farm helps us	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Farmer visiting service- show photos of his/her farm and produce that is sold- where he sells it- supermarket, roadside stall, farmers market, butchers etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use children's clothes as a discussion of how clothes are made using animal materials• Visit to the farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Digital camera-to record video off farm and turn take to take photos of their favourite things-document as photos are being taken by individual children.• Make a shopping list of things the children can buy that the animals give us.• Video- From the farm to the fridge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Anything we can bring back for our interest area?• Make vegetable soup and homemade bread.• Pictures/models of favourite things from farm-take their farm photos/ quotes as inspiration.

Medium Term Plan - Babies and Toddlers

The overall aim of the topic is to use 'This is me' as a focus for a holistic theme which integrates the four learning themes in a meaningful, fun way.

		Well-being	Identity and Belonging	Communicating	Exploring and Thinking
Learning Aims		Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults • Discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills. • Gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements • Demonstrate a sense of mastery and display learning dispositions 	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciate the features that make a person special and unique • Have a sense of 'who they are' • Feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment • Experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests and linked to their home, community and culture. 	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a range of body movements, facial expressions and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information • Interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others • Explore sound, pattern, rhythm and repetition in language • Show confidence in trying out new things 	Learning goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growing understanding of themselves and others • Make connections between learning and what they already know • Express feelings and thoughts through music, play, language, creative experience • Develop confidence and independence
Child notes – across 4 weeks					
Aimee: Support settling in from home – crèche	Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask parents for up-to-date photos of babies in their home environment, with parents/siblings/grandparents • Introduce treasure basket 'My Home' variety of materials from children's home to support gross motor skills eg: wooden spoon • Make comfort objects available when necessary. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use photographs provided by parents to personalise various areas such as nappy, sleep, pigeon hole for children's personal items. • Explore children's individual features using mirror play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hello Song: use babies names • Modelling facial expressions and gestures - smiling, peek-a boo. • Hold 'conversations' with babies/toddlers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Painting - Hand & Foot prints • Take photos of babies participating • In play • Support babies by using mirror play
Kate – Support Kate to enhance gross motor skills	Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use photographs to create wall displays at babies eye level • Treasure Basket - introduce additional small items, clothes pegs, curtain rail rings etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce books eg: mirrors, pop up's • Collage of babies interests • Spend individual time with Babies/toddlers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group activity: music time, introduce shakers, drums, symbols • Outside play – exploring sound of wind chimes and reflections in CD's 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making mobiles - all about me • Messy play - gloop, spoons, bowls
Megan – Encourage Megan's enjoyment of music and movement	Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore family photos of all children in baby room - use photographs to initiate communication with babies naming family members • Introduce variety of bottles eg: shakers, coloured water 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finger/toe puppets- the wiggle game/this is me • Outside play - providing experiences so that babies can interaction with peers older children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Song: finger, toes, hair & nose • Use facial expressions as a response to sounds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sand play wet /dry - group play • Introduce different textures and smells to the treasure baskets
	Week 4 How the farm helps us	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use caring routines to spend individual time with babies and toddlers – singing, talking, paying individual attention to the baby/toddler. • Scaffold babies and toddlers developing skills and movements – sitting/crawling/ waking/climbing etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote babies communication – smile, gurgles etc • Introduce reflect toys - babies have a sense of themselves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action song using expressions and gestures - Bye bye, happy, sad etc. • Play different sounds – calming, fast etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trip to the park • Exploring space outdoors • Outdoor sounds/smells.

However, the topic of the plan only provides a **starting point** and does not necessarily reflect the entire content of the medium-term plan. The **learning goals**, rather than the topic itself, are the main focus of the medium-term plan. This open-ended approach allows greater flexibility to follow children's individual interests as they arise.

Short-term planning is where the **strongest link** between assessment and planning is forged. The early childhood educator uses information gathered through **compiling Learning Stories** to include brief notes on the week plan relating to specific children. This provides detail to short-term week plans and allows for continuation and progression in children's learning and development.

The Post Office theme **week 1 plan** includes the following:

- Areas of the learning environment
- Learning aims for each area
- Flexible activities for each day of the week
- Reminder notes relating to specific children
- An evaluation section to complete at the end of the week, including notes for the coming week.

Sample Week Plan: **Week 1 - Post Office Topic**

Play Activity	Learning Aims	Mon, Tues, Wed	Wed, Thurs, Fri	Children
Messy Play	Explore weight, volume, size, texture Compare parcel weights/size	Introduce weighing scales used in post office to sand tray, Make wallpaper paste for wrapping paper	Making parcels from dough – shiny parcels, glitter parcels, bumpy parcels, adding bows, string	Kate – colour/pattern
Creative Play	Creative expression, decision making, designing, pattern, emergent writing	Design wrapping paper Wrapping parcels	Make post box Writing, sticking, cutting	Kara – picture book Nora – get well card
Imaginative Play	Interact, build relationships, respect others Work cooperatively, develop understanding, Express emotions and feelings	Role play Post Office and resources People in PO – Customer, Postmaster, Postperson	Role play Post Office and resources People in PO – Customer, Postmaster, Postperson	Tomas – involve in setting up interest area with PO resources
Construction Play	Develop imagination, creativity and exploration, physical skills, self-confidence, independence	Planning to make post vans – compile list of resources to bring from home. Draw large plans	Large wooden blocks Different sized cardboard boxes, Postman puzzle	Eoin – take lead in planning on paper
Small Group Activity	Taking turns in conversation, sharing experiences, thoughts, ideas understand themselves and people in the community, using ICT	Circle time -The Post Persons Job Game - Guess whats in the parcel	Discuss – what happens in the PO Looking at coins, scanning paper money,cheques	Liam - involve in small group discussion
Large Group Activity	Gross motor skills, creativity, imagination, model making, talking and listening, interest in books and stories, social interaction	Stories – Mums Special Parcel Postman Pat and the Lost Parcel	Music and Movement – Pass the Parcel Meeting the Pre-School Postman	Nora –reassurance during large group activities
Outdoor Play	Collaboration, turn taking, control body movements, confidence, motivation	I dropped a letter game Parcel treasure hunt	Making post vans from boxes Driving post vans!	Eoin – involve in outdoor project making post van
End of Week Evaluation and notes for coming week.				

Planning to Plan

It is helpful to follow a number of steps when planning learning opportunities for children:

1.	Start with the children From the 'moving forward' section of learning stories, think about the children's strengths, interests, abilities and needs.
2.	Agree a theme/activity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have I involved the children and staff team in the choice of theme/activity? Does the theme/activity incorporate a range of individual interests and needs?
3.	Think about resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What resources/equipment do I need? Do I need to refer to guidelines on interactions, partnerships or play? Is there anything additional which I can source or borrow? Are sufficient numbers of staff available to provide the level of support/supervision required?
4.	Compile theme plan (medium-term) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use Aistear's four learning themes to broadly state learning goals for the plan Highlight children's interests/needs relating to the topic Plot a broad outline of appropriate activities both indoors and outdoors Include any planned outings, events
5.	Transfer information to week plan <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Details of how the indoor and outdoor environment will be organised, children's needs and who is responsible for particular activities Do not do this in advance for the four weeks, instead do this week-by-week to allow for children's input and responses.

Reviewing and evaluating planned themes and activities

Once the topic has been completed, it is important to reflect on how successful it was in engaging children and building on their existing learning and development. This information is drawn from the assessment recordings of children participating in different aspects of the plan. Early childhood educators can also evaluate the plan in terms of how it met learning aims and goals.

Evaluation of themes/activities should be carried out on a regular basis and documented as part of the plan. This is a team responsibility. Staff should discuss the activities carried out, complete an evaluation column or sheet, and attach it to the plan for evidence of practice and for future reference. This discussion, together with the Key Person notes on individual children, will provide the starting point for follow-up activities.

The following prompts help when evaluating and reflecting:

- Were the children interested and engaged in the topic?
- Did the topic meet learning aims/goals?
- Did the children and early childhood educators enjoy it?
- Were there opportunities for all children to participate?
- What went well, what did not go well, how would you alter the activities, what additional resources could you use?
- Did the topic digress into other areas? Would you need more time/less time?
- Are there opportunities for children to transfer learning and does it link easily with a further topic or extension topic?
- What did parents think of the topic and how were they involved?

Enabling Children to Plan and Reflect on their Learning

Research and practical evidence shows that we can promote the development of thinking and reasoning in young children in early childhood by providing two curriculum components—planning and reflection. Both are thoughtful activities that encourage children to consider what they are doing and what they are learning. They also promote a broad range of other language, thinking, social, and creative competencies.

Young children are capable of making thoughtful decisions about their behaviour and keen observations about their environment. They have insight into their desires, form mental images of the past and future, and attempt to explain their behaviour and that of others. **Metacognition (higher-level thinking and problem-solving skills) develops when children are encouraged to reflect, predict, question and hypothesise.**



When we engage children in planning, we encourage them to identify their goals and consider the options for achieving them. For example, they might consider what they will do, where they will do it, what materials they will use, who they will do it with, how long it will take and whether they will need help. Planning thus involves deciding on actions and predicting interactions, recognising problems and proposing solutions and anticipating consequences and reactions.

Early childhood educators know the importance of developing memory skills in young children. They might ask children to remember something they learned earlier in the day or to recall an event that occurred earlier in the week. Reflection, however, is more than memory or a rote recitation of completed activities. **Reflection is remembering with analysis.** When we engage children in reflection, we encourage them to go beyond merely reporting what they've done. We also help them become aware of what they learned in the process, what was interesting, how they feel about it and what they can do to build on or extend the experience. Reflection consolidates knowledge so it can be generalised to other situations, thereby leading to further prediction and evaluation. Thus planning and reflection, when used through active learning, are part of an ongoing cycle of deeper thought and thoughtful application.

Early childhood educators can help children exercise these capabilities by following a range of strategies as follows:

- Strategies to promote children's abilities to plan
- Strategies to promote children's abilities to reflect

Strategies to promote children's ability to plan

1. Make planning a regular part of the daily routine

Planning should be a regular daily activity so children will automatically begin to think in terms of what they want to do and how to carry it out. Do it at the same time(s) each day, for example, after morning greeting. You can plan with children in small groups or pairs, as well as individually, making sure each child gets to express his or her intentions. In fact, children benefit from planning in small groups because the thoughts and elaborations of others often spark their own ideas. In addition to these set times, however, reflection can and should happen whenever children are actively engaged in learning. Educators can encourage children to ponder the 'what' and 'why' of their actions at a time that makes reflection especially relevant and meaningful to them.



2. Make sure children can see the areas and materials in the room when they are planning

Visibility is important for younger planners whose mental representations are limited. Even older planners cannot keep in mind all the possibilities of a well stocked room. Tour the room before or during planning and point out new materials or things the children have not used for a while. Avoid high shelves or other barriers that block a full view. Being able to see everything not only enhances planning, it also means children will incorporate a wider variety of materials into their ongoing play. When they encounter a problem carrying out their plans, they will also have a better idea of the alternatives available to help them solve it. Knowing what is in the room also minimises the chance that children will plan activities they cannot carry out with existing materials. If they do, however, this presents an opportunity for you to say something like, “We don’t have any arm casts. What could you use instead to wrap your doll’s broken arm?”

3. Ask children meaningful open-ended questions

Questions about what a child did should be asked sparingly and only to obtain information that is not trivial or already known. Open-ended queries such as “What happened when you added the third block?” will invite more observation on the part of the child than something obvious like “Did you add another block?” Questions that begin with “How did you . . . ?” or “Why do you think . . . ?” also encourage children to reconstruct and create meaning from their experiences.

4. Listen attentively to children’s plans

Share conversations with children, don’t direct them. By paying attention to their words and gestures, you will learn about their ability to anticipate and think about the details of their plans. Then you can choose the most appropriate support strategies to help them elaborate their ideas and consider the options for implementing them.

5. Support, accept and extend children’s plans

Do not force children to express their plans in a certain way. If they gesture (for example, bring you a book), don’t insist they verbalise their idea before being allowed to proceed. Accept the gestured plan, but reflect it back in words to make sure you’ve understood the intention and to supply the vocabulary they can use when they are ready (“You want me to read you this book, *The Snowy Day*.”) Don’t negate a plan or offer children an alternative to their plans. This defeats the whole purpose of encouraging them to express their own intentions. Avoid the temptation to say, “You’ve gone to the house area every day this week. How about painting in the art area for a change?” Instead, observe what interests the child in the house area and think of ways to extend it into different areas.

6. Encourage children to elaborate on their plans

Children at all stages of planning can be helped to extend their ideas. For beginners, try simple follow up questions “What will you need to do that?” Comments about what children are doing may elicit more details than questions. In your eagerness to assist younger children, don’t overlook opportunities to scaffold older children’s learning. Encourage them to give details about where they will work, the materials they intend to use, the sequence of their activities and the outcomes they expect to achieve.

7. Record children’s plans

When you record their plans, children get the message that their ideas are valuable. For example, you might label a drawing a child has made or make a note when children describe what they will do and how they will go about it. Write the child’s name on the plan. Documentation—including writing, drawing, and photography—helps children become more conscious of the process and value of planning. They are more likely to think through and elaborate on their ideas as they formally record them. Children can also review their documented plans as they reflect on their experiences and compare their intentions with the actual outcomes. Written accounts—as well as other forms of documentation—are also something concrete you and the children can add to the Learning Journey Portfolio and share with their families.

8. Use encouragement rather than praise

Another way to support planning is to avoid praising children’s ideas. If you say “great idea” on one day or to one child, you may inadvertently convey disapproval if you forget to say those words to another child or on the following day. Praise also tends to end the conversation, cutting off the possibilities for children to elaborate their plans. Instead, use other strategies, for example, listening, asking questions, commenting, recording their ideas—to encourage children to think about and follow through on their intentions.

Strategies to promote children's ability to reflect

Many of the strategies that support **planning also apply to promoting reflection**. Remember too that planning and reflection are repetitive processes. Encouraging children to think about what they did enables them to use this information as they plan what they will do next.

1. Interpret and expand on what children do and say

Non-verbal children, or those with limited language, may gesture or present materials to indicate what they did. You can add words to their actions, checking with them for cues to verify you understand their message. Your explanations will provide them with vocabulary for future reflection. Here, for example, the educator attaches sentences to the physical re-enactment and simple words of Naomi, an older toddler:

Educator: What did you do today, Naomi?

Naomi: [Points to block area.]

Educator: I saw you and Michael playing in the block area.

Naomi: [Lifts her hands high.]

Educator: You built a high tower.

Naomi: [Bangs her hands down on the table.]

Educator: Did the tower fall down? [Naomi nods.] I wonder why that happened.

Naomi: More block.

Educator: You put another block on the tower?

Naomi: Fall down.

Educator: You put a big block on top, but it was too heavy so the tower fell down.



With children who are already verbal, use body language and conversation to show you are listening.

2. Comment on what you see children doing as they play

Making comments while children are engaged in an activity serves two purposes. It encourages them to attend to and evaluate the experience as it is happening, and makes it easier for them to recall the event later. The more specific the comment, the more likely the child will remember and add his or her own details. For example, when the educator said "I saw you in the writing area using the markers," Michael elaborated, "I made an invitation for Tommy to come to my party. Now there are five children and I'm five years old."

3. Help children make the connection between their plans and their reflections

Having children recall their intentions in light of their actual behaviour helps them establish causal relationships and a sense of efficacy and responsibility regarding their actions. You might say, "I remember you planned to make a tent. Is that what you did?" The goal is not to hold children accountable for carrying out their plans—changing plans is perfectly acceptable—but rather to have them think about how and why their actions did, or did not, follow their intentions. If children do change plans, going off in a new direction or even abandoning their original idea entirely, you might ask them, "Why did you make a different plan?" or "What made you think of doing that instead?" Again, the idea is not to force them to stick to one idea, but to encourage them to ponder their options, preferences and problem-solving strategies.

4. Encourage children to carry over their activities to the next day

As children reflect on their experiences, they may recall problems they encountered or spin-offs they had not anticipated. These observations create a perfect opportunity for them to try different solutions or build on newly discovered interests the following day. You can encourage children to use their reflections in future planning in several ways. Write a note, or ask the child to draw a picture, that will serve as a reminder. It also acts as a visual memory aid when the children make plans the next day. Finally, it encourages children to share with educators, peers and families a description of what they have already done and their ideas for adding to the detail and complexity of their undertaking.

The Reflective Educator

Reflective practice is now part of the toolkit of most working professionals, whatever their area of expertise. Self-reflection is not only important for refining and improving day-to-day practice but also beneficial to individuals in terms of their own professional development.

Continuing effective practice is dependent on the educators ability to consider ways in which they can continuously improve quality. However, the process of reflective practice does not just happen because someone says it should. For reflection to be really meaningful, it must begin with a shared overall aim to achieve effective early learning and positive experiences for children. It is important to develop a whole-team approach to reflecting on action in the early childhood setting. The issues of time and opportunity are often a factor, and educators reflect upon their work together at staff or team meetings, or in the incidental conversations they have with colleagues throughout the day. These valuable interactions should be recognised and appreciated as part of the reflective process, but they are only a small part.

As teams work together they share ideas, carry out plans, seek solutions to problems that arise and develop a shared understanding of their role. The whole team must identify opportunities to reflect together so they can improve both collectively and individually.

At the end of your day working with children, you probably do what a lot of early childhood educators do - spend time thinking about what happened during your day. You are often too busy in the actual moment of working with children to really stop and think about all that is going on. Is it really that important to reflect on your work?

Being reflective:

- Demonstrates that educators are actively concerned about the aims and consequences of the work they are doing
- Enables educators to monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously
- Requires an ability to look carefully at practice in order to develop new skills and understanding
- Requires an open-minded attitude
- Enhances professional learning and personal fulfilment through collaboration and dialogue between educators.

What does reflection involve?

- Reflection 'in' action, or thinking on your feet
- Reflection 'on' action, or after the event
- Our own thoughts and ideas
- Our colleagues' thoughts and ideas
- Children and parents' thoughts and ideas
- Feedback from other partners or agencies
- The views and knowledge gained from our own experiences and that of theoretical literature

What should our approach to reflection as a team involve?

- Giving time to the process as a team
- Being clear about what it is that you are reflecting upon
- Being clear about who your partners in the reflective process are
- Consideration of the subject, making links to theory and practice
- Consideration of your current practice
- Looking for ways to improve, maintain and - most importantly - act upon what you have discovered
- Structuring your actions with timescales, responsibilities and the opportunity to reflect upon what you have achieved (or not)
- Feeding back to colleagues, reflecting upon your actions
- Making further changes or adjustments
- Being aware of the reflective 'tools' that are available to you, such as quality improvement tools such as Síolta

What do we want to achieve?

- Effective early learning experiences for children
- New ways of seeing familiar things
- Personal and professional development
- Continuous quality improvement
- A shared understanding



1. Information gained from assessment practice is only beneficial when it is put to good use.
2. Planning documents should remain flexible, allowing the children's changing interests and responses to learning to be incorporated over time.
3. Listening to what children say and incorporating their interests into planning actively involves them in the planning process.
4. By encouraging children to plan, reflect, express intentions and evaluate actions, we can equip young children with the thinking skills they need for later educational success and adult life.
5. The learning goals, rather than the topic itself, are the main focus of the medium term plan and the week plan.
6. Once the topic has been completed, it is important to reflect on how successful it was in engaging children and building on their existing learning and development.



Section 6:

Promoting Effective Transitions

Children, like adults, enjoy and are stimulated by novelty and change. The first day of school, the transfer to 'big school', are landmarks in the process of growing up. Even when children are apprehensive, they look forward to change ... but if change is to stimulate and not to dishearten, it must be carefully prepared and not too sudden
(Flowden Report, 1967)



This section will consider:

- * **Making Transitions in Early Childhood**
- * **Building Learning Partnerships**
- * **Using Assessment Information to Support the Transition to Primary School**
- * **Enabling Smooth Transitions in Early Childhood**

Making Transitions in Early Childhood

One of the most fundamental children's rights is the right to participate and for children to **have a say** in matters involving them. We have seen in previous sections, that listening to children's views and giving them a voice to make decisions, choices and to have their say in the learning process, is central to a truly child-centred approach. Previous sections have also highlighted that children are active participants in the assessment process by engaging with them in conversation and through self-reflection and self-assessment. Giving the child **a voice in the transition** process is another opportunity to enable children to have their say in matters involving them. Before children move to a new environment, they have the right to know what this will involve; they have the right to ask questions and seek explanations and the right to express their views on the arrangements.

Transition describes the situation that children experience when they move to a new setting. This can include moving from the child's first place of learning – the home, to a pre-school service or crèche, or from pre-school to primary school. The transition process is essentially the ongoing process of change for children, families and educational services to facilitate children's move from one setting to another.

Starting school is a major transition in a child's life. Each child approaches this change in a different way depending on the experience and emotional competencies or 'tools' that they possess. As we have seen in section 2, nurturing positive learning dispositions to learn have far greater long term impact on children's lives than the traditionally valued components of early learning such as knowledge (colours, shapes, numbers, letters) and skills only. A traditional view of being 'ready for school', may conjure up an image of a child who comes armed with a checklist of things that her/she can do to as an indicator of readiness.

An alternative view of school readiness is a child **armed with the positive learning dispositions** that they need to 'enable' them to learn, for example, emotional and social well-being and a strong sense of self-identity. Children who have developed positive dispositions such as strength, resilience, independence and self-confidence, will be able to call on these attributes to support, not only transitions from pre-school to primary school, but transitions throughout their lives.

Like adults, children can be hampered in their ability to think clearly and act competently when they are feeling insecure or vulnerable. Therefore during the actual process of transition, avoid any form of early assessment, albeit informal. Instead view the transition period as a social learning process and an important component of supporting children during their early days in a new environment.

Building Learning Partnerships

The parent, the early childhood educator and the primary school teacher, all play a key role in the child's learning at the different stages of his/her learning journey. The foundation for respectful partnerships between all parties is to acknowledge and value **the contribution** made to the child's learning and development by each individual.

The child's learning journey begins in the home with parents and family. When the time comes for the child to join the early childhood service, the parent passes on vital information about the child to the service. This is the beginning of a partnership process that requires respectful relationships between all parties with a central focus on **best outcomes for the child**.

Likewise, when the time comes for the child to progress to primary school, in collaboration with the parent and the child, the early childhood service has the same responsibility to pass on vital information to the primary school. The partnership now extends to involve the child, the parent, the early childhood service and the primary school.

Using assessment information to support the transition to primary school

When we reflect on the breadth, depth and richness of the information observed and documented over the course of the pre-school year, it is worth remembering how vital this information is to a **seamless continuation of learning** when the child is moving on to the next phase in his/her education.

Sharing information gained as a result of meaningful assessment with the new teacher will provide a unique and meaningful picture of the child and his/her experiences in pre-school. The Learning Journey Portfolio and the variety of Learning Stories

within the portfolio, provides the child's new teacher with an important insight into the child's positive dispositions, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding. Examples of the child's work, self assessments and comments will reveal how the child views him/herself as a learner. In addition, contributions from parents will enable the new teacher to understand the parent's perspective which will strengthen and continue the partnership into the primary school setting.

The **collaborative nature of meaningful assessment** can be extended to the transition process as well. The early childhood educator, the parent and the child all have an important role to play.

- **The early childhood educator** ensures that the child's Learning Journey Portfolio is complete and reflects a holistic and accurate picture of the child. The early childhood educator will also prepare a summary of achievement and discuss this with the child's parent at an end of year meeting. When compiling the summary of achievement, the early childhood educator draws upon the accumulative information within Learning Stories and term updates to provide statements under each category or learning theme. With the approval of the child's parent, a copy of the summary of achievement is passed on to the primary school.
- **The parent** can take a copy of the child's summary of achievement to the primary school when attending an introductory meeting with their child's new teacher. The brief, summative nature of this document provides a starting point for discussions about the child, his/her interests and learning needs. This sharing of information promotes shared views and continuity in the child's learning and development.
- **The child** has developed a sense of pride in his/her Learning Journey Portfolio over the year and it has been an important part of his/her pre-school experience. When the child has an opportunity to share the Learning Journey Portfolio with a new teacher, he/she will be able to reflect on specific aspects of the portfolio and the teacher can show appreciation and value towards the child's work. This process is an effective communication and relationship building tool in the early weeks at primary school.

Enabling smooth transitions in early childhood

Even though pre-schools and primary schools are organised very differently, when children are moving from one setting to another, it is imperative that there is **collaboration** and **cooperation** between all parties to make transitions as smooth as possible.


This collaboration and cooperation involves **enabling**:

- **The child to be ready to learn**
- **The parent to support the child's transition**
- **The school to be ready for the child**

Enabling the child to be ready to learn

Young children may be required to make a variety of transitions throughout their lives. It is essential that transitions in early childhood are positive and supported experiences as these experiences will form the basis of all future life transitions for the child. The way in which children are prepared for and supported through transitions is crucial to their ability to respond to a new learning environment.





Tips to support the child's transition to primary school

- Talk with children about their Learning Journey Portfolio and encourage them to bring it to school to show the new teacher.
- Circle time can be used to explore children's thoughts and feelings about going to school. The early childhood educator can make a list of the queries or concerns children have about school and incorporate meaningful activities in short term planning to enable children to explore their concerns.
- Build a group scrapbook about all the different schools children will be going to. This may include photos of the outside of the school, the playground, the uniform and pictures of some of the children already attending.
- Encourage children to put together an interest table of all the things they might see at school – photos of older children, schoolbag, lunchbox, uniforms, photos of playgrounds, classrooms.
- Make a group collage picture involving all the children in the setting with their names identifying their contribution. This picture can be photographed, scanned and printed. Each child can take a copy to either put in their Learning Journey Portfolio or to display in their new classroom as a reminder of their pre-school.
- Include practical activities such as encouraging children to play games where they have to introduce themselves to others and say a few things about themselves.
- Invite primary school children to come to the pre-school to meet the children and talk about their school.
- Arrange a visit to the school or schools if practical. Encourage children to explore the physical surroundings, the playground, toilets and classrooms.
- Use stories with a starting school theme and use the stories to encourage children to share their thoughts and feelings.

Enabling the Parent to support the child's transition

Some parents may already have children attending primary school. However, for many parents this will be a big transition for them too. Involve parents in preparing for transitions by providing an outline of the activities being carried out in the service leading up to the end of the academic year.



Tips to support parents leading up to their child's transition to primary school

Arrange an end of year meeting with all parents and use this as an opportunity to:

- Provide an overview of their child's progress in learning and development. Prepare a summary of the child's achievements, add the child's comments and give to the parent to take home and add their own comments. Alternatively, offer to add comments on behalf of the parent if preferred.
- Discuss any recommendations he/she may have for the child over the summer months to support the child's transition to school.
- Speak with parents about handing on assessment information. Explain to them the importance of this information to the child's progress in learning. Invite them to have their say on the record of achievement booklet and ask their permission to pass it on to the child's primary school.
- Give them ideas of things that they can be doing at home as well. For example, taking the child on walks past the primary school, borrowing books from the library that portray a positive story of children starting school, taking the child to concerts, plays or sports days at the primary school in the lead up to summer.
- Provide an information sheet for parents outlining practical tips for preparing their child for the school day, for example:
 - Recognising their own coat, lunchbox and school bag
 - Knowing their name, address and telephone number
 - Developing the skills to fasten/unfasten their coat, lunchbox and shoes
 - Developing the skills to open a juice carton, peel fruit and open yogurt pots
 - Being able to see to their own personal needs.

Enabling the School to be ready for the child

In the same way that information sessions are held for new parents prior to their child joining the early childhood service, a similar information session can be facilitated for primary school teachers who will be welcoming the children to their class.



Tips for early childhood service and the primary school

This information session can also involve parents and include:

- The manager or leader of the early childhood service providing an overview of the early childhood curriculum and learning aims and goals that were the focus of the pre-school year.
- An overview of how the pre-school day is structured. This information is important to enable teachers to appreciate the challenge some children may face with changing routines.
- Practical examples of the things children have learned and the process of learning through sample learning stories, children's work and self-assessments.
- A range of Learning Journey Portfolios can be displayed for teachers to view, as this will give them a visual overview of the learning that has taken place and give them an individual perspective on the child.
- Early childhood educators and parents will have an opportunity to speak with teachers informally and highlight specific information that may support the child during the transition to school.
- Make arrangements for ongoing information sharing between the early childhood service and the primary school, especially during the settling in phase.



1. The foundation for respecting the work of the parent, the early childhood educator and the teacher is to acknowledge and value **each contribution** made to each particular phase of the child's learning journey.
2. The information documented over the course of the pre-school year is vital to provide a **seamless continuation of learning** when the child is moving on to primary school.
3. The Learning Journey Portfolio provides the child's new teacher with a wonderful insight into the child's positive dispositions, attitudes, skills, knowledge and understanding.
4. Giving the child a voice in the transition process is another opportunity to enable children **to have their say** in matters involving them.
5. When the child is moving from one setting to another, it is imperative that there is **collaboration** and **cooperation** between all parties to make transitions as smooth as possible.

Planning and Reflecting
on Professional Practice

Promoting
Effective
Transitions

Play is Work,
Play is Learning

Final word...

“ All children deserve excellent teaching. Teaching in early childhood is a highly skilled process where there is no single correct way to respond to children in order to optimise learning. It is the teaching skills and practices of the early childhood educator that make interactions educational. Our most basic and fundamental role as early childhood educators is to truly understand children - not children as a group, but children as unique individuals all with their own exclusive story to tell. Dig deep to find that story, listen carefully and hear the different chapters that make up the story, understand the story and use it to empower children to reach their full potential as good citizens, effective learners and ultimately as happy adults. ”

(Avril 2012)

Enabling
Children
to Learn

Advancing Learning
and Development
through Assessment

Pedagogical Techniques
and Strategies



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