



Barnardos



Quality Early Years Care and Education

What to Look for in an Early Years Service

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Quality Early Years Care and Education: What to Look for in an Early Years Service

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Introduction


This booklet is written as a guide for parents and carers of young children to provide information that can support you in making decisions about the best care and education setting for your child outside the home.

In Ireland, young children are cared for and educated in a range of early years settings or services – at home; with relatives; with childminders; in sessional services (preschools, playschools, naóinraí); and in part-day and full-day care settings such as crèches and nurseries. All of these can be called early years care and education settings.

The booklet includes detailed information about why quality really matters in the early years and looks at how young children learn and what they need in order to be able to learn best. It examines the importance of communication and of early years services working in partnership with parents.

The booklet also provides information on the national quality supports that are available for all early years services to help improve their quality as well as details about the different types of early years inspections.

To help further with this most important decision-making on behalf of your young child, there is a suggested set of questions you may wish to ask a service provider to support you in finding out about the quality of their service.



We use the terms 'caregiver' and 'educator' throughout this booklet – these terms apply in all settings where your child is cared for and educated, including childminders.



What to Look for in an Early Years Service

The quality of any early years care and education setting is hugely important for babies and young children, and it is essential that your decisions about where your child is cared for and by whom are made with quality, not just practicality and cost, very much in mind.

Early Years Learning and Development

A child's education begins at birth. Research shows that young children do best when they are at home for their first year and in the following years they can benefit from good quality care and education in group settings.

Young children have particular needs for physical and emotional nurturing and care, and sensitive guidance, as well as time and space for social play, exploring and learning. This applies both at home and in early years care and education services.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to an education that lays a foundation for the rest of their lives, makes the most of their ability, and respects their family, cultural and other identities, and languages.

The United Nations Convention also recognises children's right to have a say in all matters affecting their lives and this includes very young children. This, too, applies both at home and other early years settings.

Under the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE), all eligible children in the Republic of Ireland are entitled to free early childhood care and education (known as 'free preschool') in the period before they start primary school.

Children can start in free preschool in the September, January or April after they reach their third birthday and remain in free preschool until they transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than 5½ years at the end of the preschool year). This means that the vast majority of young children in Ireland will attend at least one type of out-of-home care and education setting before they start primary school.

The key message from research carried out for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment is that early years learning environments that are well planned with a balance between care and education, and that have well-trained, confident and supported people working in them, lead to positive results for children.

The research identifies the following as most important for young children's learning and development:

- Quality interactions with other children, adults, things and places.
- Surroundings rich in language that encourage play, exploring, conversations between adults and children and children and children, and adults and children working together (collaborating).
- A balance between activities that adults decide on for the children and activities that are chosen by children themselves.
- Play and hands-on experiences, both indoors and outdoors.
- Adults who keep an eye on what children need, who understand, listen and talk to children.
- Connections and continuation in learning as children move from one setting to another.
- Supportive relationships between parents and early years settings.

Where parents choose childminding it is worth considering whether childminders are registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

Early Childhood Lasts a Lifetime

The experiences young children have in their early childhood – in the way people relate to them, in their surroundings, and their opportunities to play and learn – affect them much more than many people realise.

There is now conclusive international evidence that early childhood is a vital period in children's learning and development, in fact learning and development in the early years is the foundation for all learning and development.

Research in biology, neuroscience, genetics and psychology, and now the newer science called epigenetics, shows that the development of the actual structure of a young child's brain – even what they inherit through their genes – is affected by the experiences and opportunities they have in their earliest years.

Epigenetics shows how the genes a child is born with are switched on or off by the early environments (the relationships, places and what's going on around them) that they experience. This adds to the already huge amount of scientific evidence of the importance of the first few years of life.

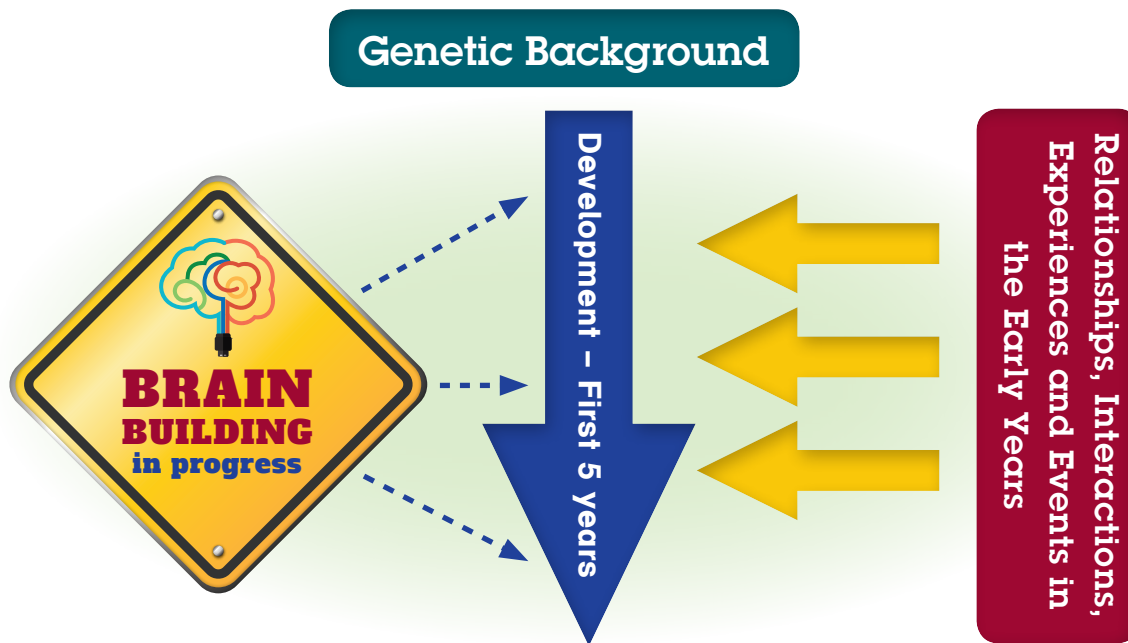
Research from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, as well as other research, tells us that if children do not get what they need from their relationships with adults and the conditions in their environments or, worse, if these are very stressful, their skill development can be seriously delayed or impaired. Healthy brain development depends on a sturdy foundation built by stable, responsive relationships with caring adults.

For example, when an infant or young child babbles, gestures or cries and an adult responds straight away with eye contact, kind words or a hug, connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that support the development of communication and social skills. When caregivers are sensitive and respond to a young child's signals and needs, they provide an environment rich in these important experiences.

On the other hand, if an adult's responses to a child are not reliable, not the right kind or there are none, the development of the child's brain may be disrupted, and later physical, mental and emotional health may be impaired. Responsive relationships are essential and if a young child does not have them, the research tells us there is a serious threat to the child's development and wellbeing.

The quality of the settings in which young children spend significant parts of their lives, outside of home as well as at home, is therefore extremely important to their wellbeing, learning and development.

Providing the support that children need to build skills at home and in the early years care and education settings they spend a lot of time in is one of society's most important responsibilities.



The foundation of lifelong ability and capacity to learn, adapt to change, cope with stress, be strong in unexpected circumstances, and the foundation of physical and mental health.

'Being' v 'Becoming'

Balancing the importance of the 'here and now' with 'school readiness'

It is important to remember that the early years of childhood are not only about preparing for school and the future, but also about the child's life in the present as a young child in the 'here and now'. The early years of life are just as important and as much a part of life as any later life stage.

For parents, recognising the importance of this life stage in its own right is important when considering the approach that an early years care and education service takes to the curriculum or programme of activities that they provide. Curriculum includes all of the experiences, activities and events – planned and unplanned – that happen in an early years setting.

When choosing an early years service for your child, consider whether the overall main focus of the service is on preparing children for school or on taking the children from where they are now in their learning and development, and addressing their needs and interests based on that.

The focus of the service can make a significant difference to the quality of care and education your child will receive. What the early years service sees as being most important for young children will have a big influence on the nature of the service they provide. This may be seen in their Vision or Mission Statement or in the marketing brochures and introductory information that services provide as well as the conversations you have with the manager or the owner when you first visit. (See page 19 for more on communication between educators and parents.)

Values, attitudes and beliefs about what is important for children are important influences on how both parents and service providers approach the care and education of young children.

What should young children be learning before they go to school?

There are many differing viewpoints, even among researchers and academics, about what and how young children should be learning before they start school. Many parents believe that their child needs to be able to count and to recognise letters and some words before they go to primary school. This belief can influence their choice of early years service for their child.

The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) president Rosena Jordan says, however, that children do not need to be able to write or recognise letters or count before they arrive at school. What children do need is confidence in their abilities and capabilities, and to be willing to take on new challenges.

Ms. Jordan says that children 'should be encouraged to develop good listening skills, as instruction and directions are part of life at school, and children need to learn how to be sociable, how to share and take turns, to have respect for others, to be aware of others' feelings and to have developed a good level of independence'.

Stages of development

Children have different 'developmental tasks' to achieve at different stages in their lives.

The first of these is the development of **trust and security**. This means knowing they are safe and can rely on those who care for them. This is done through safe, secure, reliable and responsive relationships with their main caregivers.



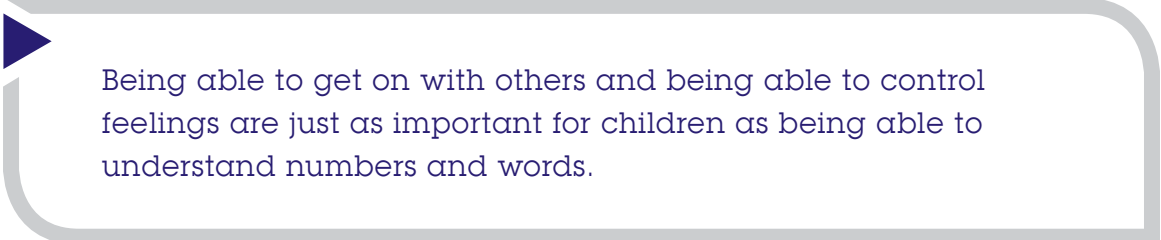
The next developmental task, which builds on this trust and security, is the development of **communication and social skills**. This means being able to get across their needs and wishes and get on well with others.



This is then followed by growing **independence skills** and, in turn, by a growing and developing feeling of competency ('I can do it').

Each stage of development builds on the stage that came before it. So each stage is every bit as important as the stage that comes next.

It is important that young children's development of trust, independence, self-reliance, concentration, communication and language skills, and a sense of 'I can do it' are supported in their early care and education settings – both at home and in early years services.



Being able to get on with others and being able to control feelings are just as important for children as being able to understand numbers and words.

By the time children are moving on from preschool to school they will need to have learned how to:

- Get on with others
- Speak clearly and be understood by strangers
- Express their needs (such as being able to ask to go to the toilet, or say when they are thirsty)
- Put on and take off their coat and shoes
- Manage a lunch box, open a carton or pour a drink
- Go to the toilet and wash their hands
- Wait in turn for a few minutes
- Sit quietly and listen to a story
- Understand basic concepts like small/big, heavy/light, under/over
- Sort and match objects
- Follow a basic sequence (first...then...)
- Hold a crayon or a pencil
- Share (but they won't be ready yet to share when they are still toddlers – this ability takes some time to learn – as toddlers they just need to play alongside others)

Children learn all of these skills – mainly through play – in good quality environments. That is, by playing alone, in pairs, in small groups and occasionally in larger groups in indoor and outdoor spaces that are created and planned by educators who know and understand what young children need and how young children learn.

How Young Children Learn

Until at least the age of nine, children learn best when their whole self is involved, in other words, their learning is holistic. This means that they learn many different things at the same time and what they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. We know from our discussion on the developmental stages that later learning builds on early learning. So young children’s learning grows layer on layer from birth, which means that their early learning makes a big difference to what they can learn later.

Children learn by doing things. They use all of their senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) to explore and work with the objects and materials around them, and they interact enthusiastically with others that they meet. Through these experiences, children develop the dispositions (like curiosity, persistence and independence), skills, knowledge, understanding, attitudes and values that will help them to grow as confident and able learners (Aistear – see information on Aistear on page 25).

Learning through different types of play

Researchers are finding more and more connections between children’s play and the learning and ability to relate to others that helps them to succeed in school.

For example, pretend play helps children learn to think imaginatively about things they can’t see and to look at things from someone else’s point of view. Pretend play is also directly connected to early literacy (the beginnings or foundations of reading skills), mathematical thinking and problem-solving.



Through pretend play, children learn to use their imaginations to represent objects, people and ideas. If children can use one thing to represent something else, like using a banana as a pretend phone, it is easier for them to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent amounts. Later on, they will be able to use their imaginations to visualise events or ideas.

Through pretend play, children also develop their skills in using language and in telling and understanding stories. For example, children act out scenes in the home corner or a child makes her furry toy 'talk', telling a story. Oral language skills and storytelling are the building blocks of reading and writing, as well as later subjects like social studies and science.

When children play with materials like blocks, sand and water, they develop skills in logic. They experiment with cause and effect, counting and sorting things and solving problems. For example, children experiment with blocks to figure out how to build a structure that stands up. By pouring sand or water into different sized containers they learn what 'heavy' and 'light' actually feel like, so they come to a better understanding of what the words really mean. Counting the seats in the pretend train they learn about how many of their friends can fit in the train and what the numbers mean. This practice in experimenting, observing, comparing and working with shapes, sizes and quantities forms the basis for understanding maths and science and for all higher-order thinking.

As children share materials and play together in dramatic play, they learn to cooperate, listen to others, stand up for their own ideas, handle frustration, and begin to understand how others might be feeling in different situations (empathy).

Through play, children develop their ability to form relationships with other children and with adults. When children choose their own activities, learning is enjoyable, based on their interests and it gives them a sense of competence (a feeling of 'I can do it').

What Children Need for Learning

In order to learn successfully, young children need:

- Surroundings in which there are plenty of interesting, stimulating and open-ended materials (materials or playthings that allow them to decide for themselves what to do with them and how to do it) where they can explore and try things out
- To be cared for and supported by adults who respect them as young learners and who are confident and knowledgeable about how young children learn and develop
- Adults who know, understand and appreciate the value of play that is chosen by the child as well as adult-led play and learning
- Adults who are aware of the impact of their own beliefs and values on children and who respect diversity (differences) among children and their families (Aistear – see page 25)
- Adults who know the value of assessing what each child already knows and is able to do so they can plan for the types of experiences the child might need next. 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. This is extremely important to ensure that a young child is given the best support to meet their learning and development needs.

Professional development, and mentoring and support for adults working with children are essential so it is important that time and resources are given to these. This means that a quality service will need to have allocated times for staff meetings. When they have these meetings and staff attend training events, it is usually a good indicator of the service's quality.

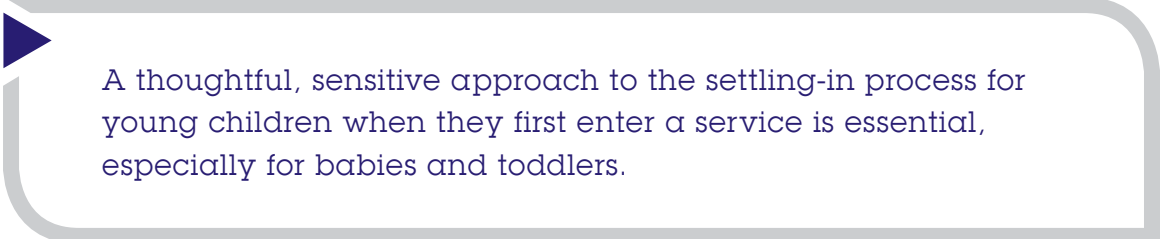
Social, Emotional and Behavioural Development in the Early Years

A young child's first attachment relationships develop over their first few years and form the basis for the development of future attachments and relationships. Attachments are the emotional connections that infants develop with their parents and other key caregivers.

These relationships are absolutely crucial for children's wellbeing and for their emotional and social development. Sensitive caregiving, understanding a child's emotional needs, and recognising a child's own thoughts and feelings are the most important features of the quality of caregiving for the promotion of healthy attachments.

Care within the family is hugely important for children's development, but so too is care that is provided by others. We know from extensive research that spending many hours being cared for by carers other than their parents affects children's development. It is known that when the quality of non-parental care is high, children do well, and when it is poor, they do not. Long hours and many years growing up in group care settings that are of poor quality poses clear risks for children's wellbeing and development.

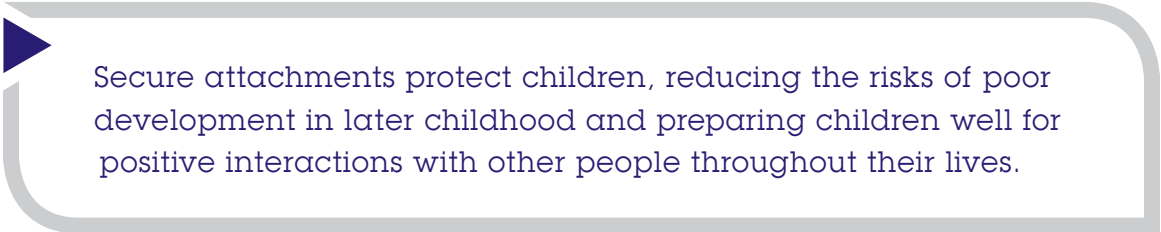
It is also important for carers to relate genuinely, warmly and sensitively with children in activities such as eating, care and comfort routines, and settling for sleep. High-quality care is care that provides attention, responds to needs, and is stimulating and affectionate.



A thoughtful, sensitive approach to the settling-in process for young children when they first enter a service is essential, especially for babies and toddlers.

A sensitive response is the caregiver's ability to understand and respond appropriately and quickly to the child's attempts to communicate. Sensitive responsiveness is the most important part of promoting secure attachments. The ability of caregivers to think about a child's thoughts and feelings, as well as their needs and rights, when interacting with them is hugely important.

Infants who are not well attached are at greater risk of problems in emotional development. Children with very poor attachment experiences are at greatest risk of failure to thrive in their early years as well as behaviour problems, low self-esteem and later difficulties in school.



Secure attachments protect children, reducing the risks of poor development in later childhood and preparing children well for positive interactions with other people throughout their lives.

The skills of sharing, turn-taking or comforting someone who is upset develop with age and are influenced by how adults nurture and support children. Young children are gradually introduced to these skills, first by helping them to 'wait a minute' (with adult support) then gradually increasing waiting times. The aim is that by the age of five children will be able to take turns and share confidently.

There is a direct link between children's play and their social development. All levels of social participation should be allowed for in play, from not playing, to playing alone, to watching other children playing, to playing alongside others, to sharing things with other children and then (usually from 30 months onwards) to playing as part of a group.

The Key Person System

The creation and development of positive relationships and attachments with carers outside of home is best achieved when children have a main caregiver. In group settings, this caregiver is usually called a Key Person or a Key Worker.

Continuity and consistency of care in an early years setting is critical in helping young children adjust to the separation from their parents and to their wellbeing and development in their crèche or preschool. Having a Key Person is one of the best ways to make sure that this happens in a setting where there are lots of children.

➔ For more information, download Barnardos free booklet *The Key Person Approach* from <http://shop.barnardos.ie/>

Supporting attachments

Attachment occurs naturally and caregivers can promote trusting and secure relationships with young children when they:

- Respond to the child's attempts to communicate (smiling, cooing, calling, asking questions, pulling at their sleeve...)
- Take an interest and join in their play
- Allow and enjoy their explorations
- Communicate warmly
- Acknowledge their delight and upset
- Cuddle, hold, have them sit on their lap (when it is clear that this is what the child wants)
- Help them to do things, talk and read with them and give them their full attention

It is particularly important that those who care for babies and infants learn to read their cues and understand their early language, how and when they like to be held, what is too much or too little attention, what they like to play with, what kinds of situations make them happy or unhappy, comfortable or uncomfortable, calm and soothed or distressed. Having a Key Person and communicating often with parents are important ways of bringing this about.

It is essential that caregivers/educators and parents work together to ensure that the early years service responds to any difficulties around a child's behaviour in a way that is in the best interests of the child. The approach must be as consistent as possible with the way in which parents approach supporting the development of their young child's social, emotional and behaviour skills at home.


➔ For more information, download Barnardos free booklet *Your Young Child's Behaviour* from <http://shop.barnardos.ie/>

Early years educators also need appropriate working conditions to support them in providing the type of care that promotes positive attachments. Knowing what kinds of supports are provided by an early years service for its staff members can be one indication for parents of whether children are likely to receive the kind of care that they will need to thrive socially and emotionally. It is difficult for caregivers who are poorly supported, poorly paid and poorly motivated, and who may have too many children to care for, to provide quality, supportive care for young children.

Communication and Language Development in the Early Years

Rich communication between caregivers and young children promotes cognitive (thinking) and language development as well as being directly connected to social and emotional development.

Good caregivers recognise that crying is part of a baby's communication and respond quickly to those cries, sending messages to the baby that they are being listened to. Many people still believe that a baby will be 'spoiled' if they are picked up too much. In fact, the more love, touch and affection shown to a baby or young child, the more settled and independent they will become. By receiving comfort they are learning that the world is safe and there is someone to look after them. When they are responded to quickly and considerately, they know that they are important and will keep on communicating.



When an infant or young child babbles, gestures or cries and an adult responds appropriately with eye contact, words or a hug, actual connections are built and strengthened in the child's brain that support the development of communication and social skills.

Good early years educators are patient listeners who allow a child time to speak without jumping in before the child is finished or finishing their sentences. They support children to express their thoughts and feelings by helping them to find the words or other ways to communicate, encouraging children to communicate in any way they can, not just through words. For example, they use pictures, toys or symbols to help children make choices or to understand the routine of the day.

Good educators always respond when a child says something. This encourages children to feel safe in communicating their needs and wants, and to develop relationships with their educators and the other children.

In a quality setting, children are encouraged to speak and are never ignored. Educators do not frown or sigh when a child tries to communicate. Children can play in a space that is inclusive, where they can see and feel that all their contributions are valued. All children's home languages and traditions are acknowledged and respected and the learning environment reflects (communicates) and shows that diversity (difference) is valued and respected. This includes the toys, pictures, books and all other materials provided for children.

Children's early attempts at language are encouraged and supported, rather than corrected, by educators who talk with and listen to children, who use new words in meaningful ways, read and tell lots of stories, and involve children in the story telling. Good educators acknowledge children's efforts at new words by simply repeating correctly and enthusiastically what the child is trying to say and sometimes adding some new words too.

Communication between Educators and Parents

Good two-way communication with parents about their child's needs, interests, likes, dislikes, their care at home and significant events in their lives is an essential part of a quality service.

Informal and formal communication between you and your child's educators, for the purpose of sharing knowledge and information in the best interests of your child, needs to take place regularly. You need to feel that you can speak to your child's Key Person at any time and more formal meetings to discuss your child's care and development should be held at a time that is convenient for both you and the educators.

➔ For more information download Barnardos free booklet *Partners in Learning* from <http://shop.barnardos.ie/>

A family notice board that is kept up to date and tidy is important, to give notice of daily schedules, activities, meetings, events, policy developments and other information that may be of benefit or relevant to you. Where any change to the service is proposed, you should be notified in advance so that you have time to give your opinions or say if you have any concerns.

You are entitled to be informed of the service's policies and procedures and all other relevant information. Good educators will generally check with parents that they have understood the policies and provide any help needed.

A summary of the service's key policies will usually be included in a Parents' Handbook. In really good quality services, parents are consulted when policies are being reviewed and receive written notification of any updates. A copy of all policies should be available to parents during all hours of operation.

Parents in partnership with the early years service


The best results for children occur when educators and families work together. The needs and interests of the child must be at the centre of any service and one of the hallmarks of a quality early years service is that they work in partnership with parents to focus on these.

Parents and other family members are the most knowledgeable about their own background, culture and language. You can help early years educators to get to know your child's personality, temperament and their particular abilities and needs, for example, their fears, how they are best comforted, their favourite toys, food or songs.

Communication with you should not just be about any problems or issues that may be arising for your child, but should include what your child is interested in and learning. It is, of course, essential that any problems for children are dealt with in partnership with their parents.

Early years educators too have their own particular skills and knowledge that are different from parenting skills, such as knowing how to work with groups, how to organise learning materials and how to create a good group learning environment based on in-depth knowledge of child development. Educators should be happy to share their knowledge with you.

It is essential to have a well thought-out settling-in process to create the foundation for a strong relationship between you and those with whom you entrust the care and education of your child. It is really good when service providers discuss your expectations and any potential issues at the beginning of this relationship, as this can be reassuring. In a high quality service, parents are viewed as important members of the team and their knowledge of their own child is valued and appreciated.



Really good quality services encourage parents to become actively involved in the decision-making process within the service and make sure they include fathers as well as mothers.

Parents must be assured that if they ever have a comment to make or need to make a complaint it will be welcomed and responded to appropriately. Information about the comments and complaints policy and the procedure for dealing with complaints should be given to you at registration/enrolment. A high quality service will deal with complaints respectfully, seriously and sensitively, and aim to resolve them as quickly as possible.

In summary, when it comes to partnership with parents, a good quality service:

- Communicates basic information to parents well and creates opportunities to discuss matters relating to their own children
- Offers parents easy ways to make contact, to visit and to raise any concerns
- Encourages ways in which parents can support their children's learning
- Provides a sense of identity and belonging through being open and welcoming and encouraging parents to become involved in the life of the service

Planning for Quality Practice

Regular meetings between the educators within the setting are essential to the provision of a quality service to children and families. In meetings, educators can discuss the many important issues that relate to planning how best to meet the children's care, learning and development needs, both as individuals and as a group.

For example educators need to discuss:

- What activities to prepare for
- What resources and materials are needed
- Who will take responsibility for what
- When, where and how activities will be planned
- How to share relevant information with and from parents

Through meetings, educators can also plan many other aspects of good quality practice, such as good teamwork and consistency for the children.



National Quality Supports for Early Years Services

There are a number of supports in place in Ireland for early years service providers and early years educators. You may find it useful to be aware of these as they can help in identifying quality in the care and education provided as well as the questions you can ask.

Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education. It is designed to support the improvement of quality across all areas of practice in early childhood care and education settings for children aged birth to six years. Síolta covers everything from the way a service is managed and operated, to the ways that parents are involved, and the ways in which children's development and education are provided for.

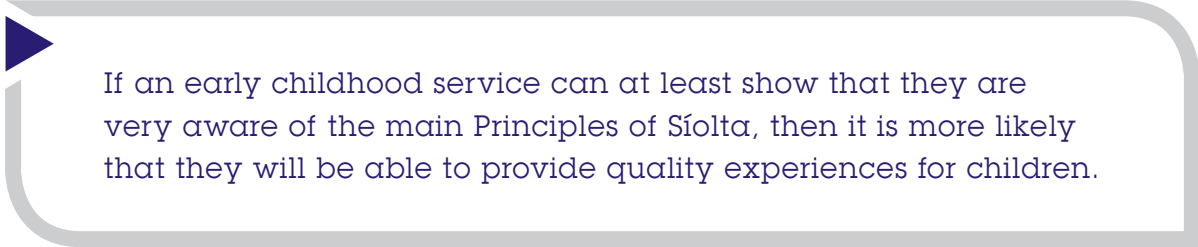
The name Síolta is the Irish word for seeds, it was chosen to reflect the potential of childhood.

The Síolta Framework

The Síolta Framework consists of 12 Principles, which guide quality practice, and 16 national quality Standards, which translate what the Principles say about quality into practice. The Standards cover every area of practice in an early years setting. Each of the 16 Standards is broken down into a number of Components or quality indicators (75 in total) with Signposts for Reflection for each of these.

There are Síolta manuals for sessional settings (preschools), full-day and part-time settings (crèches and nurseries), childminders and infant classes in primary schools.

➔ Information about Síolta and the manuals described are available at www.siolta.ie



If an early childhood service can at least show that they are very aware of the main Principles of Síolta, then it is more likely that they will be able to provide quality experiences for children.

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP)

The Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, known as the Síolta QAP, is a formal step-by-step programme in which service providers use the Síolta Framework to develop the quality of their services. It is a programme that services can enter into voluntarily. They are supported to carry out the programme by a Síolta Mentor (trained by the Early Years Education Policy Unit at the Department of Education and Skills in collaboration with the Department for Children and Youth Affairs) who guides them through it. Barnardos and other agencies such as Early Childhood Ireland and the National Childhood Network have a number of Síolta Mentors who support services through the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme.

At the end of this programme – usually at least 12 to 18 months of work – services can submit a completed Síolta Portfolio to the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills for formal Validation.

The Síolta Portfolio contains a detailed description of all areas of practice in a setting under each of the 16 quality Standards. This detailed description of practice provided by the service has to be supported by evidence of the quality of their practice, which includes things like documents, certificates, photos and video clips. Parents are asked to give consent to include any items that relate to their child.

Some examples of general questions you can ask a service provider about Síolta might be:

- Do you have the Síolta materials available?
- Can you tell me how you meet the Standards for quality?
- Has the service been Síolta Validated?

The Síolta Framework can also be used by parents to ask more specific questions about what happens within the setting in everyday practice. For example, Standard 3 on Parents and Families gives clear statements about what is good practice in this area. If you ask questions based on these statements it may give more information with which to assess the level of quality in the service, for example: What is your policy on communicating with parents?

The Síolta QAP is a very comprehensive quality assurance programme and achieving Síolta Validation means that a service has put huge effort into providing the best quality service that they can for children and families.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear is the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. The Aistear Framework describes the types of learning that are important for babies, toddlers and young children. It is used as a guide in planning learning experiences in preschools, playgroups, naóinraí, crèches, nurseries and childminding services. Aistear is also used in infant classes in primary schools and can be used at home by parents.

The name Aistear, which means journey in Irish, was chosen because early childhood is the beginning of children's lifelong learning journey.

Aistear is based on 12 Principles of early learning and development, which cover:

- Children and their lives in early childhood
- Their connections with others
- How they learn and develop

Aistear uses four Themes to describe what children learn during their early childhood.


The Themes are:

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

Each Theme has sample learning opportunities (ideas for activities). Together, the Themes offer a way to plan for and support young children's learning and development so that they benefit from positive and enjoyable experiences in their early childhood years.

Aistear also has guidelines for good practice that look at:

- Partnerships between parents and educators
- Interactions
- Play
- Assessment

 For more information on Aistear go to www.ncca.biz/Aistear/

Better Start

Better Start was set up by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, with the Early Years Education Policy Unit of the Department of Education and Skills and Pobal, to bring together a single approach to supporting quality across all early childhood care and education services in Ireland.

Quality Development Service

Better Start runs a Quality Development Service, which provides on-site mentoring and coaching to early childhood care and education services, working alongside early years providers and educators to put Síolta and Aistear into practice. This support is provided on request from the early years service.

➔ More information for parents on Better Start is available at www.pobal.ie/BetterStart

AIM – the Access and Inclusion Model

In order to support children with a disability to attend free preschool with all other children, a programme of supports called the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has been developed to provide expert advice, mentoring and support to early years services from specialists in early years care and education for children with disabilities.

AIM is designed to help meet the needs of each individual child in their preschool setting. It offers tailored, practical supports based on need and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability.

When parents have identified a preschool for their child, the service provider will consult with them to consider what supports may be needed. Where a child needs additional support, the service provider can apply, in partnership with the child's parents, for supports under AIM. Applications can only be made with parents' full consent. Both parents and providers are informed of the decision about supports.

➔ More information on AIM is available from your local City or County Childcare Committee or online at www.preschoolaccess.ie



Inspections of Early Years Services

There are two different types of inspections in place for early years services. The purpose of these is to ensure that services are of good quality across various areas. Inspection reports are accessible online and this may help you when choosing a service for your child.

Early Years Education Focused Inspections – Department of Education and Skills

The Department of Education and Skills carries out Education Inspections in early years services that are in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme (free preschool). These inspections focus on the quality of the early educational experiences services provide for children. The framework used by the education inspectors links with both Síolta and Aistear.

The Early Years Education Focused Inspections provide an evaluation as well as information, advice and support for service providers regarding the quality of education provided in an early years service.

When education inspectors visit a service they look at the learning activities that take place and the type of surroundings in which the children are learning. They also look at the interactions between educators and children, and the support educators give to the children to interact with one another. Inspectors also review and discuss records and documents with the service provider and the educators, to evaluate management and leadership for learning in the service.

At the end of an inspection, a written report is sent to the preschool outlining the inspection findings and providing advice on how educational provision in the setting can be developed or improved.

➔ Education inspection reports are published on the Department of Education and Skills website www.education.ie



Early Years Inspections – Tusla

All early years services are required to register with Tusla: The Child and Family Agency. The **minimum** requirements under which an early years service must operate are set out in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. These Regulations apply to all services for children under the age of six who are not attending primary school.

Tusla is responsible for inspecting all early years services – preschools, playgroups, day nurseries, crèches, day-care and similar services – that cater for children aged from birth to six years, to ensure that they comply with the Early Years Regulations. They do this through the National Early Years Inspectorate, which inspects early years services' under the following headings:

- Quality of service
- Management and staffing
- Safety
- Quality of care
- Premises
- Equipment

For more detailed information from Tusla on what parents should expect in early years services please see Appendix 1 on page 38.

➔ The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 are available online at www.dcy.gov.ie

➔ Tusla inspection reports are available at www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services



Choosing a Quality Service

As outlined earlier, there are a number of features that you should consider when choosing an early years setting for your child. The following will give you some idea of what to look out for as indicators of good quality and the questions you can ask.

Features to Consider

Introduction to the service and the early years educators

The amount and type of information shared with parents and children as well as the type of information the service asks for from parents (about the child's background, interests, needs, abilities, likes, dislikes, special relationships) will tell a lot about the service quality.

How the service is managed

The quality of management impacts directly on children's and parents' experiences in and with the service.

Children's rights

Children have the same rights in all settings in which they spend significant parts of their lives – to be able to have a say and make choices, to be treated with respect, to have their needs met, to be nurtured, educated and well cared for and, importantly, to play.

Environment – indoors and outdoors

The learning environment (indoors and outdoors) influences what and how children learn. Lots of natural materials and equipment that encourage children to play and to explore, and to use freely in their own way – in particular access to sand, water and blocks – are good indicators of quality.

Service policies and procedures

It is important to ask to see the service's policies and procedures. These are the 'rules' that guide practice in the service. Specific policies are required under the 2016 Early Years Regulations (see Appendix 1 for this list of policies). Having good policies that include more than just the basic Tusla inspection requirements is a good indicator of quality. It is essential that policies are implemented and are not just on paper.

Health, nutrition and welfare

Ask to see the service's most recent Tusla inspection report or view it online to ensure that the service meets the minimum legal requirements regarding health, nutrition and welfare.

Inclusion and individual needs

A good quality service will have an Inclusion Policy and will have signed up to the national Inclusion Charter. They will be respectful of differences of all kinds including culture, family background, religious beliefs, ability and disability.

Settling in

The procedure for supporting children in the settling-in period is particularly important and there should be clear information given about it, well before the child starts at the service.

Relationships

Relationships are hugely important to children's development and wellbeing, and so the quality of relationships in an early years setting must be one of the most important considerations.

Curriculum/programme of activities

Information on the curriculum should be clearly described in the Parents' Handbook and also talked through with parents at the introductory meeting. Not all curricula/programmes are the same but it is essential that the curriculum for the provision of quality early childhood care and education focuses on:

- The best interests of the children
- Children's needs
- An understanding of the ways in which young children learn and develop
- The importance of relationships and interactions
- The need for all children to be and to feel included

It is particularly important to consider how children learn and that learning is holistic – this means children learn many different things at the same time and what they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. Trust, motivation, interest, enjoyment, and social and emotional development are as important as purely physical skills and thinking skills.

- Ask about the service's knowledge and use of Aistear.
- Ask to see the service's most recent Education Inspection Report or view it online.

Play and learning – indoors and outdoors

The amount of time given to play and the type of activities through which young children learn best – hands-on, playful, meaningful activities (activities that mean something to children), that encourage creativity, exploration and curiosity – are big indicators of quality.

Young children also need lots of movement for the development of their thinking skills as well as their physical development, rather than too much sitting at tables.

Communication with and in the service

Good, clear, open communication is very important at all times and at all levels.

Service organisation and planning

Efficient organisation and planning impact directly on the learning experiences children will have.

Community involvement

The extent to which the service is part of, and involved in, the local community is important for families and for children's growing sense of their identity and belonging.

Preparing for the move to school

Preparing for the move to school happens over time, and should happen in collaboration with schools. While not the only consideration, it is an important part of planning for children.

Early Years Inspections

Both Tusla and Department of Education Inspections Reports are available to view online. A service should be happy to share their most recent reports with parents.

Suggested Questions to Ask In Order To Help Identify a Quality Early Years Service

As well as asking the questions about Síolta outlined on page 24, there are other questions you may wish to ask early years educators, which include the following:

- In what ways are parents involved in children's settling in?
- How do you match the routines of the service to my child's routines?
- How do you ensure that each child is responded to quickly if they need attention, especially if they are crying?
- What kinds of choices are children able to make?
- Are there choices of food available and what happens if my child doesn't feel like eating something or has an allergy to some food?
- How much time is given to play and exploration, and how often can the children play outdoors?
- How often does formal planning for play and learning experiences happen?
- How does the environment promote the safety of all children and adults?
- What is your policy and procedures on illness and infectious diseases?
- What procedures are in place for medical emergencies?
- What procedures are in place to ensure that children are protected from any form of abuse?
- In what ways does the service ensure that children's need for rest, quiet time and privacy is respected?
- What does your policy say about interactions between children and adults?
- How does the way adults relate to one another and to children show and demonstrate respect, support and partnership for the child?
- How is confidentiality dealt with in record keeping, storing and sharing of information?
- Do all staff members have access to my child's file? Does anyone else? If so, for what purpose?

- Does each learning area and each activity in the setting have plenty of interesting equipment and materials for the children that encourage exploration and curiosity?
- In what ways does the setting promote a strong sense of identity and belonging for everyone?
- What approach is taken to helping children in getting on well with each other and resolving conflicts?
- What kinds of arrangements are there for regular communication between educators and parents?
- How do you ensure that the caregivers/educators are supported in their jobs?
- In what way does the service make sure it stays up to date on knowledge about young children's learning and development?
- Are there resources in the community that the service connects with or uses?

These questions are based on the indicators of quality which can be found in each Siolta manual. The manuals contain many more questions.

Appendix 1

According to the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate, parents should at least expect the following from a service:

Quality of Service

- The service is registered with the Child and Family Agency.
- The last inspection report is available.
- An information booklet/leaflet is available detailing the type of service provided.
- The service should feel welcoming to parents and their child.
- The environment is caring, safe and friendly.

Management and Staffing

- There is a named person in charge at all times.
- All staff have been vetted e.g. Garda Vetting, references, Police Vetting (if they have lived abroad).
- Staff have an appropriate level of experience, training and qualifications.
- An adequate number of adults are available to supervise and care for the children.
- Children are supervised at all times.
- There are enough adults to provide individual attention to a child if they need it.
- Staff should have a good understanding about child development and working with children.
- Staff are observed to play with the children.
- Staff turnover rates are low.

Safety

- The service must have a policy on Child Protection.
- The staff have attended training on Child Protection.
- There is a policy on collecting children from the service.
- There are appropriate fire safety and child safety measures in place.

■ Policies and Procedures should be available and implemented in the service. These are some of the Policies and Procedures you would expect to find in the service:

- Administration of Medications
- Safe Conduct of Outings
- Accidents/Incidents
- Complaints
- Encouraging and Promoting Positive Behaviour
- Illness
- Infectious Diseases in the Service
- Safe Sleep for Children
- Health & Safety
- Nappy Changing/Toileting

Under the Early Years Regulations 2016 the following policies are also required:

- Inclusion
- Healthy Eating
- Outdoor Play
- Staff Absences
- The Use of the Internet and Photographic and Recording Devices
- Recruitment
- Risk Management
- Settling-in
- Staff Training
- Supervision

Quality of Care

- Good interaction between staff and children.
- The service can cater for a child with special or additional needs.
- The children are properly supervised but still allowed to experience activities that are challenging and exciting.
- There are written programmes outlining the children's activities.
- The Programme of Care and Education should be flexible to meet the varying needs of the children.
- A system is in place to discuss with you how to best deal with your child should they become ill, distressed or angry.
- It is clear how challenging behaviour is managed.
- Children are observed interacting well with other children.
- A system is in place to replace staff who are ill or on holidays.

- There is a respectful approach towards diversity, where each child's individuality and sense of identity is valued.
- Food is suitable, nutritious and a varied menu is available where the service provides food.
- Special dietary needs can be catered for.
- The arrangements in place for feeding a child are to parents' satisfaction.
- Safe sleeping/resting arrangements are in place for children.
- Staff are familiar with the guidelines around safe sleep and prevention of sudden infant death.
- Sibling interaction is facilitated and managed in the service. Siblings/friends are facilitated to spend time together.

Premises

- The premises is well maintained, clean and hygienic, bright and well ventilated.
- The premises must be safe and secure. A system is in place to prevent unauthorised access to the service and to prohibit a child leaving the premises unsupervised.
- There must be adequate space to ensure comfort in rest and play.
- A quiet area is available if a child wants to relax.
- There is space for children to play inside and outside.
- The outdoor play area is secure and hazard free.
- All play areas are bright and cheerful.
- Adequate facilities are provided for the safe and hygienic preparation and storage of food.
- The kitchen facilities are clean and hygienic with suitable wash-up, hand-washing and sterilising facilities.
- The preschool should not be too hot or too cold.

Equipment

- The equipment and furniture must be safe, appropriate and well maintained and clean.
- Sufficient suitable toys, play materials and resources are available to provide stimulating activities and play opportunities for the children.
- The equipment, toys, materials available must be appropriate for the ages of the children attending and their developmental needs.
- Activities and resources should promote cultural awareness and equal opportunities.

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