

# Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Principles and themes



© NCCA 2009

National Council for Curriculum  
and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.  
[www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



## A Message from the Minister for Education and Science



The publication of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* marks an important milestone in early childhood education in Ireland. Building on other important developments in the sector, *Aistear* is the outcome of many years of research, consultation, planning, and development by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in partnership with the early childhood sector in Ireland and abroad. This partnership has enabled the Council to develop a curriculum framework which reflects the experiences of practitioners, children and parents and is informed by evidence and research.

The Irish word for a journey, *Aistear* represents the beginning or perhaps the further advancement of an exciting journey for many; for parents in children’s own homes and practitioners including childminders and infant teachers in the variety of out-of-home settings as they begin to use *Aistear’s* contents, and for children as they embark on their lifelong journey of learning and development. The framework highlights the critical importance of children enjoying and benefiting from early childhood, and its potential adventures and discoveries. It also illustrates the breadth and depth of children’s learning when given rich and varied experiences in their formative years. In addition, it highlights the important role adults play in nurturing and extending this learning and development. I am confident that such a curriculum framework can contribute greatly to helping our youngest citizens grow up with a strong sense of well-being; proud of themselves, their families and communities; confident and competent communicators; curious and resilient explorers; and creative thinkers.

I would like to thank the NCCA for its leadership in this work and the many organisations, agencies and researchers who contributed to the development of *Aistear*. Particular thanks are due to the practitioners around the country who offered their views and insights as the work progressed. I look forward to the continuing journey of bringing the aspirations of the framework to the everyday practice of all who work with children from birth to six years.

**Batt O’Keeffe T.D.**

Minister for Education and Science





## A Message from the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs



Early childhood is an important stage in children’s lives when they find out about and make sense of their surroundings by interacting with each other and with adults, by playing, exploring, and by forming and testing ideas. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* highlights this tremendous capacity that children have to learn and develop, and the importance of everyone working together to give children rich experiences in these early years.

The introduction of the Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education is a significant move forward in our collective journey of continuous quality improvement in the sector. In particular, it marks a key step towards equality of opportunity for all young children in Ireland at the most important developmental stage of their lives. I welcome the timely publication of *Aistear* and am confident that, together with *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, it can provide much practical support and guidance to practitioners participating in the initiative, and to those working with younger and older children in the early childhood period. *Aistear’s* intended outcomes for children are especially fitting in a 21st century society and provide an exciting and challenging vision to which we can aspire in our work with children from birth to six years.

I would like to record my thanks to the NCCA for its work on *Aistear*, and to the early childhood sector for the ongoing contribution to the framework. I know *Aistear* will be welcomed by the sector and will have a significant influence on the development of early childhood practice in the years ahead, ultimately enriching the lives of our youngest citizens.

**Barry Andrews T.D.**  
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs





## Contents

Introduction	6
Principles of early learning and development	7
<i>Aistear's</i> themes	13
Theme: <i>Well-being</i>	16
Theme: <i>Identity and Belonging</i>	25
Theme: <i>Communicating</i>	34
Theme: <i>Exploring and Thinking</i>	43
Glossary	53

## Figures

Figure 1: Describing children's learning and development through themes	13
---	----

## Tables

Table 1: Aims and learning goals for <i>Well-being</i>	17
Table 2: Aims and learning goals for <i>Identity and Belonging</i>	26
Table 3: Aims and learning goals for <i>Communicating</i>	35
Table 4: Aims and learning goals for <i>Exploring and Thinking</i>	44



## Introduction

Early childhood is a time of great opportunity for learning and development. In these early years children learn through loving, trusting and respectful relationships, and through discussion, exploration and play. They learn about languages and how and when to use them; they learn to think and to interact with others and the environment. They learn to be creative and adventurous, to develop working theories about their world, and to make decisions about themselves as learners.

*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold. This early learning also lays important foundations for later learning. Because early childhood marks the beginning of children's lifelong learning journeys, this framework is called *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey.

### Purpose of Aistear

*Aistear* is the **curriculum framework** for children from **birth to six years** in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as **competent and confident learners** within loving relationships with others. *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 as to how this learning might be nurtured. The Framework also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

In supporting children's early learning and development *Aistear*

- identifies what and how children should learn, and describes the types of experiences that can support this
- makes connections in children's learning throughout the early childhood years and as they move from one setting to another
- supports parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and practitioners
- complements and extends existing curriculums and materials
- informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work.

# Principles of early learning and development

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups:

1. The first group concerns **children and their lives in early childhood:**
  - the child's uniqueness
  - equality and diversity
  - children as citizens.
2. The second group concerns **children's connections with others:**
  - relationships
  - parents, family and community
  - the adult's role.
3. The third group concerns **how children learn and develop:**
  - holistic learning and development
  - active learning
  - play and hands-on experiences
  - relevant and meaningful experiences
  - communication and language
  - the learning environment.

Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development.

## 1. Children and their lives in early childhood

### The child's uniqueness

Each child has his/her own set of experiences and a unique life-story. He/she is an active learner growing up as a member of a family and community with particular traditions and ways of life.

- Remember that I am a unique individual with my own strengths, interests, abilities, needs and experiences. Recognise and build on these when you are helping me to learn and develop.
- You know I am a confident and able learner and that I learn at my own rate about things that interest me. Support me to do this in a way that allows me to make decisions about what I learn and when, and how well I am learning.
- I need you, my parents and practitioners, to share what you know about me with each other. By doing this, you can get to know me better and plan things for me to do that will help me to learn in an enjoyable and meaningful way.
- In order for you to understand and support me you need to understand my family background and community. This is especially important if I come from a disadvantaged or marginalised community.

## Equality and diversity

Nurturing equality and diversity is important in early childhood. Promoting equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential. Diversity is about welcoming and valuing individual and group differences, and understanding and celebrating difference as part of life.

- Support me to feel equal to everyone else and do not let me be excluded because of my ethnicity, culture, faith/no faith, home language, family background and type, special educational need, physical appearance, gender, or ability. Recognise, value and accept me and my family.
- You may have to treat me in a different way to other children, to ensure I feel equal. Thank you for respecting my cultural identity and that of my family. Remember too that I may need you to help me to integrate into life in Ireland.
- Help me to learn to value social and cultural difference and to recognise that I live in a diverse, multi-ethnic society. Help me to learn to recognise and challenge injustice and discrimination and to stand up for myself and others.
- Remember that learning is more meaningful, motivating and enjoyable for me when activities and experiences are based on my skills, strengths and interests and when they are linked to my home culture and language.
- Help me to be open to the ideas, stories and experiences of others, and to listen and learn from these.



## Children as citizens

Children are citizens with rights and responsibilities. They have opinions that are worth listening to, and have the right to be involved in making decisions about matters which affect them. In this way, they have a right to experience democracy. From this experience they learn that, as well as having rights, they also have a responsibility to respect and help others, and to care for their environment.

- Remember that I too am a citizen. Help me to learn about my rights and responsibilities. Model fairness, justice and respect when you interact with me and others.
- Create an environment for me in which I feel confident and comfortable, and have opportunities to share my experiences, stories, ideas, and feelings. Model democracy in action. Involve me in making decisions and in planning activities, and doing and reflecting on them with others.
- Let me share my views and opinions with you about things that matter to me. Help me to understand that others may have different views and opinions, and to respect these. As I communicate in different ways, this might mean you need to observe and interpret my facial expressions, body movements, gurgles, cries, moods, and my language(s).
- I have the right to be protected from harm. Help to ensure I am not endangered or neglected. If you have concerns report them to the relevant person.
- Encourage me to care for my own and others' belongings and for the environment.

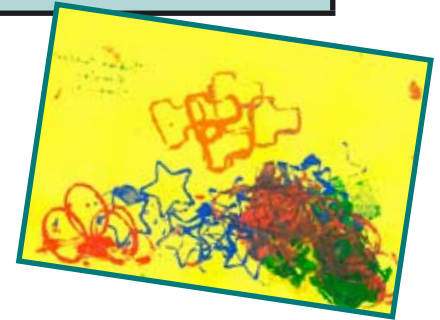


## 2. Children's connections with others

### Relationships

Children have a fundamental need to be with other people. They learn and develop through loving and nurturing relationships with adults and other children, and the quality of these interactions impacts on their learning and development.

- Show me respect and love when you talk to me; play with me and care for me.
- My early interactions with people lay the foundations for my relationships with others later in my life. Help me make strong attachments and give me time and space to be with familiar, loving adults and with other children.
- I enjoy being with adults and children. Give me opportunities to play with them and to take part in activities with them. Help me to interact with them, to have fun, to share, to take turns, and to handle conflict.



### Parents, family and community

Parents are the most important people in children's lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play.

- Remember that my parents and my family are the most important people in my life. Value their opinions and expertise. Without the care and education I get from them I would not be who I am. They love me, look after me, and teach me important things about life and learning. They want the best for me. Give my parents opportunities to share information with you about me and about what I do at home.
- You, my parents and practitioners, need to work together to help me learn and develop to the best of my ability. Think about ways to make links between my home and where I spend time with you, because you are all important to me.
- My community is important to me too. Show through your interactions with me that you respect my family and where I come from.



### The adult's role

Early learning takes place through a reciprocal relationship between the adult and the child – sometimes the adult leads the learning and sometimes the child leads. The adult enhances learning through a respectful understanding of the child's uniqueness. He/she alters the type and amount of support as the child grows in confidence and competence, and achieves new things.

- Build a strong relationship with me and help me to trust you. If I feel happy and secure wherever I am I will learn more.
- Think about how you help me learn. Make time to learn new things and new ways of helping me to learn and develop. That way we can learn things together.

- Be a good role model for me, and think about your own beliefs and attitudes and how you interact with me. What you say, do and suggest through your words and actions influences me.
- You play a key role in helping me to reach my full potential. Build on my abilities, interests and experiences. Think of the different ways I learn and develop and use different interaction strategies that suit me.
- Sometimes parents find it hard to cope. When things go wrong in my family I need you to look out for me and to protect me from harm.
- Help me if I am being hurt because other children or families do not understand my background or culture.



### 3. How children learn and develop

#### Holistic learning and development

Children learn many different things at the same time. What they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn.

- I learn lots of things at the same time. Think about all areas of my learning and development—cognitive, creative, emotional, linguistic, moral, physical, social, and spiritual, and provide me with opportunities in all of these areas.
- When supporting me to learn and develop, remember that what I learn in my early childhood setting is shaped by previous learning and experiences with my family and my community and as part of a wider society.
- Take time to observe me and to talk to me regularly. Use this time to identify moments when you can help me connect my new learning and development with past experiences and plan for my future learning.

#### Active learning

Active learning involves children learning by doing things. They use their senses to explore and work with the objects and materials around them and they interact enthusiastically with the adults and other children that they meet. Through these experiences, children develop the dispositions, skills, knowledge, and understanding, attitudes, and values that will help them to grow as confident and competent learners.

- Let me explore, try out, make mistakes, discover, and create my own theories about how things work and why, so that I can be independent and self-reliant and can learn about the world I live in.
- Give me opportunities to use my different senses when I am learning.
- Support me in learning with and from adults and other children. Ask me about my discoveries and adventures; talk to me and help me to learn more. I learn a lot on my own but I also learn a lot when I can share my experiences with others.



## Play and hands-on experiences

Much of children's early learning and development takes place through play and hands-on experiences. Through these, children explore social, physical and imaginary worlds. These experiences help them to manage their feelings, develop as thinkers and language users, develop socially, be creative and imaginative, and lay the foundations for becoming effective communicators and learners.

- Play is important to me, and it is important for my learning and development. When I play, I use my body, my mind, my feelings, and my senses. Give me opportunities to develop my play. Watch how I play, and see how you can support me.
- Give me time and space to play with other children. When I play with them I learn about co-operation, about how to deal with conflict, about how others think and feel, and what different actions and things mean. Sometimes I like to play on my own or with other children, and at other times I like you to play with me. You can help me to learn all sorts of things when we play together.
- Provide me with objects, toys and equipment that reflect my own and others' cultures. I also need access to open-ended materials, natural and everyday things to help me learn. Let me experience the different types of play and encourage me to use all the materials in the environment regardless of my gender or ability.
- Involve me in lots of meaningful, hands-on experiences in order to learn, to develop, and to become independent. I use my hands, my ears, my eyes, and my body to explore the objects, places and people in my world. Allow me the freedom to explore and to do things for myself.

## Relevant and meaningful experiences

Relevant and meaningful experiences make learning more enjoyable and positive for children. On-going assessment of what children do, say and make, and reflection on these experiences helps practitioners to plan more developmentally appropriate and meaningful learning experiences for children. This also enables them to improve their practice. Assessment is about building a picture of children's individual strengths, interests, abilities, and needs and using this to support and plan for their future learning and development.

- Look at what I am doing, talk to me and listen to what I am saying. When I master something for the first time, take a picture of me or make a note of it and add it to my learning portfolio.
- Notice what I am interested in and what I can do. Record my progress and achievement in developing dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. This will help you to support my identity, respond to my changing abilities, interests and needs, and plan experiences which will enhance my learning and development.
- My parents and family have lots of information about me and they are interested in finding out what I do when I am not at home. They like to know how I get on with adults and other children, what I am interested in, what I can do, and how they can help me to learn and develop further. I need you, my parents and my practitioner, to make time to discuss how I am getting on. Sometimes I will need you, my practitioner, to show my parents what they can do to support my learning at home.



## Communication and language

The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Communication helps children learn to think about and make sense of their world. They communicate from birth using many different ways of giving and receiving information. Each of these ways is important in its own right. Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped by two main factors: children's own ability and their environment.

- Support me to communicate to the best of my ability from the earliest age possible. Watch out in case I have any communication and/or language delays or difficulties, since the earlier I get help the better it is for me.
- Remember that I give and receive information in many different ways. I can communicate using words, sign language, Braille, rhythm, number, movement, gesture, drama, art, and Information and Communications Technology (ICT). When I am ready, support me in my writing and reading in a way that suits my needs best, and don't rush me.
- You have a key role in supporting my communication and language skills. Talk to me, listen to me, respond to me, interpret what I say, and provide a place for me where I get the opportunity to share my experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others in all the ways that I can. Model communication and language skills for me.
- My parents will be keen for me to learn English and/or Irish if I have a different home language. Remember to tell my parents that it is important for me to maintain my home language too. Reassure them that I can learn English and/or Irish as well as keeping my home language.

## The learning environment

The learning environment (inside and outside) influences what and how children learn. An inviting environment encourages and helps children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure, and challenge.

- I learn best in a place which is
  - warm and inviting, acknowledges my family background, and makes me feel welcome and safe
  - well-kept, accessible, adaptable, and safe
  - well-resourced and well-organised
  - stimulating, challenging and empowering.
 Create this environment for me.
- The place where I learn and develop should support my developing sense of who I am and how I belong to my group, my family, and my community. Make sure I can see and experience lots of real and accurate reflections of my culture and identity as well as that of all the children who are with me – songs and stories, pictures and words, play and games.
- Set up and arrange the place where I play and learn so that it allows me to express myself, to interact with others, to make choices, to test ideas and materials, to create, to develop and practise skills, to stimulate curiosity, to foster empathy and independence, to explore and make discoveries, to solve problems, and to persevere in the face of difficulties and uncertainties.





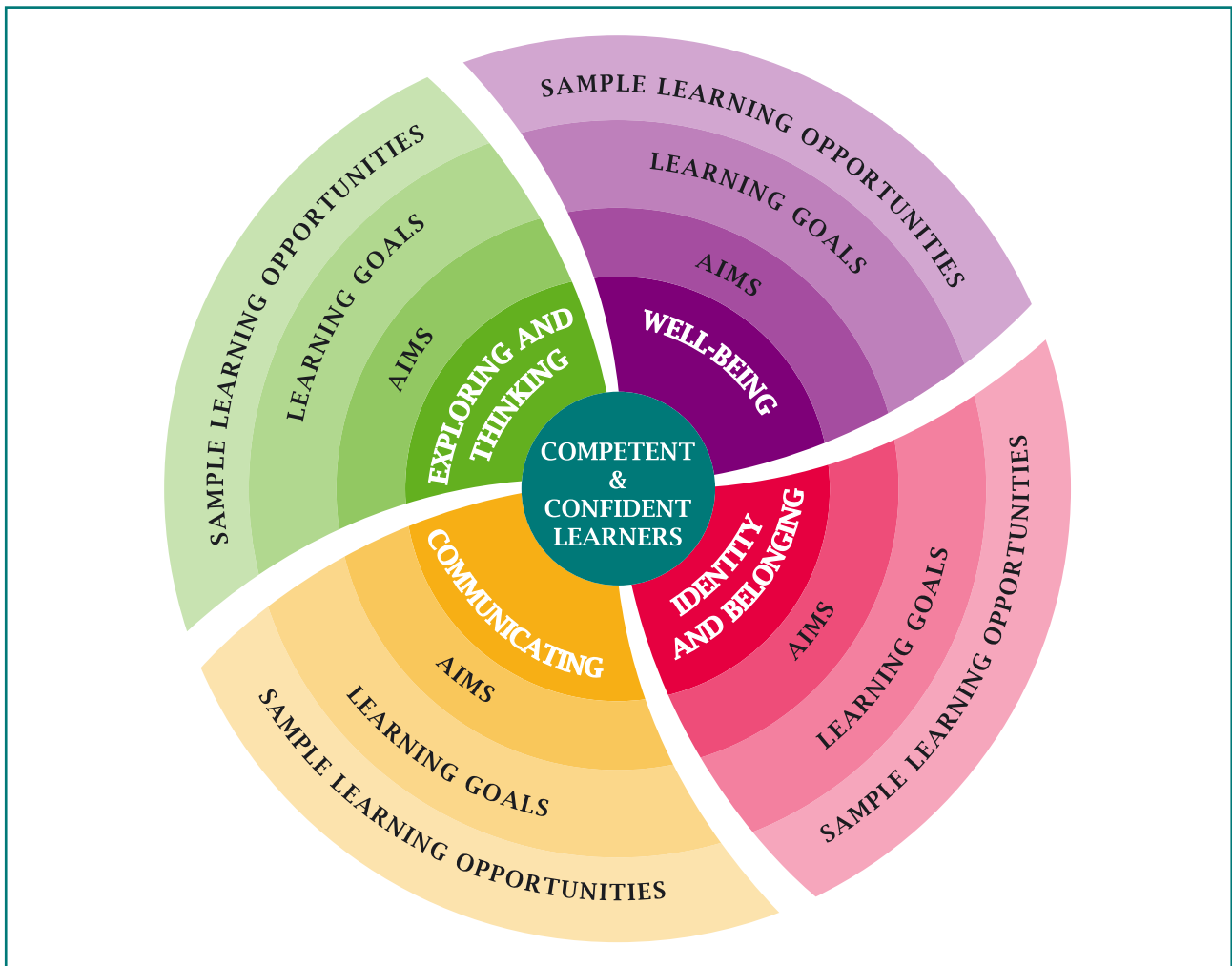
## Aistear's themes

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework presents children's learning and development using four themes. These are:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and Thinking.

The themes describe what children learn—the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims. Each aim is divided into six learning goals. (See Figure 1.) Some of these goals may be more suited to children as they get older.

Figure 1: Describing children's learning and development through themes





Each theme offers some ideas and suggestions for the types of learning experiences that adults might provide for children in working towards *Aistear's* aims and goals. These ideas and suggestions are known as *sample learning opportunities*. They are presented in three overlapping age groups:

- babies (birth to 18 months)
- toddlers (12 months to 3 years)
- young children (2½ to 6 years).

While most of the sample learning opportunities can be adapted and developed for different types of settings, some may be more suited to one type than to another. Most of the sample learning opportunities can also be adapted for use indoors or outdoors. Using the outdoor environment can often give children more space and freedom to move, to explore, and to express themselves, which in turn can bring even greater enjoyment, satisfaction and learning.



## Well-being

## Theme: Well-being

**The theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy.**

Well-being focuses on developing as a person. It 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. They become positive about themselves and their learning when adults value them for who they are and when they promote warm and supportive relationships with them. Expressing themselves creatively and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children's sense of well-being. Life is full of challenges and struggles. Therefore, being flexible and having a positive outlook on learning and on life is crucial. All these experiences help children to become resilient and resourceful and to learn to cope with change and situations in which things go wrong.

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. He/she plans for and provides opportunities for children to express themselves, to encourage them to play and work with others, and to deal with challenges. The adult also helps children towards independence by providing them with choice in their activities, and by providing opportunities for them to make decisions and to take the lead.

Table 1: Aims and learning goals for *Well-being*

Well-being	
Aims	Learning goals
<p><b>Aim 1</b> Children will be strong psychologically and socially.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. make strong attachments and develop warm and supportive relationships with family, peers and adults in out-of-home settings and in their community</li> <li>2. be aware of and name their own feelings, and understand that others may have different feelings</li> <li>3. handle transitions and changes well</li> <li>4. be confident and self-reliant</li> <li>5. respect themselves, others and the environment</li> <li>6. make decisions and choices about their own learning and development.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 2</b> Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements</li> <li>2. be aware of their bodies, their bodily functions, and their changing abilities</li> <li>3. discover, explore and refine gross and fine motor skills</li> <li>4. use self-help skills in caring for their own bodies</li> <li>5. show good judgement when taking risks</li> <li>6. make healthy choices and demonstrate positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise, and routine.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 3</b> Children will be creative and spiritual.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. express themselves creatively and experience the arts</li> <li>2. express themselves through a variety of types of play</li> <li>3. develop and nurture their sense of wonder and awe</li> <li>4. become reflective and think flexibly</li> <li>5. care for the environment</li> <li>6. understand that others may have beliefs and values different to their own.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 4</b> Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. show increasing independence, and be able to make choices and decisions</li> <li>2. demonstrate a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities and display learning dispositions, such as determination and perseverance</li> <li>3. think positively, take learning risks, and become resilient and resourceful when things go wrong</li> <li>4. motivate themselves, and welcome and seek challenge</li> <li>5. respect life, their own and others, and know that life has a meaning and purpose</li> <li>6. be active citizens.</li> </ol>

## Sample learning opportunities

### Babies

#### The adult

- engages with babies in a **consistent, calm, caring and respectful manner**:
  - knows babies well, responds appropriately to them and provides a secure base from which they can play and explore
  - communicates positively with babies using eye contact, touch, and a soft tone of voice
  - sets up relaxed routines for feeding, toileting, sleeping and play activities, and interacts with and talks to the babies during these routines
  - has routines for change-over and transition times, for example waving bye-bye, placing a favourite toy in a 'special' place, saying the babies' names on arrival
  - shares information regularly to get to know more about babies' home and out-of-home experiences
  
- enables babies to explore and manipulate objects in a **multi-sensorial** way so that they can smell, taste, hear, see, touch, reach, grasp, lift, and drop objects:
  - provides a variety of items and materials that are safe for babies to play with, for example things that are hard, soft, natural, and manmade
  - encourages and helps babies to strengthen muscles by placing them in different positions, for example lying on their tummies, lifting their heads to see around them, sitting propped up by cushions, lying on their backs under a mobile
  
- encourages babies to **do things for themselves**, encourages their initiatives and choices, and reacts positively to their endeavours so that they develop positive dispositions to learning:
  - assists, encourages and affirms babies' efforts, for example says, *Look, you're drinking your milk all by yourself*, or claps hands when the baby turns the pages of a book
  - acknowledges and encourages babies' persistence, for example provides physical support as they attempt to stand, walk, or put shapes in a shape sorter
  - describes babies' activities and affirms their efforts
  
- nurtures babies' sense of **wonder**:
  - gives babies experiences of the natural environment outdoors and describes the experiences, for example touching flowers and leaves, looking at spiders' webs, watching, listening to and touching running water, and playing with snow
  - places natural items such as stones, wooden items, wool, and felt in a basket for exploration, or models splashing water in the bath or sink
  - interacts with babies in a quiet area, for example the baby sitting on the adult's lap to gaze about the room or to listen to a piece of gentle music, while the adult responds to the baby's communicative efforts or quietly describes what the baby is focusing on





- facilitates **repetition and challenge** so that babies can master and extend what they are doing, while encouraging them to take **risks**:
  - challenges babies to try new things, for example offers new toys or materials, hides objects leaving part of the toy visible in the beginning, puts the toy just out of reach so that the babies have to crawl or reach to get it
  - introduces babies to different play areas indoors and outdoors, for example gives babies access to steps or ramps to experience different levels, waits nearby as the babies crawl up steps, kneels down to look into a tunnel so that the babies can see him/her
  - encourages repetition of activities so that babies can master them, and repeats vocalisations and sounds
- helps babies to **respect themselves and others**:
  - helps babies discover they are unique people, for example places mirrors and photos at babies' level, uses babies' names often
  - creates opportunities for babies to be with other babies and older children, with the adult talking about who is there and what is happening
  - affirms babies' behaviour, saying, for example, *Well done, you are helping Mammy tidy the toys back in the box* or *You are giving your teddy a lovely cuddle.*

## Toddlers

### The adult

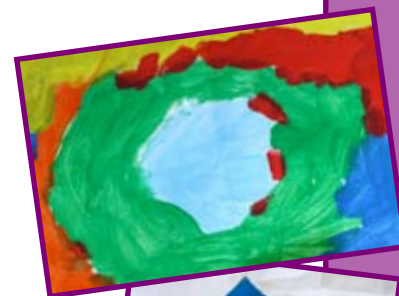
- ensures that toddlers get adequate **rest, nutrition and stimulation**:
  - enables toddlers to develop and/or continue routines around eating, sleeping and hygiene, keeping their families informed of routines
  - encourages healthy eating and helps toddlers to become aware of different food types and their benefits, for example that milk is good for bones and teeth, and that fruit and vegetables are good for healthy bodies
  - incorporates sleeping times into the daily routine for those who need it
- provides toddlers with a well-structured and orderly environment and a **predictable but flexible routine**:
  - helps toddlers to anticipate familiar events, for example uses signals to show when the present activity is going to end and tells them what is going to happen next: *Soon we will be putting away the bricks and tidying up before story time* or *We're going to put on coats now before going outside*
  - structures the environment by storing things in familiar places, for example a toy-box in the bedroom or dividing the space into interest areas such as quiet, messy, pretend play, and so on, so that toddlers know where to find things
- enables toddlers to become **independent**:
  - shows toddlers how to do things, for example getting their cups from the cupboard, lifting a chair, caring for a plant, putting their blanket on their bed, filling the washing machine, sweeping the floor



- encourages and enables toddlers to do things for themselves by developing self-care skills, for example washing and drying hands, getting dressed, becoming toilet trained, putting on wellingtons
- encourages toddlers to make choices, saying, for example, *Would you like an apple or an orange? Do you want to wear the red socks or the blue socks? Which story would you like before bedtime? Whose hand will you take, mine or Aileen's?*
- encourages toddlers to **solve problems** and to think about different ways of doing things:
  - acknowledges and encourages toddlers' problem-solving efforts, saying, for example, *Oh, I see, you pulled up your sleeve because you wanted to play with the water* or *Great, you are helping sweep up the sand that fell on the floor*
  - gives toddlers reasons and choices when they have to do something, saying, for example, *I need to change your nappy because it is dirty. Will you get the clean nappy or will I? We can go outside in the rain when you put on your coat and wellies. You want the car that Laura is playing with – why don't we find another one like it?*
- provides lots of opportunities to strengthen toddlers' **muscles**, to refine **skills** and to enhance **hand-eye co-ordination**:
  - discovers with toddlers how their bodies work by finding out what different body parts do and what sounds they make, for example stretching, balancing, listening to their breathing, throwing and catching items, kicking a ball, using a climbing frame
  - ensures there are lots of opportunities for toddlers to take part in a variety of types of play regardless of gender or ability
- collaborates with toddlers in experiencing and **caring for the environment**:
  - provides opportunities for toddlers to enjoy and learn about the natural environment, for example stamping in puddles, digging, recycling, sweeping, making art with natural materials, going for walks, planting, hunting for creatures such as worms, ladybirds, spiders, caterpillars, observing and finding out about them
  - provides adequate outdoor clothing so that toddlers can play outside regardless of the weather
  - takes toddlers on trips, for example visiting an open farm to see the animals or going to a garden to experience different smells and colours and feel different textures
  - takes photographs of the outdoors, displaying them at child level and using them to start discussions
- encourages toddlers to act on their **curiosity**, to **take risks**, to **concentrate**, and to be **resilient**:
  - provides opportunities for toddlers to try things out and to see what happens, for example when they add water to soil, when they mix different coloured paints together, or when they make ramps for a toy tractor or tricycle
  - helps toddlers' concentration by creating quiet zones and reducing background noise, ensures toddlers are not disturbed unnecessarily when they are absorbed in a task, and provides tasks and activities linked to their interests



- encourages toddlers to take risks, for example climbing to the top of the slide, trying a new food, getting an object from the top shelf
- helps toddlers to look on things positively even when things don't go as they plan, for example when the tower they are building falls down or when they can't have the toy or snack they want.



## Young children

### The adult

- helps young children to **predict and cope with changes, transitions and stressful life events**:
  - helps children to share their emotions non-verbally and verbally with others and to develop coping skills such as asking for help, talking about what has happened, or talking about what is going to happen: *Where are we going after dinner? Would you like to hold the teddy while you are waving goodbye to Dad? If you are afraid come and tell me.*
  - helps children to become aware of what happens in their bodies when they become upset, frightened and angry, for example fluttering tummy, sweaty palms, dry mouth
  - comforts children during separation, for example staying with them, looking at family photographs, doing a favourite activity together, playing in a favourite place
  - talks to children about transitions such as starting pre-school or primary school, staying overnight with other family members, moving to a new house, welcoming a new baby into the family
- approaches **conflict situations** calmly, models **positive behaviour**, and creates opportunities for children to **share and take turns**:
  - provides adequate resources so that children don't have to wait too long to get their turn, for example encouraging children to use strategies like asking for a turn, using an egg-timer to time each turn, or drawing up a waiting list and encouraging children to tick themselves off the list as they take their turn
  - uses a problem-solving approach to respond to social conflicts, for example asking children what happened or what the problem is, restating the problem, helping children to find a solution, providing subsequent support and ensuring all involved are supported, comforted and reassured
  - uses 'I statements' to focus on the problem not the person, saying, for example, *I feel worried when you do that because you might hurt yourself* or *I know you are really cross with Dwayne for taking the truck*
  - speaks calmly, models being polite, says *please, thank you and excuse me*, offers explanations and gives reasons for actions
  - uses rotas so that everyone in a group or family gets a chance to do things, for example handing out lunches, tidying up the book corner, being first to do or get something

- promotes **good health** and encourages children to make **healthy choices**:
  - models and encourages exercising, taking care of teeth, washing hands, using their own hair brushes, using tissues to clean their noses
  - encourages children to refine their self-care and self-help skills such as using cutlery, fastening buttons, putting on shoes, making lunch, packing their bags
  - provides food choices at snack-times and lunch-times to extend children's knowledge and experience of a range of healthy food options from different cultures
  - discusses food, where it comes from, how it is prepared, and how it is cooked and eaten, encouraging children to take part in cooking and food preparation as appropriate, for example buttering toast, chopping up bananas, picking strawberries, gathering herbs and vegetables from the garden
  - includes physical activities in the daily routine to help build children's fitness
  
- listens to and discusses things **in depth** with children:
  - listens attentively to what children are saying and also to what they are not saying
  - encourages thinking together in small groups by making open-ended statements and asking open-ended questions, saying, for example, *What would happen if ... I wonder why ... What do you think about ...*
  - discusses children's profound questions in a secure and reassuring manner, for example, *Why was I born? Why did granny die? If the world is round why don't we fall off when it moves around? Does the world go on forever? Who named the days of the week? Why is my Mario's skin black? Why can't Enya speak English? Why don't Anto's legs work properly?*
  - raises awareness about a diversity of beliefs, for example that many people have a concept of God or of a being greater than themselves, that some people don't share this belief
  
- plans **quiet times** and sets up a space for **thinking and reflecting**:
  - encourages children to reflect on what they have done or to observe the detail in something such as a leaf or a flower
  - introduces children to relaxation strategies, for example asking children to concentrate on breathing and inviting them to listen to a piece of music
  - ensures children who need some peace and quiet are not disturbed
  - builds sleeping times into routines for children who need them and provides appropriate place for sleeping



- explores and promotes the concept of **citizenship** and **social justice** with children and respects them as young citizens:
  - ensures play is a fair and positive experience for all children
  - introduces games with rules, for example card and board games, hopscotch, football, parachute game (trying to make a ball fall over the edge of a large sheet held by members of two teams)
  - discusses important issues with children, for example a newspaper article that might interest them, or concepts like fairness, power, responsibility, freedom, rights, or prejudice in the context of children's daily experiences
  - involves children in decision making and rule making, for example consulting with them on rules for talking and listening or turn-taking and exploring why the rules are important
  - provides children with choices, saying, for example, *What would you like to do this morning? What story will we read?* And inviting the children to vote or to reach a consensus
  - ensures all children can participate in negotiations, for example helping shy and quiet children to partake
  - nurtures children's sense of empathy and fairness by encouraging and supporting discussion when issues arise
  
- appreciates children's **efforts**, identifies their **individual strengths and abilities** and helps them to **cope and to try again** when they experience failure:
  - observes children closely so that he/she knows what their interests and strengths are, and builds on these
  - encourages children to use their many abilities and strengths, for example getting along with others, being artistic or musical, taking part in sports, enjoying reading
  - helps children to reflect on their achievements and interests and to identify personal goals, saying, for example, *What can you do now that you couldn't last year or when you were a baby? What would you like to be able to do at your next birthday? What is your favourite activity? Why?*
  - models strategies to help children persevere in the face of difficulty, for example what to do when the jigsaw piece won't fit or when the sand-castle collapses.







## **Identity and Belonging**

## Theme: Identity and Belonging

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

From birth, children develop a sense of who they are. Relationships with family members, other adults and children, friends and members of their community play a key role in building their identities. 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, beliefs, and languages help children to develop pride in who they are. These messages also give them confidence to voice their views and opinions, to make choices, and to help shape their own learning.

By embracing difference, by exploring their own attitudes in relation to equality and diversity, and by realising that their attitudes and values influence children, adults can develop the insights, self-awareness and skills that are needed to help children develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. This helps to ensure that all children are respected and valued and that they can recognise and deal with discrimination and prejudice.

Table 2: Aims and learning goals for *Identity and Belonging*

Identity and Belonging	
Aims	Learning goals
<p><b>Aim 1</b> Children will have strong self-identities and will feel respected and affirmed as unique individuals with their own life stories.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. build respectful relationships with others</li> <li>2. appreciate the features that make a person special and unique (name, size, hair, hand and footprint, gender, birthday)</li> <li>3. understand that as individuals they are separate from others with their own needs, interests and abilities</li> <li>4. have a sense of 'who they are' and be able to describe their backgrounds, strengths and abilities</li> <li>5. feel valued and see themselves and their interests reflected in the environment</li> <li>6. express their own ideas, preferences and needs, and have these responded to with respect and consistency.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 2</b> Children will have a sense of group identity where links with their family and community are acknowledged and extended.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. feel that they have a place and a right to belong to the group</li> <li>2. know that members of their family and community are positively acknowledged and welcomed</li> <li>3. be able to share personal experiences about their own families and cultures, and come to know that there is a diversity of family structures, cultures and backgrounds</li> <li>4. understand and take part in routines, customs, festivals, and celebrations</li> <li>5. see themselves as part of a wider community and know about their local area, including some of its places, features and people</li> <li>6. understand the different roles of people in the community.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 3</b> Children will be able to express their rights and show an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. express their views and help make decisions in matters that affect them</li> <li>2. understand the rules and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour</li> <li>3. interact, work co-operatively, and help others</li> <li>4. be aware of and respect others' needs, rights, feelings, culture, language, background, and religious beliefs</li> <li>5. have a sense of social justice and recognise and deal with unfair behaviour</li> <li>6. demonstrate the skills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation, and conflict resolution.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 4</b> Children will see themselves as capable learners.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. develop a broad range of abilities and interests</li> <li>2. show an awareness of their own unique strengths, abilities and learning styles, and be willing to share their skills and knowledge with others</li> <li>3. show increasing confidence and self-assurance in directing their own learning</li> <li>4. demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence and responsibility</li> <li>5. experience learning opportunities that are based on personal interests, and linked to their home, community and culture</li> <li>6. be motivated, and begin to think about and recognise their own progress and achievements.</li> </ol>

## Sample learning opportunities

### Babies

#### The adult

- closely observes babies, knows their **personalities** well, respects and responds to their **individual needs and preferences**, and builds on **care practices** from home:
  - knows babies' natural rhythms, supports sleeping and feeding routines, and provides favourite comfort objects, for example blanket, teddy, soother
  - places photographs of parents near the sleeping area and knows at least a few words in the babies' home language when that language is neither English nor Irish
  - responds appropriately to babies' feelings, for example soothes them when upset, builds on their curiosity, provides positive physical contact such as cuddling, hugging, and holding on the lap
  
- supports babies' emerging **sense of identity**:
  - helps babies understand and use their physical capabilities, for example encouraging them to clap hands, to reach, to smile, to wave, to point, and to talk using gurgles and sounds
  - helps babies to distinguish themselves from others, for example says the babies' names and the names of family members, looks at and points to photographs
  - provides opportunities for babies to be with, to watch, and to listen to other children
  - provides low level mirrors and reflective toys, such as activity cubes with safety mirrors attached, and describes what babies see to enable them to recognise their own reflection
  - displays photos of babies and their work in the setting
  - shows the daily routine through photographs, makes portfolios of babies' constructions and paintings as they grow
  - helps babies to identify body parts by pointing to, touching, and naming them, for example pointing to toes, wriggling fingers, tapping heads, touching ears
  
- provides opportunities for **older siblings, peers and babies** to see one another and to be together at different times during the day, optimising opportunities that will enable them to interact and communicate:
  - plans activities and events when babies, siblings, and/or older children can be together, for example meal times, song-time, before going home
  - ensures babies and siblings have time outside to play together regularly
  
- provides babies with experiences of the **outside world**:
  - brings babies outside to explore and observe on a regular basis
  - gives babies opportunities to see the outdoors, for example positions babies near low level windows where they have a view outside when they are inside



- provides babies with natural items, pictures and books about nature, for example the weather, animals, and things that happen outside such as farming, travel, or buildings
- plans visits to places in the local community such as a park, a library, a playground, a market
- brings babies to the local parent-and-baby or parent-and-toddler group.

## Toddlers

### The adult

- **plays with and observes toddlers and takes account of their interests, needs, rights and wishes:**
  - observes and listens carefully to what toddlers do and say, rephrases emergent speech to support language development in a positive way, for example when the toddler says, *I want a t-spoon*, the adult responds with, *Oh you want a spoon do you Amy?* – rather than saying, *don't say t-spoon Amy.*
  - empathises with and responds to toddlers when they are concerned or afraid
  - respects and values things that are important to toddlers such as relationships, family, pets, objects, for example knows that the toddler loves tractors and extends his/her interest by having books about tractors, by having a farm set, or by visiting a real farm
- **spends one-to-one time with toddlers to make them feel special and valued:**
  - plays with toddlers and completes tasks or projects together with them, follows the toddlers' leads, allows plenty of opportunity for interaction and affirmation
  - reads favourite stories and introduces appropriate new stories
  - goes for walks and chats with toddlers along the way
  - provides opportunities for toddlers to be creative, for example making cards for special occasions, making and playing with different coloured play-dough, making a collage from junk materials
  - displays toddlers' work showing their names and dates, for example photographs, constructions, paintings, collages
  - gives toddlers an assigned space in which to put their things
  - invites toddlers to talk about their news, experiences and feelings
  - looks at toddlers' learning portfolios with them individually, and talks about what they have achieved
- **uses resources and materials which reflect toddlers' families, genders, abilities, backgrounds, and cultures:**
  - provides books and puzzles which represent a variety of family types, homes and





occupations, including those of the toddlers' parent/s, taking account of abilities, disabilities and cultures, beginning with who is in the setting and then extending it to the community

- plays with toddlers using dolls, including those with anatomically correct features that have a range of skin tones and hair types
  - plays and responds to culturally appropriate and relevant music
  - reads books about people of different appearances and abilities (including those with special needs), for example people who wear glasses or hearing aids, people who use wheelchairs, crutches or Zimmer frames, people who are on the autistic spectrum, or people with illnesses such as Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease
  - provides a range of colours in crayons and paints, and encourages toddlers to show different skin tones in their pictures
  - plans the pretend play area to reflect the lifestyle of all toddlers attending, for example dress-up clothes, utensils, food, and cooking items in the pretend play area that are familiar to the toddlers, especially if they are from culturally diverse homes
  - provides objects and tools similar to those used by the toddlers' parent/s at work, in order to reflect the diverse nature of parental occupations
- **facilitates activities that encourage toddlers to interact and play with others:**
    - encourages children to learn each others' names and to use these in interactions such as greetings, singing happy birthday, playing together
    - supports peer mentoring, for example encouraging children to help each other, to work in pairs as appropriate, and to play together when they want to (as well as supporting parallel or solitary play)
    - plans small group co-operative games or activities such as floor jigsaws, building blocks, playing with teddy bears and dolls, doing creative group projects
  - **supports toddlers in beginning to manage their behaviour appropriately and to know what behaviour is acceptable:**
    - responds to toddlers positively through verbal and non-verbal communication
    - uses predictable daily routines, sets rules and boundaries, and applies these consistently
    - anticipates conflicts and things that will upset and frustrate toddlers, and helps them to deal with these
    - empathises with toddlers and helps them understand what is and what is not acceptable through positive encouragement and reinforcement
    - observes toddlers' behaviour and provides comfort, feedback and support in times of need, such as when toddlers are upset, jealous, frightened, or stressed

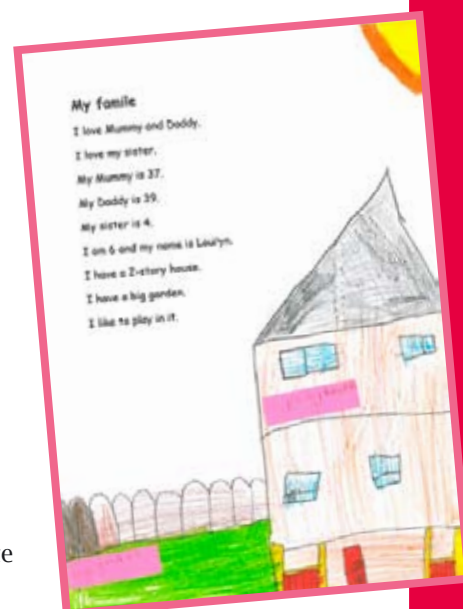


- nurtures feelings of compassion and understanding in toddlers, for example affirming them when they offer the teddy to a sibling who is crying, talking to toddlers about how it feels when someone takes a toy away from them
- ensures that both **boys and girls** are encouraged to explore, take risks, enjoy challenge and to take on caring roles:
  - encourages non-stereotypical play, for example telling stories which support this, modelling non-stereotypical roles, displaying posters showing men and women participating in the same tasks in the home and at work
  - ensures that boys and girls have access to all areas and all toys and equipment, and encourages them to use these
  - provides challenging physical activities for boys and girls.

### Young children

#### The adult

- supports children to **think about themselves, who they are and their strengths, interests and abilities**:
  - encourages children to make 'all about me' posters with photographs and/or drawings of the children, their families, homes, pets, and favourite toys and activities, and talk about these
  - provides art materials reflective of different skin tones
  - explores with children what makes them special, for example their own characteristics and what makes them different from their siblings and peers
  - discusses children's individual strengths and interests, for example sport, animals, cars, dancing, singing, playing an instrument, computers, literacy, numeracy
  - uses drawings and early writings to help children create books, for example about their favourite sports team or their holidays (with the adult acting as a scribe for younger children)
  - acknowledges and, if appropriate, celebrates events such as birthdays, Chinese New Year, Christmas or Diwali, Ramadan, and Rosh Hashanah
  - displays children's work where others can see it
  - takes photographs or video recordings of children taking part in music-making, creative activities, dance, drama, and pretend play, and shares them with children and their families
  - sources books or makes books that show the children's backgrounds and cultures, including Travellers, lone parents, and people with disabilities
- creates multiple opportunities for young children to **talk, listen and be heard whenever possible with peers, with adults, or in small groups**:
  - sits with children during break-times, encouraging them to chat, to share experiences, and to listen to others



- encourages discussions about children's work and play, for example what they are doing now and what they have seen and done
  - displays posters of people showing different emotions, occupations, and places, as a starting point for discussion
  - records sequences of events in personal or family histories, for example looking at their own baby and toddler photos, talking about toys their grandparents played with, clothes their parents wore, and music their parents listened to
  - encourages speaking and listening to others in a group, for example passes round a pretend microphone giving each child an opportunity to say something, as well as hearing what others have to say
- uses pretend play to encourage and support children to **empathise** with others and see things from **another's point of view**:
    - uses props such as dressing-up clothes to help children take on new identities, or provides an assortment of small world figures and models to mirror life around them
    - encourages children to experience sensory impairment through playful activities, for example *Blindman's Buff*, wearing ear muffs, and empathising with people who have physical disabilities by using play resources, such as a doll-sized wheel chair, small world crutches, Zimmer frames, guide dogs
    - uses stories to discuss the actions, feelings and motivations of characters, saying, for example, *Sarah is sad because she can't find her blanket. How can we help her to feel better? How does John feel when you ...? How would you feel if ... How did the little pigs feel when the wolf was outside their door? How did Declan feel when he got lost in the shop?*
    - encourages children to compliment each other on their achievements
- adapts routines to cater for **individual needs, interests, preferences, and capabilities**:
    - enables children to be involved in or to choose alternative activities
    - respects children's preferences, for example supports their preference to play alone, with a sibling or peer, or in a group
    - sets tasks for varying abilities so that everyone has a chance to be successful
    - encourages and affirms effort
- creates a **language environment** that reflects the languages of all the children and adults in the setting:
    - labels regularly used objects and resources using pictures and different languages, for example coat hangers, shoe boxes, pigeon-holes for work, place mats for snacks, daily routines, different areas of the room
    - invites children to teach their peers words in the language of their home country, writes and displays these key words and phrases
    - uses the correct spelling and pronunciation of children's names



- develops young children's awareness of the **community** in which they live:
  - helps children become aware of and be active in their setting (their micro-community)
  - helps ensure children know the name of the setting and that they recognise some of the other adults and children involved
  - includes the children in making decisions and in participating in community activities such as concerts, assemblies and displays
  - visits places in the community and facilitates visits from, and interactions with members of the community
  - encourages children to ask visitors questions
  - discusses the roles of people in the community such as a garda, a nurse, a social welfare officer, a librarian, a teacher, a lollipop person
  - works on projects such as 'Our Community' - involving where to go and what to do, making maps or posters of the local area with pictures of significant features such as a sculpture, a castle or a mountain, makes a community wall
  - uses ICT equipment, such as scanners, digital cameras, interactive white boards, or slide shows to collect and display information about their community
  - helps children to develop a sense of place and a responsibility to care for that place, for example looking after their place in the room, keeping their things tidy, having responsibility for a particular area such as tidying up the dress-up clothes, gathering up recyclables, planting and caring for flowers at the entrance to the setting, picking up litter.





# Communicating



## Theme: 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. In time, the skills of reading and writing enrich this experience. Communicating is a two-way activity; as well as learning to share their experiences with others children also learn to interpret what others are sharing with them. They communicate in many different ways including facial expressions, gestures, body movements, sounds, language and for some children, through assistive technology. Children's language is more than words, phrases and sentences. It includes art, Braille, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, sculpture, signing, and stories. While most children eventually master spoken and written language as their key means of communicating, they continue to speak through their gestures, body movements and expressions to a greater or lesser extent. Some children with special educational needs may need additional and consistent support throughout their lifetime to practise, learn and perfect the art of non-verbal communication.

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 each other and the adult, 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 environment can fuel their thinking, imagination and creativity, thereby enriching communication. These early experiences support children in becoming confident and competent communicators.

Table 3: Aims and learning goals for *Communicating*

Communicating	
Aims	Learning goals
<p><b>Aim 1</b> Children will use non-verbal communication skills.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. use a range of body movements, facial expressions, and early vocalisations to show feelings and share information</li> <li>2. understand and use non-verbal communication rules, such as turn-taking and making eye contact</li> <li>3. interpret and respond to non-verbal communication by others</li> <li>4. understand and respect that some people will rely on non-verbal communication as their main way of interacting with others</li> <li>5. combine non-verbal and verbal communication to get their point across</li> <li>6. express themselves creatively and imaginatively using non-verbal communication.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 2</b> Children will use language.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. interact with other children and adults by listening, discussing and taking turns in conversation</li> <li>2. explore sound, pattern, rhythm, and repetition in language</li> <li>3. use an expanding vocabulary of words and phrases, and show a growing understanding of syntax and meaning</li> <li>4. 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</li> <li>5. become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages</li> <li>6. be positive about their home language, and know that they can use different languages to communicate with different people and in different situations.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 3</b> Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. use language to interpret experiences, to solve problems, and to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings</li> <li>2. use books and ICT for fun, to gain information and broaden their understanding of the world</li> <li>3. build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and understand that these can be read by others</li> <li>4. become familiar with and use a variety of print in an enjoyable and meaningful way</li> <li>5. have opportunities to use a variety of mark-making materials and implements in an enjoyable and meaningful way</li> <li>6. develop counting skills, and a growing understanding of the meaning and use of numbers and mathematical language in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 4</b> Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. share their feelings, thoughts and ideas by story-telling, making art, moving to music, role-playing, problem-solving, and responding to these experiences</li> <li>2. express themselves through the visual arts using skills such as cutting, drawing, gluing, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, and sewing</li> <li>3. listen to and respond to a variety of types of music, sing songs and make music using instruments</li> <li>4. use language to imagine and recreate roles and experiences</li> <li>5. respond to and create literacy experiences through story, poetry, song, and drama</li> <li>6. show confidence in trying out new things, taking risks, and thinking creatively.</li> </ol>

## Sample learning opportunities

### Babies

#### The adult

- interacts **non-verbally** with babies and uses appropriate and supportive techniques to encourage communication:
  - establishes and maintains eye contact with babies, speaks to them when interacting, and pauses giving them a turn
  - repeats babies' sounds and uses infant-directed speech when talking to them (using a distinctly higher pitch, short phrases, simple words, a slow pace, and long vowels)
  - models non-verbal strategies to share feelings, for example using wide eyes to show amazement or wonder, smiling and clapping hands to show delight
  - interprets and responds to babies' sounds, expressions and body movements, for example soothing babies, verbalising their intentions, responding to gestures with words, and pointing to things
  - watches for signs that babies are concentrating on something they see, hear, feel, or taste, and models conversation by asking simple questions and providing answers
- provides opportunities for babies to learn **language** from others:
  - enables babies to watch and listen to adults and other children
  - encourages other children to speak to and play with babies so they hear sounds, words and sentences being used
  - repeats the names of other children around babies and describes what they are doing
- creates a **print-rich environment** and fosters babies' **enjoyment of books**:
  - shares a variety of books including babies' favourite ones, and encourages them to lift flaps, feel textures, and press buttons to hear sounds
  - looks at and talks about pictures and photographs that link to babies' experiences
  - provides 'talking' toys for play
  - describes and comments on what is happening around them, for example noises, colours, weather, and activities
  - displays photographs of the babies' with their names beside them
- supports **language development** using stories, games, songs, and rhymes with actions, finger movements and visual props:
  - repeats words, songs and rhymes often so that babies become familiar with sounds
  - reads and enjoys stories with babies
  - uses culturally appropriate props such as dolls, puppets, dress-up items, everyday objects, exaggerated gestures, and movement to stimulate babies' senses when telling stories and nursery rhymes
  - involves babies in 'saying' rhymes, for example pausing and waiting for the babies to imitate an action or to make a sound for a familiar line or word in a rhyme
  - speaks key words and phrases using babies' home language where this is neither English nor Irish (asking parents for help in doing this)



- fosters **listening skills** using voice tone, music, movement, songs and rhymes:
  - plays listening games focusing on particular sounds or patterns of sound
  - uses the human voice where possible, rather than recordings, to introduce songs, poems and rhymes
  - sings songs slowly leaving gaps which invite babies to join in
  - moves to the beat of the music and helps babies to do the same
  - provides a variety of ‘home-made’ and ‘real’ musical instruments for babies to play with
- supports **creative expression**:
  - encourages babies to explore a range of materials, for example painting with their hands, playing with bubbles, crawling on fabrics of different textures
  - plays a variety of music and encourages babies to respond, for example claps, taps on the head or hand, waves, screeches, moving quickly to music with a fast tempo
  - provides playthings of different sizes, colours, shapes, and textures, and describes their features, for example, *I see you’ve got the fluffy cat. Cia, look at the yellow star.*



## Toddlers

### The adult

- supports toddlers in developing their **language**:
  - names familiar objects and describes experiences
  - over time, introduces new words in context, and models using more complex language structures, for example adding descriptive words: *The snail crawled slowly. The big giant was very hungry. Tony is sad because his pet hamster is sick.*
  - shows the meaning of words by linking to children’s actions and experiences
  - encourages toddlers to use their home language (when this is neither English nor Irish) in the setting, for example to say a rhyme
- creates a **print-rich environment** and fosters toddlers’ love of, excitement in, and understanding of **books**:
  - reads, enjoys and explores stories
  - invites toddlers to ‘read’ stories using pictures
  - models how to use English and Irish books—right-way up, left to right on the page
  - provides toddlers with opportunities to discuss, think, predict, suggest, recount, and speculate about what will happen next in stories and poems and why
  - encourages toddlers to make marks, for example writing with crayons, painting and printing, working with chalks
- encourages toddlers to **communicate creatively** through story, song, sculpture, rhyme, play, music, dance, and art:
  - through pretend play, retells and adapts stories read and experiences lived, for example toddlers creating a den where the animals sleep at night, making a ‘bus’ and setting off on a journey collecting passengers on the way, setting up a vet’s surgery where they treat their sick pets, constructing a fishing port where they land and sort their catch



- provides materials and helps toddlers design and make musical instruments from 'junk' materials, and encourages toddlers to use these to make music imitating a steady beat
  - encourages toddlers to listen to and respond to music, for example tapping, swaying, moving to the beat
  - describes and makes facial expressions to explain how pieces of music make them feel
  - provides a variety of art materials and play props for children to use in sharing their thoughts, feelings and ideas
- counts and uses **mathematical language** in everyday situations:
    - counts with the children as part of daily routines, for example, *How many aprons do we need to have for everyone to bake our bread? Let's count together. I see you have lots of tools in your workshop. How many nails are you hammering into that piece of wood? Do we have enough chairs and beds for the seven dwarfs?*
    - uses everyday moments to enrich toddlers' understanding of number, for example putting one paintbrush in each paint-pot, giving a story-book to each child, checking each toddler has a doll in the buggy to go for a walk, using numbers when creating patterns with paint or toys, for example a traffic-jam of cars—one red car, one yellow car, one red car, one yellow car
    - explores the characteristics of objects, and notices similarities and differences, for example the colour, height and size of flowers in the garden or park, the size, shape and colour of shells or stones
    - helps toddlers to share with others, for example giving play-dough to each of four children or dividing a mandarin orange into segments and sharing with a friend, sharing wheelie toys among a group of children
    - enjoys finger games and nursery rhymes involving counting
    - provides activities to help toddlers understand positional language such as up, down, in, out, behind, in front, over, under, and describes these as the toddlers experience them.



### Young children

#### The adult

- encourages young children to develop **their non-verbal communication**:
  - creates opportunities for children to respond to literary experiences using facial expressions and body movements, for example showing feelings through facial expressions as they arise in a poem or story being read aloud by the adult, using body movements and actions to respond to a tongue twister or a song
  - models non-verbal rules such as taking turns, and encourages children to use these in their interactions with others
  - demonstrates empathy in response to children's non-verbal reactions to stories and experiences and encourages children to 'read' each other's expressions and body language



- **helps young children in developing their listening skills:**
  - encourages children to play group games, for example, games that involve listening to, memorising, and adding to lists such as a shopping list, *I went to the shop and I bought a loaf of bread, a litre of milk, a tin of beans...*
  - provides opportunities for children to listen to a variety of sounds in their environment, and to describe and identify them
  - invites children to focus on features of pieces of music, for example fast/slow, high/low and loud/soft, and to share these through discussion, movement and art
  - encourages children to listen to each other tell and read stories
  - works with children to decide on 'how we listen' in order to promote an atmosphere of respect for each other's contributions
  
- **encourages young children to think and talk about their own and others' feelings:**
  - uses the language of feelings: *I feel happy today because ... I was so cross when ... I got scared yesterday 'cos ...*
  - models admitting making mistakes and saying *sorry*
  - encourages children to use pretend play to work through emotions such as worry, fear and jealousy; providing lots of props, dress-up clothes and equipment to help with this
  - encourages young children to talk about and/or draw pictures of what they like/don't like doing
  - encourages children to recognise their strengths and things that they find easy and difficult to do
  - invites children to draw comic strips or provides pictures to sequence stories about feelings
  - reads and discusses books which reflect a range of emotions, such as empathy, discrimination, equality, and fairness
  
- **supports young children in developing their language:**
  - models good use of language while providing children with lots of opportunities for speaking and listening (especially important for children learning English or Irish as a second language)
  - listens to young children attentively and takes their ideas seriously
  - provides opportunities for children to talk to different people in one-to-one, small group, and large group situations, for example children saying a nursery rhyme with a friend or telling their news about something they did together, children interview a member of their community
  - encourages children to plan, predict and speculate about future or imaginary experiences particularly during pretend play
  - plays language games with children, for example *I spy*
  - finds and creates words that rhyme including nonsense words, such as *man, tan, ban, dan, chan, wan*
  - says tongue twisters
  - reads stories with children and explores characters and events in them



- draws on new words from the story and models their use in a meaningful way
  - encourages the children to think and talk about why things happened as they did in the story
  - encourages children to retell and sequence stories and explore topics arising from the stories such as fairness, fear, friendship, bullying, and being safe
  - asks open-ended questions and makes statements to encourage children to think aloud, wonder and explore possibilities with the adult, for example *What is a friend? I wonder are fairies real. Being scared makes me go cold! How do aeroplanes stay up in the sky?*
  - draws children's attention to letters and their sounds as part of their daily activities, play and routines
- ensures young children experience a **print-rich environment** and fosters their love of, excitement in, understanding of, and use of **books**:
    - provides young children with frequent opportunities to play with and read books
    - organises visits to the library
    - reads regularly to children using a range of books that are culturally relevant and that reflect different human abilities, family types, interests, and topics
    - uses props, puppets, gestures, and voices to bring stories alive in role-playing and drama
    - helps young children to be story-tellers, for example starts a story and encourages the children to continue it (perhaps taping it and playing it back or writing it down)
    - shows pictures and photographs to children encouraging them to make up stories about them, for example a photograph of a tiger on the bus!
    - uses a variety of books including large format books to help children develop early reading skills and to learn about the basic terminology and conventions in English and Irish books—author and illustrator, predicting the story from the pictures, going from left to right and from top to bottom, turning pages in sequence, using page numbers to locate a story, drawing attention to action words
    - encourages children to read and enjoy stories with their parents, grandparents and older siblings
  - provides opportunities for young children to make sense of their experiences by representing their thoughts and ideas through **mark-making and early writing**:
    - helps children to become familiar with print through drawing, painting and making marks with a variety of writing tools
    - models writing by scribing for children and reading back what they said, providing opportunities in play situations for children to write captions and lists using 'invented spelling', for example the farmer's mart, the newsagent's shop, menus in the cafe, a written warning to the alien planning to destroy the earth!
    - plays with children as they use writing and reading in their play situations, for example writing prescriptions for patients at the doctor's, making stamps for the



post-office and addressing letters to post, using a scanner and card machine at the supermarket, making passports and flight tickets for the airport

- helps older children to trace or cut out upper and lower case letters, to make textured numbers, to play with magnetic, plastic and wooden numbers and letters
  - creates a writing area with blank cards, 'post-its', envelopes, writing materials and clipboards with pencils attached, an old typewriter, a computer with word processing software or email (talking to children in another setting using email or webmail and a webcam)
  - shows children how to use ICT to record events and create pictures and messages, for example using software that enables children to cut and paste letters, numbers, pictures, or other symbols
- **develops young children's understanding of number in the environment:**
    - draws attention to numbers in the environment, for example notices, signs, food containers, shop windows, house numbers, car registration plates, labels, calendars, phone numbers, weighing scales
    - uses job charts, weather charts and posters, as well as newspapers, magazines, directories and displays of children's own writing, to draw attention to numbers
    - encourages children to use number in their play by providing props such as clocks, stop-watches, phones, thermometers, price lists, money and asking for the children's help in play scenarios, for example, *What ingredients and how many of each do I need to make pizzas for the deliveries? Can you make the shopping list for the birthday party? What orders has the florist today?*
  - **helps young children to express themselves creatively through art, cookery, drama, language, music, scientific exploration, and stories:**
    - encourages children to play imaginatively with creative materials to solve problems and to come up with new ideas on how to manipulate materials
    - provides open-ended resources such as clay, pasta shapes, paper of different textures, writing materials, paint, digital camera, and natural resources (pine cones, stones, leaves, sand, water) for children's projects and play
    - facilitates children with differing abilities to work together creatively over time on a project, for example a group picture based on a piece of music that the children have heard, a project on building a house so strong the wolf won't get inside, a coach to bring Cinderella to the ball and which will remain a coach after midnight, or a den where the adults can't see them
    - reacts positively to children's creative endeavours, for example moving furniture or equipment to make more space, gathering and mixing ingredients to make a witch's brew (noting the ingredients, the method, and how it works)
    - helps children to explore, make, reflect, co-operate, and communicate by moving, dancing and role-playing.





## **Exploring and Thinking**

## Theme: 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 forming, testing and refining 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.

In early childhood, most children develop physically and cognitively through exploring their environment, though some have disabilities that make this more difficult to achieve. 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, refine their skills, and work together to solve problems.



Table 4: Aims and learning goals for *Exploring and Thinking*

Exploring and Thinking	
Aims	Learning goals
<p><b>Aim 1</b> Children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>engage, explore and experiment in their environment and use new physical skills including skills to manipulate objects and materials</li> <li>demonstrate a growing understanding of themselves and others in their community</li> <li>develop an understanding of change as part of their lives</li> <li>learn about the natural environment and its features, materials, animals, and plants, and their own responsibility as carers</li> <li>develop a sense of time, shape, space, and place</li> <li>come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, size, weight, height, length, capacity, and money in an enjoyable and meaningful way.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 2</b> Children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating, and problem-solving, and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recognise patterns and make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know</li> <li>gather and use information from different sources using their increasing cognitive, physical and social skills</li> <li>use their experience and information to explore and develop working theories about how the world works, and think about how and why they learn things</li> <li>demonstrate their ability to reason, negotiate and think logically</li> <li>collaborate with others to share interests and to solve problems confidently</li> <li>use their creativity and imagination to think of new ways to solve problems.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 3</b> Children will explore ways to represent ideas, feelings, thoughts, objects, and actions through symbols.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>make marks and use drawing, painting and model-making to record objects, events and ideas</li> <li>become familiar with and associate symbols (pictures, numbers, letters, and words) with the things they represent</li> <li>build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers) used to communicate, and use these in an enjoyable and meaningful way leading to early reading and writing</li> <li>express feelings, thoughts and ideas through improvising, moving, playing, talking, writing, story-telling, music and art</li> <li>use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour, and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences</li> <li>use books and ICT (software and the internet) for enjoyment and as a source of information.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Aim 4</b> Children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like curiosity, playfulness, perseverance, confidence, resourcefulness, and risk-taking.</p>	<p>In partnership with the adult, children will</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>demonstrate growing confidence in being able to do things for themselves</li> <li>address challenges and cope with frustrations</li> <li>make decisions and take increasing responsibility for their own learning</li> <li>feel confident that their ideas, thoughts and questions will be listened to and taken seriously</li> <li>develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning, and justifying</li> <li>act on their curiosity, take risks and be open to new ideas and uncertainty.</li> </ol>

## Sample learning opportunities

### Babies

#### The adult

- promotes a warm and trusting relationship with babies through **play and exploration**:
  - maximises opportunities for meaningful adult interactions with babies (observing before interacting) during play and sensory explorations
  - strikes a balance between adult and babies' initiations so that the interactions can be meaningful, regularly following the baby's lead
  - focuses babies' attention on a particular object or person, for example by pointing to a feature
  - affirms babies' explorations and discoveries, for example using wide eyes, a smile, clapping hands, describing what the babies have done, signalling their achievements to another adult or child
  
- provides opportunities for babies to develop **physical skills** and **spatial awareness**:
  - places appealing objects out of babies' reach encouraging them to move towards them
  - provides safe surfaces and objects (toys, furniture) which give babies something to hold on to, to balance against, or to pull themselves up with
  - encourages babies to crawl, lift, slide, walk, or climb in, on, around, under, over, and through things
  - gives babies playthings and objects such as balls, bean-bags, objects that rattle, spinning tops, cylinders of different sizes, and boxes of different shapes and colours to investigate and make discoveries
  
- creates opportunities for babies to experience **cause and effect**:
  - helps babies to see what happens when they interact with playthings and everyday objects such as cutlery, saucepans, sponges, soft balls and keys in different ways, for example touching, shaking, pushing, rolling, squeezing, throwing, picking up and handing back a toy as babies repeatedly drop it until they tire of the game
  - provides wheelie objects and toys for babies to push and pull on different surfaces
  
- provides opportunities for **sensory exploration** that help babies to develop ideas about how the world works:
  - creates opportunities for babies to experience different sights, sounds, smells, tastes, movements, textures, and temperatures indoors and outdoors, while being mindful of the babies' sensitivities towards these
  - plans space for babies to move, explore and touch things
  - provides safe, natural objects for exploratory play, for example a basket of objects (including shells, wool, and wooden spoons), water for splashing, sand, grass for sitting on



- plays hiding games to help babies to develop the concept of **object permanence** (the knowledge that things still exist even when they are out of sight):
  - hides a favourite toy under a towel while babies look on and encourages them to find it, for example, *I wonder where ... has gone. Do you know Caitlín?*
  - looks at lift-the-flap books with babies
  - searches for things together with babies: *I wonder where your teddy is, Pachie? Let's look under the cot. Not there, maybe it's in the kitchen. Did you see it anywhere?*
- provides **all babies** with opportunities to **play and explore**:
  - puts things within reach and gives support to young babies to grab them
  - encourages babies with visual impairment to explore using touch and sound
  - encourages and joins in older babies' pretend play and responds to their initiatives, such as pretending to drink from the empty cup that they offer, crawling after the babies on the floor, speaking into the toy mobile phone, stirring the saucepan with the wooden spoon
  - makes sure that babies with hearing impairment can see what is happening and can see people's faces when they speak
  - uses blankets to help babies with motor impairment to roll over
  - uses number in everyday routines, for example putting on two socks, drinking from one bottle, moving four wheels on the buggy or push-toy.



## Toddlers

### The adult

- encourages **physical activity** and the development of an **understanding of space**:
  - sets up boxes, cushions and other safe objects as well as climbing frames for toddlers to crawl into, over, around, behind, on top of, beside, in front of
  - encourages toddlers to become increasingly skilful at activities like running, jumping, hopping, pedalling a tricycle, moving towards and away from people and things
  - helps toddlers to notice the location of objects, rearrange them, and look at them from different viewpoints
  - encourages play with stack blocks, simple puzzles, things that fit together and come apart, things that fill and empty, things that reverse and go forward such as a tractor or tricycle
  - provides opportunities for toddlers to explore and make discoveries without adult intervention using safe, everyday objects like empty thread reels, jar lids, tins, corks, strong cardboard tubes, large buttons, pine cones, seashells, and scraps of material
- helps toddlers to **experience** and **talk about the world** around them:
  - encourages toddlers to play with natural materials such as sand, water, stones, leaves, and acorns
  - draws children's attention to the physical properties of objects, such as their colour, texture, size, and shape

- organises outings for toddlers with mixed-age groups of children, for example walking in the woods, feeding the ducks in the river, visiting the local farm to feed the calves and collect the eggs, splashing in puddles in their wellies and raingear, and encouraging them to talk about these experiences
  - talks to toddlers about people they meet in their community and what they do, for example, the bus driver, the hairdresser, Travellers, the shop assistant, people from new communities, the librarian, the Community Welfare Officer
- supports toddlers in **making theories** about how things work, and in understanding **cause and effect**:
    - provides objects and materials to encourage toddlers to investigate, for example have early experiences with magnets and magnifying lenses, experience the effect of water on different materials, including sand, stones, paper, soil, and ice
    - gives opportunities to toddlers to do everyday tasks, such as putting items in a bag, washing paint pots, sweeping with a brush, emptying and tidying a cupboard, pouring water into cups
  - enables toddlers develop an understanding of concepts like **measures** (weight, height, volume, money, and time):
    - encourages toddlers to remember and reflect on things and events, to talk about things that are going to happen, and to develop planning and prediction skills, for example, *When your sister comes home from school, we'll go to the playground. What are you going to do after you finish building your ship?*
    - provides play money for the laundrette or supermarket in the pretend area and encourages toddlers to use it in their play
    - gives toddlers opportunities to make purchases as part of a trip to the local shop
    - provides props and toys which enable toddlers to measure how high and long something is, how heavy objects are, or how much can fit in containers, for example scales for weighing the newborn baby in the hospital, rulers and tape-measures for building a bridge or laying a new carpet or wooden floor, watches and stop-clocks for timing a race or blowing the whistle at half-time, cups, jugs, kettles, bottles, pots, saucepans, sieves, spoons, and ladles for pouring, emptying, filling, transferring, and comparing
  - helps toddlers understand the process of **change**:
    - celebrates toddlers' achievements as they learn to do new things, and talks about this change with them
    - helps toddlers to plant seeds, grow flowers and vegetables, harvest them and use them
    - keeps a pet and gives toddlers responsibility for looking after it
    - draws toddlers' attention to changes in the weather in a day, and from one day to the next
    - involves toddlers in baking and discusses ingredients changing, for example butter or chocolate melting and hardening, milk souring, dough rising, pastry crusting
    - poses questions and speculates about how things happen and why: *What makes the windmill go round? How did you make it go faster? I wonder why the ice-cream melted outside?*



- encourages toddlers to follow an **interest**:
  - gives toddlers time and space, indoors and outdoors, to encourage their learning by exploring an object or a place that interests them
  - provides lots of different materials, objects, hiding places, dens, and cubby holes for toddlers to explore and find out about
  - shows interest in their explorations by offering to join in, talking to the toddlers, taking photographs and video recordings, and using these to affirm their work, their efforts and their achievements
  - helps toddlers share their projects with other children and adults in the setting, and with their parents, for example asking them if they'd like to show Mam or Dad or a sibling what they have been doing
  
- provides opportunities for toddlers to **compare, sort, categorise, and order** things:
  - encourages toddlers to find pairs of everyday items, for example matching socks or shoes
  - provides toddlers with items and asks them to find another example of each which is the same
  - helps toddlers to match clothes to different sized dolls
  - draws toddlers' attention to the 'language of size' in stories, for example small, medium-sized and big in the story *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*
  - provides sorting toys such as objects that stack or fit inside each other, for example nested boxes and shape-sorters
  - asks toddlers to find a variety of leaves and sort them according to their shapes or colours in the autumn, sort fruit according to ones that have seeds, ones that have stones, and ones that have none, or sort Sam's (the class puppet) clothes for winter and summer
  - draws toddlers' attention to differences which make them unique, for example encouraging them to order themselves according to their heights, providing them with different-sized shoes for the shoe-shop and corresponding boxes for storage
  - helps the toddler to share items, for example giving a lettuce leaf to each slug in the garden, a mud pie to each guest in the café, a ticket to each passenger on the Luas
  
- draws toddlers' attention to the use of **pictures, numbers and printed words** in the environment and in their play:
  - draws attention to words and numbers in everyday situations, for example, *That's the yoghurt you like, it has a picture of a strawberry on it. The green light means that we can cross now. That's our bus, can you see the number 3 on the front? What's the number of your pizza delivery van? My mobile number is 275, can you call me? What size of shoes would you like to try on in my shoe-shop?*
  - uses stories, songs, rhymes, and finger-play to help toddlers understand numbers and words
  - makes number games and tactile number cards, and displays books with numbers for older toddlers.





## Young children

### The adult

- enables young children to develop **physical skills**:
  - encourages children to use gross motor skills such as balancing, cycling with and without stabilisers, hopping, jumping, running, skipping, bouncing, completing obstacle courses, and playing team games with rules such as basketball, tag-rugby, and uni-hoc, or parachute game (trying to make a ball fall over the edge of a large sheet held by members of two teams)
  - creates opportunities for using beanbags, balls, bats, hula hoops, racquets, skipping ropes, and large play equipment, such as slides and climbing frames
  - provides experiences to use fine motor skills through activities that involve the children picking up and inserting items, for example opening and closing buttons and zips, doing jigsaws, working with beads, sewing, and building with small construction toys
  
- extends young children's **knowledge about their world**:
  - helps children to collect, sort and organise objects and natural materials, for example shells, leaves, stones, seeds, flowers
  - talks to children about patterns and sounds in the natural environment, for example the sound of rain, animal sounds, traffic sounds
  - models and encourages respect for the environment and surroundings, for example sorting and putting rubbish in the bin, making a compost heap, turning off lights and taps when they are not needed, using cardboard tubes, plastic containers, and packaging for art and construction
  - takes children on trips, for example to an open farm to learn about the story of milk, to an animal rescue centre to find out about respecting and caring for animals
  - gives children directions to find something
  - records children's holiday destinations on a globe, and explores what modes of transport they used
  - models using maps and helps children create their own maps of their indoor and outdoor areas
  - uses a map of the indoor or outdoor area to assign children to different areas of play
  - experiments with gravity, for example rolling a ball down a plank, changing the angle and seeing what happens, finding out whether objects will float or sink, using magnets with various materials and objects, testing materials for waterproofing and transparency in order to make umbrellas and spectacles
  - encourages children to test ideas and take risks, for example posing the question, *What would happen if ...?*
  
- encourages young children to get involved in **projects** which enable them to explore a topic that interests them, or an experience they really enjoyed:
  - gives children space indoors and outdoors to encourage their learning through their own projects





- provides lots of materials, books and props for children to use in their projects
  - shows interest in their projects by joining in with certain tasks, talking to the children, taking photographs and video recordings, and using these to affirm children's work, their efforts and achievements
  - helps children share their projects with other children and adults in the setting, and with their parents, for example through an invitation to a display
- encourages young children to **think deeply** about things by using discussion techniques, listening carefully to them and building on what they know:
    - uses everyday experiences, stories and photographs to prompt discussions that can fuel imagination, for example a photograph of two teddies on top of a hill looking down, the pet guinea pig in the airport with his suitcase, a story of an animal that escapes from the zoo
    - asks open-ended questions, for example, *In the story, what did Manus do next? What would you do? What do you think would happen if ... Why do you think that? How can we make this stand up?*
    - makes open-ended statements, for example, *I wonder what Santa does in the summer. I want to be in a film...*
    - encourages children to use different resources to gather information, for example, *Let's look in this book or on the computer and see if we can find out more about ... I wonder would your Gran know about that ... Where did we hear about ... before?*
  - uses play and real-life experiences to **classify, sequence, sort, match, look for and create patterns and shapes**:
    - plans activities in which young children order items and use the language of big/bigger/biggest, tall/taller/tallest, wide/wider/widest
    - explores and classifies things in the garden that are rough/smooth, thick/thin, high/low, and in dark/light shades of colours
    - investigates and classifies the flavours and textures of vegetables and fruit grown in the garden or bought in the shop, for example sweet/sour, crunchy/soft
    - encourages children to think about amounts, colours and shapes, for example, *Can we divide the apple pieces so that everyone gets the same number? Can you put all the blue cups on this table and the yellow ones on that table? How many chairs do you think we'll need for the passengers on the bus? This piece doesn't fit into the space. I think it's too big. Can you find a smaller piece?*
  - enables young children to develop an understanding of concepts like **measures** (weight, height, volume, money and time):
    - draws children's attention to time using a large clock, for example showing 11:00 on the clock and telling the children, *We will choose our story and read it on the story carpet at 11 o'clock*



- uses the 'language of time', for example talking about what the children did and encouraging them to sequence their actions and the events: *We washed the stones and left them in the sun. Then we painted faces on them. Tomorrow we're going to make legs and arms 'cos they can't do anything without them!*
- provides play money in the fruit and vegetable shop and helps the children to make a price list
- works with the children to fill, pay for, and deliver orders for their customers
- plays with children in visiting the bank to exchange coins for other coins, for example a 2c coin for two 1c coins, or a 5c coin for five 1c coins or three 1c coins and one 2c coin
- draws children's attention to the passing of time, for example, comparing photographs of themselves as babies, toddlers and young children, playing with objects such as old phones, kettles, radios and typewriters
- provides lots of props and toys for measuring height, weight, length, and volume, for example, tapes and rulers to measure how much fabric is needed for the bride's dress; trailers, forklifts, buckets, containers, spades, spoons and ladles to move stones and soil in order to make way for a new road; cups, pots, saucepans, sieves, spoons, jugs for lifting, pouring, emptying, filling orders in the juice bar or coffee shop, and for comparing



- builds on young children's natural curiosity and helps them to experiment and investigate **change**:
  - helps children to explore materials in their environment, for example watching and comparing ice melting indoors and outdoors, noting the life-cycle of a frog through regular visits to the nearby pond
  - helps children to explore growth and change, for example growing vegetables from seeds or making butter, and sequencing the main stages through photographs
  - watches and records changes to a plant or a tree during the course of a season
  - harvests and uses flowers, fruits and vegetables
  - records weather changes from day to day and week to week
  - measures shadows at different times of the day
  - records changes to puddles throughout a day or over the course of a number of days
- encourages young children to experiment with colour, shape, size, and texture to **represent ideas**:
  - encourages children to explore different colours and textures, for example, *What colours would you like to use in your picture of the beach? Why do you want to use those colours? Can you find anything in the scrap box that we can use to make a furry lion? Oh, I see it's night-time now, that's why you've used so much black paint.*
  - helps children to think about how they might use shape and size to help represent their ideas and thoughts, for example, *I wonder how we could show how big and*

*wrinkled the elephant in the zoo was. Perhaps we could make his body bigger, will we try that? Mmmm, making a model of our village could be tricky. What could we use that would look like the shops we've got in Aistown?*

- uses **symbols** to help young children learn from and use their environment:
  - uses labels that feature pictures or symbols as well as the written word on boxes and shelves, so that children can easily see where to put and store things
  - presents the daily and weekly routine pictorially, so that children know what is happening next, for example making a picture of a train with each carriage representing a day of the week or a different part of the day, or making a clock face with a pointer that can be moved to show the next activity
  - uses a graphic calendar to show whose birthdays happen in each month, and when special events such as Santa's arrival will happen
  - displays numbers in purposeful contexts and ensures children see numerals alongside the written word and a corresponding example of the correct number, for example 2, two, \*\*
  - provides areas where children can count objects and label them with the corresponding number and areas where children can display collections of objects of interest to them relating to a particular concept like mini-beasts, colour, racing cars, princesses and fairies, flying creatures, buses, musical instruments
  
- models the **writing process** and helps young children to record their experiences and thoughts:
  - makes scrapbooks using children's drawings, photographs or pictures, for example the animals they saw at the circus or things they did while on holiday, the scenario played out in the pretend play area, or the work they did in the garden
  - writes a description or caption under children's drawings or paintings using the children's own words (scribing) and reads it with the children, for example, *This is the lion we saw at the zoo. He was scary when he roared!*
  - encourages children to write their own messages using 'invented' spelling and to share these with their peers
  - provides time and space for children to explore the transition into conventional writing through drawing, writing during pretend play, and using invented spelling, while avoiding inappropriate formal instruction
  - models the use of books and ICT for gathering information, for example looking up train timetables, finding and following a recipe, booking tickets, checking the weather forecast, sending a text or email that children have dictated to a relative or friend and reading out the response, using a word-processing programme to write and print out captions, labels, stories, letters, and cards.



## Glossary

**Active learning** involves children learning by doing, using their senses to explore and work with the objects and materials around them. Through these experiences, children develop the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding that will help them to grow as confident and competent learners.

**Adaptive devices** are any supports that help a child with a disability to increase, improve or maintain their ability to perform a task or to play or interact with others.

**Adult** refers to all those who care for and educate children from birth to six in Ireland. This includes parents/guardians and other significant adults in children's lives including practitioners, and other professionals, such as therapists and social workers.

**Aistear** is the early childhood curriculum framework in Ireland. Aistear is the Irish word for journey.

**Assessment** is the ongoing process of collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using information to develop rich pictures of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning.

**Assistive communication technology** refers to any device which enables children with disabilities to communicate. It can range from a page with picture choices to sophisticated touch screen technology and speaking computers.

**Attention Deficit Hyperactive disorder (ADHD)** is a developmental disorder characterised by distractibility, impulsive behaviours and the inability to stay focused on tasks or activities.

**Autistic spectrum disorder** is a developmental disorder characterised by difficulties with social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication, and unusual, repetitive behaviours, or severely limited interests and activities. These behaviours can range in impact from mild to disabling.

**Background** refers to family background, and to an individual's social and economic status.

**Buddy systems** involve children being assigned a 'special' friend to work and play with. (See also *Peer mentoring*.)

**Cerebral palsy** is an umbrella term for physical impairments affecting muscle control and movement. Children with it have problems with walking, eating, talking, and playing.

**Child-initiated activities** involve children having the opportunity to follow a particular interest or to be involved in deciding to do a particular activity.

**Childminder** refers to a person who looks after children either in his/her own home or in the children's home. A notified childminder is a person who has informed the local Health Service Executive (HSE) office of his/her work. Childminders who look after more than three pre-school children with the exception of those who mind multiple birth children or siblings are required by law to notify the HSE. Other childminders can voluntarily notify themselves.

**County and city childcare committees** were established nationally in 2001 to encourage the development of childcare locally. The 33 committees offer information and advice to the general public on a range of issues in relation to childcare. In particular they offer advice and support on applying for grants under national childcare schemes.

**Culture** refers to a sense of belonging, a shared understanding and identity. Everybody has a culture and it is the way we learn to think, communicate and behave. While we are born into a culture, it is nevertheless learned rather than given. (See also *Ethnicity*.) Culture evolves for individuals and communities over time.

**Curriculum** refers to all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment, which contribute to children's learning and development.

**Curriculum framework** is a scaffold or support which helps adults to develop a curriculum for the children in their setting.

**Cystic fibrosis** is an inherited disease which primarily affects the lungs and the digestive system. It causes a thick sticky mucus to be produced, blocking the bronchial tubes and preventing the body's natural enzymes from digesting food.

**Development** is the process by which a person changes and grows over time, influenced by both experiences and physiological changes. It has two dimensions: normative which follows a prescribed pattern and dynamic which depends on time and experience.

**Disability** refers to a physical, sensory or psychological impairment that can create challenges for children in taking part in everyday activities. Specific levels of learning disability have been classified (mild general learning disability, moderate general learning disability, severe/profound general learning disability).

**Discrimination** includes policies, practices or behaviours that lead to unfair treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their identity or perceived identity. It can be intentional or unintentional, and may be direct or indirect.

**Dispositions** are enduring habits of mind and action. A disposition is the tendency to respond to situations in characteristic ways.

**Down syndrome** is a condition in which extra genetic material results in varying degrees of developmental delay, both psychological and physical. It is characterised by physical features and occasionally medical problems including heart problems.

**Dyspraxia** is a condition where children have difficulties with motor skills. They can appear clumsy and fall over often. They can also have difficulties with organisational and social skills.

**Early childhood** is the period that extends from birth to six years.

**Emergent literacy** is concerned with children developing a growing understanding of print and language as a foundation for reading and writing. Through play and hands-on experiences children see and interact with print as they build an awareness of its functions and conventions.

**Emergent speech** refers to all the sounds that children make to communicate from birth, including babbling, gurgling and words.

**Equality and Diversity** is important in early childhood. Diversity refers to individual and group differences in society. It is about welcoming and valuing difference as part of life. Promoting equality is about creating a fairer society where everyone can participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential. It includes the importance of recognising different individual needs and ensuring equity, and is not about treating all children the same.

**Ethnicity** includes children's identification with a group having some or all of the following shared characteristics: culture, food, language, forms of dress, religion, lifestyle, traditions, customs, and nationality. An ethnic group is a group that sees itself or is regarded by others as a distinct community by virtue of certain characteristics that help distinguish it from other groups.

**Family support workers** are employed by the Health Service Executive and offer home based practical and emotional support to families during difficult times with a view to maintaining children at home with their families where possible.



**Full and part-time daycare** means an early childhood setting which offers a structured day care service for children. **Part-time daycare** is for more than three and a half hours but less than five hours per day, while full-time is for more than five hours. **Nurseries/crèches/childcare settings** are early childhood settings offering full and part-time daycare service for babies, toddlers and young children. The words nursery, crèche and childcare setting are often used interchangeably.

**Gaelscoil** is a school where the Irish language is the medium of teaching and is also the language of communication between teachers, children, parents, and boards of management. Irish may or may not be the home language of the children.

**Gaeltacht** is an area in Ireland where the majority of inhabitants are active Irish speakers.

**Gaeltacht school** is a school in an area defined as a Gaeltacht. In these areas Irish is typically the language of the home and is the medium of teaching in the school.

**Hands-on experiences** provide opportunities for children to touch, taste, smell, hear, see and do as they explore social, physical and imaginary worlds.

**Health Service Executive** is a government agency which provides services that improve, promote and protect the health and welfare of everyone living in Ireland.

**Higher-order thinking skills** involve manipulating ideas and information. These skills include problem-solving, predicting, critiquing, analysing, questioning, and justifying. Lower order thinking skills include remembering and learning facts. (See also *Thinking skills* below.)

**Home School Community Liaison** co-ordinators are employed by schools to build effective partnerships between parents and teachers in the interests of children's learning and development. Selected primary schools, largely in urban areas and to a lesser degree in rural areas, with high concentrations of children experiencing educational disadvantage are invited to join the scheme.

**Hypothesise** is to wonder why and make an informed suggestion about why something is the way it is.

**Individual education plan** is a written document prepared for a child with a specific special educational need. The plan uses information gathered through assessment to identify short-term and medium-term learning targets for the child. The plan outlines the learning activities, resources and supports necessary to achieve those targets.

**Information Communication Technology** refers to all devices that communicate and manipulate information. This includes mobile phones, computers, scanners, and digital cameras.

**Invented spelling** refers to children's attempts to spell, using the sound of the word (phonetic spelling). It is the practice of encouraging and facilitating beginning writers to write and spell as they want. The act of writing is more important than the correct spelling. Eventually the child will learn and use the correct form of spelling.

**Junior and senior infants** refer to children in the first two years of primary school.

**Key worker** refers to a specific member of staff allocated to a child in the early childhood setting. He/she provides continuity between home and setting and has a 'special' responsibility for the child and the relationship with the child's family.

**Learning** is a complex, dynamic and interactive process whereby knowledge, skills and attitudes are created through experience. Formal learning consists of learning experiences which have been planned for the child. Informal learning occurs on a continuous basis as the child interacts with the environment.



**Literacy** is more than having the ability to read and write. It is about helping children to communicate with others and to make sense of the world. It includes oral and written language and other sign systems such as mathematics, art, sound, pictures, Braille, sign language and music. Literacy also acknowledges the changing nature of information communication technology and the many forms of representation relevant to children including screen-based (electronic games, computers, the internet, television).

**Meta-cognitive skills** are used by children to think about their own learning. This can involve children remembering, reflecting on their work and the usefulness of their current strategies for a particular task or activity. It includes the ability to evaluate and to think about thinking.

**Muscular dystrophy** is the name for a group of inherited disorders in which muscles progressively weaken.

**Naíonra** is a pre-school service for young children delivered through the medium of the Irish language, under the guidance of stiúrthóirí (pre-school practitioners).

**New communities** are groups of people of a common heritage that have immigrated to Ireland in recent years.

**Numeracy** involves developing an understanding of numbers and mathematical concepts. (See also *Literacy*.)

**Out-of-home settings** include all settings with the exception of the child's own home that children under six years of age attend such as childminding settings, nurseries/crèches, naíonraí, playgroups, parent and toddler groups, pre-schools, hospitals, after schools, and primary schools.

**Parents** refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the father and mother and/or guardians.

**Parents' Associations** (also known as *Parents' Councils*) are a way for parents to be involved in their children's primary schools. They have two broad tasks – to support the Principal or the Board of Management on matters relating to the school, and to adopt a programme of activities which will promote the involvement of parents in the operation of the school, in consultation with the principal.

**Pedagogy** refers to all the practitioner's actions or work in supporting children's learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all involved. In *Aistear*, the terms 'pedagogy' and 'practice' are used interchangeably.

**Peer mentoring** involves children helping and supporting each other to share knowledge and skills, to teach each other, to work in pairs as appropriate, and to play together when they want to. (See also *Buddy system*.)

**Picture exchange communication systems** is a form of augmentative and alternative communication which can be used for children with autistic spectrum disorders. It involves using pictures instead of words to communicate.

**Portfolio** is a way of compiling information about children's learning and development. It can take the form of a folder, a scrapbook, a shoe, cereal or pizza box, or something similar in which objects made/drawn by the children, photographs, stories, notes, records of care, checklists, and test scores (where relevant), are kept. This collection tells the story of each child's learning journey—his/her efforts, progress and achievement over time.

**Practitioner** is the term used for all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners may have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level. The term includes childminders and teachers in junior and senior infant classes in primary schools.

**Pre-reading or early reading skills** include those developed in young children which support the emergence of literacy. Such skills include knowing basic terminology and conventions in English and Irish books—author and illustrator, predicting the story from the pictures, going from left to right and from top to bottom, turning pages in sequence, using page numbers to locate a story and drawing attention to action words.

**Pre-school regulations** are formally known as the *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006*. These revised regulations were developed under *Part VII of the Child Care Act, 1991*. They require minimum standards for early childhood services and oblige providers covered by the Act to notify the Health Service Executive of their service and to be available for inspection. Regulation 5 emphasises facilitating each child's learning, development and well-being by providing appropriate learning opportunities, experiences, activities, and interactions.

**Primary school** is the setting children of school going age attend. While compulsory education begins in Ireland at age 6 years, approximately half of all 4-year-olds and 95 % of 5-year-olds start school before the compulsory school age.

**Primary School Curriculum** is the curriculum used in all primary schools in Ireland. It was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and launched in 1999. It is presented in 6 curriculum areas comprising 11 subjects. The NCCA reviews the curriculum on an on-going basis.

**Problem-solving** refers to children's ability to overcome obstacles that they meet while playing and undertaking activities. (See also *Thinking skills*.) A problem-solving approach in the context of social conflicts, involves asking children what happened or what the problem is, restating the problem, helping children to find a solution, providing subsequent support and ensuring all involved are supported, comforted and reassured.

**Pro-social behaviour** describes any action that benefits another individual. The behaviours include helping, comforting and sharing. It involves the ability to connect with others in a meaningful way.

**Racism** is a specific form of discrimination and exclusion. It involves a pattern of attitudes and behaviours grounded in the belief that one group of people, defined by race, skin colour, nationality, ethnicity or cultural identity, is inherently superior to others.

**Scaffolding** describes the process by which adults (and more capable peers) support and guide children's learning, enabling children to reach the next level of ability, beyond their own personal capability at that particular time.

**Scribe** is the role played by adults or older children when they model writing by recording on paper children's own words, and then reading back to the children what they said.

**Sensory impairment** refers to a problem with the visual and auditory senses.

**Sessional setting** is an early childhood service which offers a planned programme of activities to young children for less than three and a half hours per day. It includes playgroups, playschools, pre-schools and naíonraí (Irish medium pre-schools).

**Shared reading** is an interactive process in which an adult or an older child reads a story to one child or a group of children. All participants take turns in reading or telling the story.

**Siolta** is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland. It was developed in consultation with the early childhood sector by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2006. It is a quality assurance programme designed to support practitioners to improve their practice in all areas of service delivery in settings where children from birth to six years spend time out of their homes.

**Spatial awareness** involves children being aware of themselves and their bodies in space and knowing they can move themselves and objects. Spatial skills include fitting things together and taking them apart, lining things up, surrounding or containing things, building, filling and emptying, looking at things from different physical perspectives, being able to recognise distance in two dimensional images, such as photos or paintings. This helps children understand concepts like over/under, near/far, up/down, and in/out.

**Special educational need** refers to a limitation in the ability of a person to benefit from or participate in education due to a continuing sensory/physical/learning disability, mental health or other condition.

**Special education settings** are developed specifically to support children with special educational needs. The settings include special schools, special classes, special units, and resource rooms.

**Special needs assistants** (SNAs) provide one-to-one support and assistance to children with special educational needs in an educational context.

**Spina bifida** is a defect in which the spine is malformed before birth. It causes varying degrees of disability and in severe cases can result in paralysis.

**Stereotype** is an over-simplified generalisation or widely held assumption about a particular group, creating false expectations that individual members of the group will conform to certain (often negative) traits, behaviours or characteristics.

**Thinking skills** include questioning (babies having their curiosity interpreted by attentive adults, and when older asking questions); making connections (between people, places and things); reasoning (working things out and later explaining); evaluating (reviewing what they learned or have done); problem-solving (the learner recognising something can be changed and that they have the ability to do it), and creative thinking (seeing many different ways of doing, exploring, discovering, finding out about the world).

**Travellers** are an indigenous minority documented as being part of Irish society for centuries. Travellers have a long shared history, cultural values, language, customs, and traditions which make them a self-defined group, and one which is recognisable and distinct. Their culture and way of life, of which nomadism (moving from one place to another) is an important factor, distinguishes them from the settled population. Travellers may or may not live a nomadic lifestyle. Trailer is the name given to the mobile home that some Traveller families live in.

**Working theories** are the ideas children develop about how the world works. These theories develop in response to children's own questions: what? why? when? where? and who? These theories are developed by children who are given opportunities to solve problems, to explore and who are supported to access appropriate information. They learn to be creative and adventurous, and to make decisions about themselves as learners.



National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

The NCCA would like to thank the children who kindly consented to having their work samples and/or photographs used in this publication.

The NCCA was granted parental permission for the participation of their children in this process.