Introduction

Introduction

This introduction to the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* explains the purpose of, and audience for the Guide and outlines the meaning of the word 'curriculum' as used in *Aistear*, in *Síolta* and in the Guide. It also gives an overview of the structure of the Practice Guide and describes the aspects of *Aistear* and *Síolta* that it focuses on.

Purpose and audience

The purpose of the Practice Guide is to support practitioners in using *Aistear*: *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009a) and *Síolta*, *The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006) **together** to develop the quality of their curriculum and in doing so, to better support children's learning and development. The Practice Guide is based on the understanding that settings are compliant with, or are working to become compliant with *The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children (DHC), 2006).

The Practice Guide includes a range of resources to help practitioners to critically reflect on their curriculum and to identify what works well. Additionally, the resources can help practitioners to identify priorities for development and to plan actions for positive change. In this way, the Practice Guide can be used for on-going review, development and improvement by individual practitioners, practitioners working together and by practitioners supported by a mentor. Early Childhood Specialists working with *Better Start*, the National Early Years Quality Development Service will use the Practice Guide as they work with settings. The Practice Guide can also be used by other professionals working in a support or mentoring role, for example, by County and City Childcare Committees and by National Voluntary Childcare Organisations, and those working in an evaluation role. While the Practice Guide has been developed primarily for practitioners/stiúrthóirí working in part- and full-time daycare and sessional settings including naíonraí[1] and Early Start Units in primary schools, others such as childminders, parents, early childhood students, trainers and lecturers might also find some of the materials useful.

[1] A 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) (*Aistear, Principles and themes*, 2009a, p.56).

Síolta and *Aistear*

In Ireland there are two early childhood frameworks—*Síolta* and *Aistear*. While similar in many ways as outlined in Table 1 taken from an audit of the two frameworks (2009b, p.5), *Síolta* is concerned with all aspects of quality in early childhood whilst *Aistear* focuses specifically on curriculum.

The Practice Guide draws the two frameworks together in a practical way and offers suggestions, ideas and examples of how they can be used to develop a curriculum that helps all children to enjoy and progress in their early learning and development. The following sections look at *Síolta* and *Aistear* in more detail.
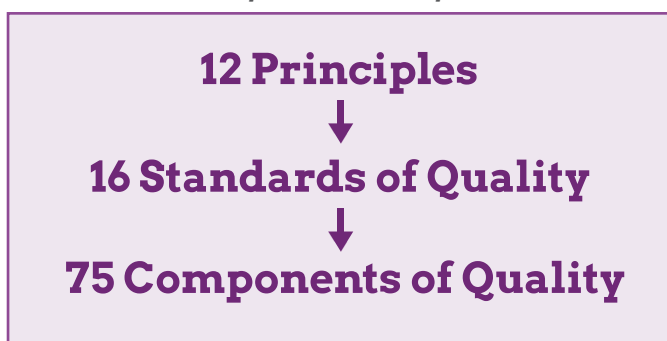
Table 1 : Comparison of Síolta and Aistear: Purpose, audience and children

Framework	Purpose	Age	Early Childhood Settings	Audience
Síolta	To improve the overall quality of early childhood settings for children and families.	Birth – 6 years	All early childhood settings including infant classes in primary school.	Practitioners who care for and educate children from birth to six years. Other professionals who work with children and their families.
Aistear	To provide challenging and enjoyable experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with others.	Birth – 6 years	All early childhood settings including children's own homes and infant classes in primary school.	All adults who care for and educate children from birth to six years – parents and practitioners. Other professionals who work with children and their families.

Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

Síolta is the national quality framework for early childhood education. It encompasses all aspects of quality in early childhood settings for children from birth to six years. The framework includes principles, standards and components as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Overview of the contents of Síolta

12 Principles
↓
16 Standards of Quality
↓
75 Components of Quality

The Practice Guide focuses **only on the standards and components in *Síolta* that relate to curriculum**. Standard 7: Curriculum states that *encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme*. Nine other *Síolta* standards are particularly relevant to curriculum development work. These are:

- Standard 1: Rights of the Child
- Standard 2: Environments
- Standard 3: Parents and Families
- Standard 5: Interactions
- Standard 6: Play
- Standard 11: Professional Practice
- Standard 13: Transitions
- Standard 14: Identity and Belonging
- Standard 16: Community Involvement.

Relevant components from other *Síolta* standards relating to curriculum are also reflected in the Practice Guide. To avoid duplication and in light of feedback on repetition gathered through the *Síolta* Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), some components have been grouped with similar-type components in one standard for the purposes of the Practice Guide. Table 3 provides more detail on these. The table uses bracketed numbers to refer to individual components in *Síolta*. The first part of each number refers to the relevant standard and the second part refers to the actual component. For example, (1.2) means Standard 1, Component 2.

Table 3 : Síolta standards and components covered in the Practice Guide

Standard	Components
1: Rights of the Child	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. All children will • be given choices, have choices respected (1.1). • be enabled to initiate activity, be appropriately independent (1.2) and through their active participation and consultation be considered a partner by the adult (1.3) (4.1).
2: Environments	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • The indoor and outdoor environments are well-laid out, well planned (2.1) and comfortable and well-maintained (2.3) to provide a pleasant environment for children and adults. • The indoor and outdoor environments are adaptable and accessible (2.2) (6.2) with an appropriate amount of materials, resources and equipment (2.7) (6.4). • The indoor and outdoor environments provide a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative, culturally appropriate and enriching experiences for all children (2.5 and 2.6). • Components related to safety (2.4) and food management (2.8) are outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
3: Parents and Families	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • There are formal and informal opportunities for communication, consultation (4.1) and mutual information sharing about children (3.1) (12.2) with a variety of opportunities for parents to be involved (3.2). • Staff are sensitive and supportive in their interactions with parents (3.3) (11.5). • Component 3.4 related to policies and procedures is outside the remit of the Practice Guide. • Component 16.1 related to the availability of information on local, regional and national resources, is covered in relation to supporting children's learning and development.
4: Consultation	One component is covered in the Practice Guide. • Consultation with children (4.1) is included in Standard 1, consultation with parents (4.1) in Standard 3, consultation with staff (4.1) in Standard 11. • Other consultation activity to which this standard refers is related to management and goes beyond the remit of the Practice Guide.

Standard	Components
5: Interactions	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • Children are enabled to interact and play (6.6) with peers and other ages in pairs, small groups and to a lesser degree in large groups (5.1) and are supported to interact positively (5.2). • Adults use all aspects of the daily routine, including mealtimes (9.4) to interact sensitively with children (5.3) and the interactive style is balanced and focused on process, following children's leads and promoting language (5.4). • All interactions support the development of close nurturing relationships (9.6) through the effective use of a Key Person Approach. • Adults model good, respectful interactions in their interactions with each other (5.5). • Component 5.6 related to policies and procedures is outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
6: Play	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • Providing adequate time for play is included as part of the daily routine (6.1). Opportunities to achieve mastery and success through play (6.3) and enabling children to be creative and make new meaning (6.5) are also provided. Documenting, planning and assessment element is also included (6.7). • Accessibility of materials (6.2) (6.4) are covered in Standard 2 and aspects relating to interactions (6.6) are covered in Standard 5.
7: Curriculum	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • The holistic nature of curriculum (7.1), drawing on research and well-referenced (7.2), the importance of spontaneous learning and child initiated activity is advocated (7.3). • The relationships aspect of curriculum (7.4) (9.6) and the relationship aspects of effective transitions (13.1) are covered. • Documentation, planning and assessment are important in supporting children's learning and development (7.5 and 7.6).
8: Planning and Evaluation	This standard is not covered in the Practice Guide. It looks at the planning and evaluation of the delivery of the setting more than the learning and development of the children so is considered outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
9: Health and Welfare	Two components in this standard are covered in the Practice Guide. • Social aspect to mealtime (9.4) and relationships (9.6) are addressed in Standard 5. • Other components relate to management and regulation and are outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
10: Organisation	Three components in this Standard are covered in the Practice Guide. • Vision, values and principles (10.1), practitioners valued as professionals (10.4) and teamwork (10.5) are addressed in Standard 11. • Other components relate to management and are outside the remit of the Practice Guide.

Standard	Components
11: Professional Practice	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • All adults in the setting can provide evidence that they have achieved levels of skills and knowledge appropriate to their role and responsibilities (11.1). • All adults will contribute to and subscribe to a set of values and principles (10.1 and 11.2) which will inform their practice. • Reflective practice will be supported and encouraged (11.3) and this will be augmented by regular opportunities for on-going professional development (11.4). • All practitioners are valued in their role as professionals (10.4) and as such will be consulted with (4.1) and teamwork will be encouraged and supported (10.5). • As professionals, confidentiality (12.3) is integral to practice. • Professional practice related to families (11.5) is covered in Standard 3.
12: Communication	Two components in this standard are covered in the Practice Guide. • Sharing information with stakeholders (12.2) is addressed in Standards 3 and 13. Confidentiality (12.3) is addressed in Standard 11. • Collection of information (12.1) relates to management and is outside the remit of the Practice Guide. Component 12.4 related to policies and procedures is also outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
13: Transitions	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • Smooth transitions are facilitated and promoted through relationships (13.1), liaison within and between settings (13.2) and through consultation and communication (12.2) with all stakeholders (13.3). • Component (13.4) related to policies and procedures is outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
14: Identity and Belonging	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • The setting promotes a confident self and group identity (14.2) and an understanding of the needs and rights of others (14.3). • Component 14.1 related to policies and procedures is outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
15: Legislation and Regulation	This standard is not covered in the Practice Guide. It looks at issues of compliance in relation to legislation and regulations being met or exceeded and so is considered outside the remit of the Practice Guide.
16: Community Involvement	This standard is covered in the Practice Guide. • The setting is connected and integrated with the local and national community and has links which have the potential to develop these relationships further (16.2 and 16.3). • The setting actively supports children's citizenship in their local and national community (16.4). • Component 16.1 related to the availability of information on local, regional and national resources, is addressed in Standard 3: Parents and Families.

Whilst many of *Síolta's* standards and components outline good practice in relation to the development of a high quality curriculum, *Aistear* provides detail about how children learn and develop in early childhood and describes the types of experiences and learning opportunities that are important for them during this time.

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear is the early childhood curriculum framework. It is not a prescriptive programme that sets out activities and worksheets for babies, toddlers and young children. Such a programme would not promote an image of children as competent and confident learners or do justice to early childhood practitioners' professional role as curriculum developers. Instead, the *Aistear* framework provides information and practical ideas to help practitioners plan and build a curriculum that supports children to develop positive dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, as well as knowledge and understanding. *Aistear* includes principles, themes and guidelines for good practice as shown in Table 4.

Table 4 : Overview of the contents of Aistear

12 Principles	
Themes	**Guidelines for Good Practice**
Well-being	Building partnerships between parents and practitioners
Identity and Belonging	Learning and developing through interactions
Communicating	Learning and developing through play
Exploring and Thinking	Supporting learning and development through assessment

Aistear prioritises four broad outcomes for children's learning and development as described through its themes in Table 5.

Table 5 : Aistear's themes and broad outcomes

Themes	Broad Outcomes
Well-being	Children are confident, happy and healthy.
Identity and Belonging	Children have a positive sense of who they are, develop a sense of their culture and heritage and feel valued and respected as part of a family and community.
Communicating	Children share their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for different purposes.
Exploring and Thinking	Children make sense of the things, places and people in their world.

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Aistear states that *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 (Principles and themes,* p.54). In developing a curriculum, practitioners respond to children's interests and questions, extend their learning and promote challenge and engagement through enjoyable and motivating experiences. The Practice Guide supports practitioners in using *Aistear's* principles, themes and guidelines to develop this type of curriculum and in doing so, to meet relevant standards and components set out in *Síolta*.

Curriculum for *all* children

Síolta and *Aistear* support the learning and development of all children from birth to six years across a range of early childhood settings and through the provision of an appropriate curriculum. A curriculum is more than the daily routine or a list of activities and experiences. It is more than naming a philosophy or approach to early childhood care and education. It is about the totality of children's experiences—the broad goals for their learning and development, the activities and experiences through which they can learn and develop, the approaches and strategies practitioners use to support and enable them to achieve their goals and the environment in which all of this takes place. The curriculum also includes the unintended impact of experiences, routines and practitioners' values and beliefs on children which is often referred to as the 'hidden curriculum'.

Aistear and *Síolta* reflect a socio-cultural view of how children learn and develop during these early years. In practice, this means the early childhood curriculum acknowledges the important influence that family, peers, community, background and culture have on children's learning and development. Children live in diverse communities and bring their early experiences at home, with their families and communities to the setting. They also bring individual strengths, abilities, dispositions, values and attitudes, knowledge, interests and needs as well as their own theories and ideas about how the world works, to the setting. Children learn and develop at different rates, in different ways and at different times and the curriculum needs to respond appropriately. The curriculum can also provide opportunities for children to learn and use the Irish language and to experience Irish culture and heritage to nurture this important aspect of identity and belonging in Ireland.

For some children, learning and development brings particular challenges. This can require practitioners to use specific interaction strategies, provide and use particular resources in the learning environment, and/or communicate in specific ways to help children understand, join in conversations and play an active part in, and benefit from experiences and activities. Every child has an ability to learn and develop and each child follows his/her own learning journey.

Aistear and *Síolta* **together** can guide practitioners in developing and providing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum that motivates, engages and appropriately challenges all children as learners and enables them to progress in their individual learning journeys. This links with the aims of the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) to *enable the child to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual and to develop as a social being through co-operating with others* (DES, 1999, p.7).

Developing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

Drawing on the early childhood sector's experiences with *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the Practice Guide uses the concept of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum to help practitioners to use the two frameworks together. An emergent and inquiry-based curriculum uses children's and practitioners' interests, questions and experiences as starting points for curriculum planning. At times, topics emerge from children's interests. Their engagement with people, materials, ideas and events triggers their curiosity and motivation to learn.

At other times, practitioners introduce specific topics linked to *Aistear's* learning goals to support children's learning and development. In partnership with children, practitioners identify ideas or inquiries that become the focus for learning. Observant, skilled and supportive practitioners harness this child-initiated interest, know when it is appropriate and helpful to provide new opportunities or topics for children to explore or when to use adult interests as a stimulus for learning to create a relevant, meaningful and stimulating curriculum for all children.

Aistear and *Síolta* show that an early childhood curriculum involves a practitioner:

1. getting to **know children** well and remembering that they bring a wealth of experience from home and are learning all the time through play and planned experiences, and from conversations, actions and interactions throughout the day.
2. understanding that **children have individual abilities,** knowledge, dispositions, needs, interests and challenges as well as theories about how the world works and acknowledging the importance of a curriculum that responds to this diversity.
3. knowing **how** to support and extend learning and development at this early stage in children's lives.
4. using information gathered through daily work to review and reflect on the **impact of the curriculum** and of **his/her work** on children's learning and development to ensure that all children's holistic development is being supported appropriately.
5. using *Aistear's* **learning goals** which outline dispositions, skills, values and attitudes, and knowledge and understanding in order to plan for and assess children's learning and development.
6. **sharing this vision** of early learning and development with others such as colleagues, children's families and professionals such as mentors, inspectors, speech and language therapists and primary school teachers.

Babies, toddlers and young children need a variety of appropriate learning experiences to support their holistic development and to help them reach their individual potential. Seeing all children as competent and confident involves the practitioner supporting children to get the most benefit from these experiences. The Practice Guide helps practitioners to do this in a way that supports *all* children.

Over time, children's theories and knowledge about how things work and why progress to understanding more formal concepts and ideas. They use different ways to communicate progression in their thinking, knowledge and understanding including movements and gestures, talking, drawings, plans, models, making marks and using symbols in inventive ways. At the same time, babies, toddlers and young children develop an expanding repertoire of skills at an increasingly sophisticated level. They demonstrate a range of dispositions, values and attitudes in how they approach and respond to experiences and in how they interact with others. The practitioner reflects on all of this to build a rich picture of each child's learning and development and uses this information to plan for and extend learning.

The practitioner's role

The role of the adult in early childhood is central. *Aistear* highlights that

> *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 (Principles and themes, p.9).*

Aistear describes a range of interaction strategies for practitioners to use to support babies', toddlers' and young children's learning and development. *Aistear's User Guide* also outlines some of the knowledge, dispositions, skills and abilities that practitioners working with children need (p.7).

Síolta also has a principle on the role of the adult which states that

> *the role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental. Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult. The competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experience of adults, in addition to their capacity to reflect upon their role, are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for each child. This demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued (2006, p.8).*

Síolta's principle on team work is also relevant as is the standard on Professional Practice. The Practice Guide embraces the role of the adult as outlined in *Aistear* and *Síolta* and develops it with a particular focus on the role as **curriculum developer.** An important part of this is pedagogical leadership which is explored in detail in Curriculum Foundations.

Using the Practice Guide

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is intended to help you in your role as curriculum developer to build, reflect on and extend your curriculum to support babies', toddlers' and young children's early learning and development. Some resources in the Guide focus on a specific age group—babies and toddlers (birth-3 years) and young children (3-6 years)—while other resources are relevant across the full early childhood period of birth to six years. Drawing on the early childhood sector's experiences of using *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the Practice Guide includes

- **Curriculum Foundations** and
- six interconnected **Curriculum Pillars**:
  1. Building Partnerships with Parents
  2. Creating and Using the Learning Environment
  3. Learning through Play
  4. Nurturing and Extending Interactions
  5. Planning and Assessing using *Aistear's* Themes
  6. Supporting Transitions.

Curriculum Foundations

Curriculum Foundations comprises an overview and four elements as set out in Table 6. Together, the elements provide focus for an exploration of the factors, values and principles that significantly impact on and shape the curriculum which practitioners develop and provide for the children in their setting. It is important that practitioners work on the four elements of **Curriculum Foundations** before undertaking work on **Curriculum Pillars**.

Table 6 : Overview of elements in Curriculum Foundations in the Practice Guide

Elements	Purpose
Overview	The overview makes connections between the two frameworks and lists the different resources that are available in Curriculum Foundations.
Element 1: Developing your Curriculum and Curriculum Statement	This element helps practitioners review their current curriculum and develop a more emergent and inquiry-based one.
Element 2: Principles including Rights of the Child and Practitioner Image of the Child	This element looks at the principles of *Aistear* and *Síolta* and focuses in particular on the rights of the child and the practitioner's image of the child. It provides activities to help practitioners embed the principles in their work.
Element 3: Themes of *Aistear*	This element helps practitioner's to become familiar with *Aistear's* themes so they can use them to support their work with children.
Element 4: Professional Practice	This element looks at the professional role of the practitioner, reflective practice and the concept of pedagogical leadership.

Curriculum Pillars

Each Curriculum Pillar includes an overview and five categories of resources which are summarised below in Table 7. As already noted, it is important that practitioners work on the four elements of Curriculum Foundations before undertaking work on Curriculum Pillars.

Table 7 : Overview of categories of resources in Curriculum Pillars in the Practice Guide

Category of resource	Purpose
Overview	This provides an outline of the Curriculum Pillar, makes connections with *Aistear* and *Síolta* and lists the resources available in this part of the Practice Guide.
Self-evaluation Tools	These tools provide prompts to help practitioners reflect on their work in order to identify successes and challenges and to note changes they would like to make.
Examples and Ideas for Practice	These resources show examples of curriculum from different early childhood settings.
Resources for Sharing	These resources include tip sheets, posters, presentation materials and questionnaires.
Action Planning Tools	Templates are provided to help practitioners plan for changes in a particular area of their work.
Gallery	Photos from a range of early childhood settings offer additional ideas about aspects of curriculum.