

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Principles and themes



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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





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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.

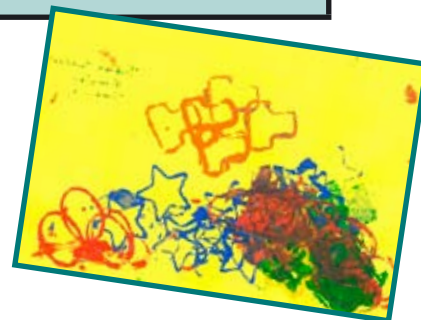
- Remember that I too am a citizen. Help me to learn about my rights and responsibilities. Model fairness, justice and respect when you interact with me and others.
- Create an environment for me in which I feel confident and comfortable, and have opportunities to share my experiences, stories, ideas, 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.





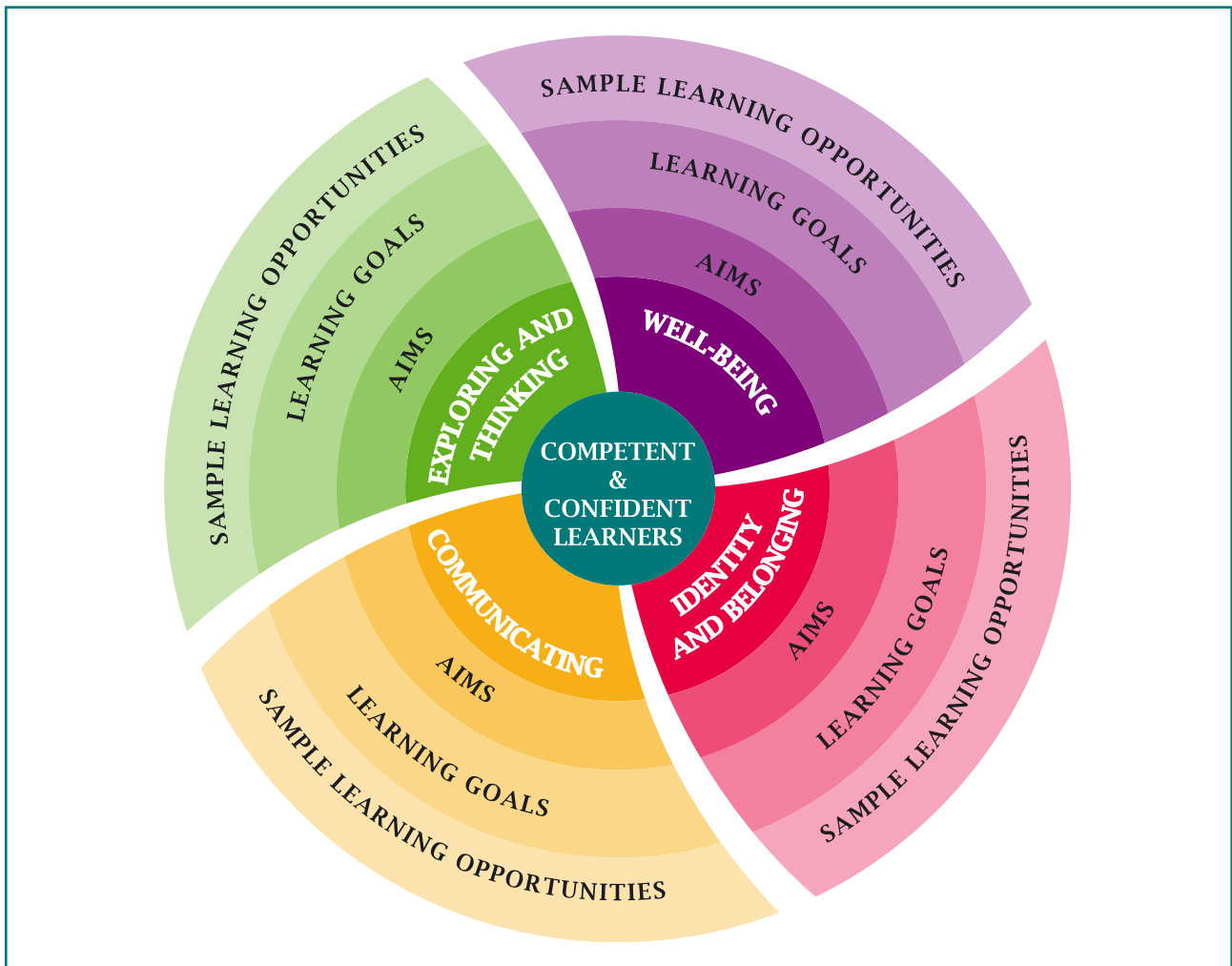
Aistear's themes

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.