



Research Digest

Standard 1 Rights of the Child

Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.



Introduction

Most discussions on the rights of the child focus on rights concerning provision and protection ( Research Digest/ Standards 9: Health and Welfare and  15: Legislation and Regulation) and tend to benefit from wide support. Participation rights – where the child is seen to have agency and power within her/his own life – are more controversial. This is due, primarily, to the different constructions and understandings of childhood. Social learning theory has come a long way from Locke’s conceptualisation of the child as an empty vessel or Bandura’s belief that imitation formed the basis of learning. Current theories on childhood are contextualist in their approach. That is, the child is not perceived as a constant, universal organism operating in a vacuum. Instead the mind is seen as inherently social, and so adult-child relations should be characterised by an interactionist approach (O’Dwyer, 2006).

The change in conceptions of childhood is reflected in international policy and legislation, most notably in the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC). The Convention details the special rights of children, including their right to participate in a democracy in ways that reflect their age and maturity. Articles 3 and 12 have particular relevance for early childhood care and education (ECCE) provision: Article 3 states that the best interests of the child must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children, and Article 12 outlines how the child’s views must be considered and taken into account in all matters affecting her/him (United Nations [UN] General Assembly, 1989). Ensuring that these rights are met puts a duty on practitioners to enable every child to exercise choice, and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development. It means moving beyond simply safeguarding children’s rights, to actively promoting them.

Recent Research

Respecting children's choices and decisions

Taking the time to talk and listen to children provides practitioners with a better understanding of what children are feeling, and can therefore provide deeper insight into their needs within the setting. Hart (2005) believes consultation with children has many additional functions, such as being:

- Central to the learning process
- Vital in relation to emotional development in very young children
- Healthy for the development and retention of positive self-esteem
- Important in gauging society's views on early childhood and children
- Important in establishing continuity with the home
- An evaluation mechanism (through which the child's view of service provision is gathered)

There are a range of approaches to consulting with children. The Mosaic approach, for example, brings together a range of methods for listening to young children's perspectives about their lives. Using combinations of observation and participatory tools, children's perspectives become the focus for an exchange of meanings between children, practitioners and parents (Clark *et al.*, 2005). The strategic component within any approach to consulting with children is the acknowledgement that listening and talking to them is a central factor in their cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social development. Children benefit enormously from discussions with adults in which their views and opinions are attended to, responded to, taken seriously and acted upon (Kay, 2004).

The *National Children's Strategy, Our Children, Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000) was launched as a means to implement many of the articles in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989). Based on a 'whole child perspective', the Children's Strategy recognises that children have the capacity to shape their own lives and should, accordingly, be given a voice: '*Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity*' (DHC, 2000:3). Hayes (2002) believes that this should be translated into practice by:

- Encouraging children to express their views
- Demonstrating a willingness to take the views expressed seriously
- Avoiding misunderstanding, by clearly setting out for the child the scope of such participation by them
- Providing children with sufficient information and support to enable them to express informed views
- Explaining the decisions taken, especially when the views of the child cannot be fully taken into account

In order to achieve balance in the discussion around children's right to inclusion in decision-making processes, it is important to identify some of the barriers that may impede such participation. Fear of a loss of power from the adult's perspective could represent an obstacle. Lansdown and Lancaster (2001:40) attribute this to the assumption that '*...adults have the monopoly of expertise in determining outcomes in children's lives*', and advocate that simple reliance on adults to promote the well-being of the child is an inadequate approach to caring for children. A second obstacle may lie in the belief that children make irrational, unfeasible decisions. The expertise of the practitioner is central to ensuring that this isn't the case. An understanding of child development, for example, allows for inclusion and decision-making that is appropriate to the age and developmental stage of each child. For a baby, this may be something as basic as choosing between two playthings, or for an older child, it could


be choosing meals, and so forth. The important factor within the interaction is that the level of choice is appropriate for the child. Time is also a potential barrier to consulting with children. Kay (2004) acknowledges that individual attention on a regular basis is an almost utopian concept in a busy ECCE setting, but stresses the fact that taking time to listen to young children may represent a step forward in their knowledge of the world around them. Regardless of the obstacles that appear (perceived or real), a supportive climate where collaboration between adults and children is encouraged is essential for learning. This involves active listening and reflection, in order to *'...provoke, co-construct and stimulate children's thinking and their collaboration with peers'* (French, 2007:27).

Partnership with children

"Practitioners face a challenge, to look upon children as experts on themselves and not that practitioners are all-powerful and know best...how could this fail to raise the level of any child's self-esteem, creating an environment of trust and negotiation within the spirit of enquiry?" (Hart, 2005:206)

Though the adage that children 'should be seen and not heard' now seems archaic and outdated within ECCE, there is still a certain resistance in the consideration of children as partners. Promoting the rights of children through partnership, however, does not mean giving children a license to take complete control over what is happening within the setting. It is, as Lansdown and Lancaster (2001) concur, about moving away from the discredited assumption that adults alone can determine what happens in children's lives, without consideration of children's own views, experiences and preferences. It means that children, even very young ones, are entitled to be listened to and taken seriously. For this type of collaborative partnership to work, it is important that the setting recognises the importance of developing a culture and ethos of participation, and that each individual practitioner understands and acknowledges adult power and responsibilities within the adult-child relationship.

Kinney (2005:123) outlines some principles and values that should underpin any consideration of children as partners:

- The rights of children should be respected – this includes the right to be heard and to have their views taken into account
- Adults must listen and respond – it is important to ensure effective ways of supporting children to communicate their viewpoints
- Participation takes time – children benefit from a consistent experience of the process of consultation and participation, in order to fully understand both what is expected of them and the outcomes
- An important part of children learning about the process of consultation is recognising and respecting the viewpoint of adults and other children ( Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging)
- Consultation is not enough – the results of the consultation and how those discoveries influence practice are vitally important

Acknowledging that children are rights-bearers rather than merely recipients of adult protective care raises a multitude of issues in adult relationships towards children (Lansdown and Lancaster, 2001). It does not, however, negate the fact that children have needs but argues that, accordingly, children have the right to have those needs met. This requires ensuring that each child is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

Implementing the Standard

Ensuring that each child's rights are met involves providing the child with opportunities where she/he is enabled to take the lead, initiate activity, be appropriately independent and is supported to solve problems. For babies, this can mean providing routines to ensure that she/he gets regular and frequent individual attention, other than in response to distress or care needs. For children aged from twelve months onwards, the continuation of this individualised care is equally important. Practitioners should provide each child with opportunities within the daily routine to use her/his initiative and to be appropriately independent. This could be achieved through:

- Problem-solving opportunities that arise for the child in the course of the day's activities and routines
- Providing challenges, as a matter of routine, where the child takes the lead and acts with appropriate levels of independence (e.g., tidying up after her/himself, choosing activities, selecting stories for reading time, etc.)
- Supporting and emphasising the success of situations when a child chooses, organises and takes the lead in an activity
- Supporting child-initiated activity for the child with a disability
- Providing opportunities for the child to care for her/his own belongings and those of the setting
- Enabling the child to take care of her/himself
- Using meal/snack and tidy-up times to encourage individual initiative in each child

There are also some questions that the practitioner should reflect upon when considering the child's participation in the daily routine of the setting, in activities, in conversations and in all other appropriate situations:

- How is each child (including the child with special needs) enabled to participate with her/his peers?
- How are responsiveness and sensitivity towards the child demonstrated when engaged with her/him?
- How is it ensured that each child joins in the shared activities in a way that suits her/his own disposition?
- Are there challenges in considering the child as a partner?

For a child to actively engage in the daily activities of the setting, and for her/him to be empowered to make decisions and choices, the practitioner should achieve a balance between child-chosen (directed) and adult-chosen (directed) activity. This involves an understanding of child development, to ensure that the level of choice is appropriate for each child.

Conclusion

Rights have a pivotal role in improving the lives of children and reconstructing their position within society from that of passive dependants to that of active citizens. The child-related professions are being challenged in their perspectives – accustomed to making assumptions about the needs of children and what is best for them, ECCE policy-makers and providers need to recognise children as powerful and competent social actors (Smith, 2006).

Partnership between adults and children is a key component in ensuring that children are enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant in her/his own development and learning. The practitioner's role lies in determining what is age and developmentally appropriate within that partnership. As Jans (2004:40) highlights

"...the citizenship of children is based on a continuous learning process in which children and adults are interdependent. In this interdependency, the playful ways



in which children give meaning to their environment has to be taken into account.”

ECCE settings must ensure that each child has opportunities to make choices, is enabled to make choices, and has her/his choices and decisions respected. They need to ensure that each child has opportunities to take the lead, to initiate activity, to be appropriately independent, and to be supported in problem-solving. In such a domain, the rights of the child become the responsibility of the adult.

Resources for Rights of the Child

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The National Quality Framework
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Research Digest Standard 2 Environments



Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well-maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.

Introduction

“The outdoor and indoor environments develop children’s confidence to express themselves, to make choices, to test ideas, to develop and practise skills, to make discoveries, and to persevere in the face of difficulty and uncertainty” (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004:55).

Learning environments, both indoor and outdoor, should be motivating and appealing to all children. Children have different interests, needs and background experiences, and the materials, equipment and activities that the setting provides for them should be reflective of this diversity. Providing an environment where a child is encouraged and supported to have a positive sense of identity and belonging ( Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging) is critical to her/his success as a learner. Similarly, there is an evident link between the environment and the interactions that take place within it ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions). The environment, therefore, requires careful consideration, in order to support relationships, play and curriculum implementation as key contexts for learning.

Recent Research

Well planned indoor and outdoor environments

Flexible indoor and outdoor environments, which address children's differing levels of maturity, and which are adapted to meet children's changing needs throughout the year, should be provided (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2005). The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA, 2002) offers guidelines on the planning, design, building or altering of premises for an early childhood setting. The provision of discrete areas for playing, sleeping, eating, bodily care, and storage of personal items is recommended, in addition to appropriate signage for all visitors and users of the setting. Sturdy, appropriately small-sized furniture, sanitary ware and equipment communicate an atmosphere of welcome and belonging for very small children. In planning a good learning environment, interest areas should be developed and arranged to facilitate easy movement and visibility. French (2003) suggests ideas for the use of internal and external spaces, and outlines guidelines for establishing a learning environment and arranging and equipping areas. Children themselves need to be participants in what adults are thinking, planning and doing on their behalf (Greenfield, 2004). Ulrich (2004) suggests that children should be reflected more personally in the environment, in order to enhance their self-identity and self-esteem. They recommend that practitioners consult with children and consider the following suggestions:

- Display children's project work
- Ensure that displays are at children's eye level
- Exhibit information about children's families
- Engage children in contributing photos or other materials for display
- Ensure that children's names are displayed

- Ensure that each child has some space that is personalised for her/him

The natural world can be appreciated and used as a foundation for creativity, play, sensory stimulation, and as a resource for continuity between settings (CECDE, 2006). Outdoor play space is sadly lacking in many early childhood settings, and outdoor experiences for non-mobile babies, toddlers and children with additional needs is particularly neglected. Bilton (2002) suggests that there are certain principles to be adhered to when planning for effective early childhood experiences:

- Integration and combination of indoor and outdoor environments
- Availability of indoors and outdoors simultaneously for children
- Both indoors and outdoors should receive equal consideration in design, layout, resourcing, equipping, management, planning, evaluation, staffing, and adult interaction
- Outdoors is both a learning and a teaching environment where play is central to children's development and utilises effective modes of learning
- Children need to be able to control, change and modify their environment
- Staff have to be supportive towards the development of effective outdoor environments

All of the above necessitates careful planning for a structured environment, to reflect the holistic nature of children's early learning and development (CECDE, 2005).

Adaptability and accessibility


All aspects of the environment must demonstrate inclusivity and the flexibility to welcome children and adults with additional needs, as well as ensuring consistent ease of access and frequent use by all (CECDE, 2005). Practitioners who understand child development and how children learn, and who aspire to support children's individual growth and development, construct



environments which are adaptable and communicate a sense of respect and purpose (French and Murphy, 2005). Wheelchair and buggy ramps as well as wide double doors should be provided in services and, ideally, the setting should also be situated on the ground floor (French, 2003).

Well maintained and comfortable environments

The environments should be safe, hygienic, spacious and bright, and afford opportunities to rest, play, eat and have bodily care needs met. They should be regularly maintained and evaluated. Settings also need to have some adult-sized furniture for adults' comfort. Both children and adults should enjoy their space (French, 2003; French and Murphy, 2005).

The NCNA (2002) observes that architectural design should extend beyond the basic requirements of accommodation in early childhood settings, and provide spaces to stimulate and interest the child. Advice on the use of colour, light and shade is provided, along with the need to divide spaces both horizontally and vertically, with suggestions for creating mood. The importance of paying attention to the kitchen, in terms of structural finishes and food storage and preparation, is also outlined. The health and safety of all children and adults is paramount and all out-of-home settings must, therefore, conform to all relevant health and safety standards ( Research Digest/Standard 9: Health and Welfare). Although safe equipment is vital, the environment should still facilitate challenge, exploration and risk-taking (Greenfield, 2004; CECDE, 2006).

Providing challenging and enriching experiences

The physical environments and experiences provided for children, indoors and out, have a powerful impact on their present and future (Greenfield, 2004; Ulrich, 2004). The experiences offered to children should support all children (and adults) to:

- Work independently and with others
- Actively explore and learn

- Make and follow through on decisions
- Engage in first hand, real and creative experiences
- Solve problems
- Experience co-operative, symbolic and dramatic play (French, 2007)

Environments structured to meet the child's needs should provide a balance between the child's active approach to learning in terms of security and safety, and an appropriate level of risk (CECDE, 2005). 'Safe risk' is challenging for the child and supports the development of autonomy and self-reliance, and provides a positive sense of control. As young children learn from interacting with materials, events and ideas, it is essential that practitioners provide environments which:

- Encourage curiosity, interest and choice
- Are both dynamic and diverse
- Build on children's interests, learning dispositions and needs (CECDE, 2005)

There is considerable evidence that the absence of public play spaces in the community impacts negatively on children's opportunities for physical activity among their peers (CECDE, 2006). Ouvry (2003) suggests five reasons why children should experience outdoor play:

- Movement allows children to relive their experiences
- Children need daily outdoor access as a right (given the potential health benefits in later life)
- There is a need for 'risky freedom'
- Unique opportunities for learning take place, such as change in weather, finding beetles under a stone, space to undertake large scale constructions
- Behaviour improves outdoors

The most effective learning comes from simple, versatile, and abundant materials. Children gain significant play value from



elements within the natural environment, such as slopes, trees, bushes, sand, long grass and water. Natural features such as these should be retained or provided in play facilities (CECDE, 2006).

Implementing the Standard


Ensuring that the indoor environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children requires the setting to provide a variety of different spaces and areas. These should facilitate and support the development of social activities and interactions and so, should be age-appropriate. For babies up to eighteen months old, for example, designated areas could be assigned:

- Floor area - carpeted section, adequate storage for equipment (e.g., soft toys, balls, blocks), etc.
- Book area - quiet area of the room, natural light, comfortable seating, carpeted sections, cushions, display units, puppets for story-telling, large books in a variety of formats, etc.
- Sensory stimulation area - wide variety of musical instruments which reflect a variety of cultures, equipment (e.g., tape recorders), different types of music (e.g., classical, opera, pop, traditional), wall-mounted mirrors, treasure baskets, scented materials, suitable storage, traditional nursery rhymes, etc.

For toddlers, these spaces could be expanded to include water and/or sand areas, paint areas, collage materials, a home corner, role play and other special theme areas (e.g., clay, computer area, woodwork, cooking, etc.). All should be fully supervised and operated in compliance with relevant health and safety regulations.

To support the child's learning and development, developmentally appropriate equipment and material should be made available to all children within the setting. In order to ensure that the learning needs of each child are met, the practitioner should consider:

- Providing sufficient amounts of equipment and materials
- Regular inspection of equipment and materials, ensuring repair/replacement when necessary

- How the equipment and materials support the implementation of the curriculum/programme
- Provision of equipment and materials for children with special needs to ensure access to the curriculum/programme
- Careful use of television/video/DVDs/computers to initiate interest, develop ideas and extend learning
- Reflecting the diversity of the wider society within the setting ( Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging)

Conclusion

The indoor and outdoor environment require planning at every level, from daily considerations such as seating arrangements, heating, availing of dry weather to use outdoor spaces, type of play etc., to the broader decisions, such as design and layout, compliance with health and safety regulations, and the determination of what is developmentally appropriate for children of different ages. This planning and layout should consider and accommodate the needs of all children and adults in the setting.

It is crucial that the environment provides a range of developmentally appropriate, challenging, diverse, creative and enriching experiences for all children. In ensuring that this is provided, the setting becomes more than a just a place where children spend a great deal of time being cared for; it becomes a place where their initiative is encouraged, their competence is nurtured, and their curiosity is aroused.



Resources for Environments

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Ouvry, M. (2003). *Exercising Minds and Muscles*. London: National Children's Bureau.

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Children's Books

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Stephens, H. (2002). *Glittery Garden*. London: Macmillan Children's Books. [Tactile book, exploring the outdoor environment].

Stephens, H. (2002). *Sparkly Day*. London: Macmillan Children's Books. [Looks at different weather conditions and games that can be played outdoors].



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Research Digest

Standard 3 Parents and Families



Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.

Introduction

Parental involvement¹ is a term that is often used loosely. As the primary caregivers and educators of their children, parents have a tremendous responsibility to be involved in their children's lives both inside and outside the home, including their children's non-parental childcare and education arrangements. Research demonstrates that the more involved parents are in their children's learning and development, the greater chance children have to succeed, particularly (later on) in their academic performance. As Lopez *et al.* (2004:2) point out:

"Family involvement predicts children's school success. Developmental and education research confirms that parental attitudes, styles of interaction, behaviours, and relationships with schools are associated with children's social development and academic performance."

As early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings play a strategic role in both the current and future learning patterns of children, and in their socialisation, encouraging partnership with parents and families should be seen as an integral component of quality provision. This requires a proactive partnership approach and should be evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.


1. In order to avoid repetition, the terms 'parents' and 'parental involvement' are used throughout the Research Digest, and are intended as a blanket term for parents, families and, where appropriate, carers and legal guardians of children.

Recent Research

Defining parental involvement

Much controversy surrounds what 'parental involvement' actually constitutes. Reynolds and Clements (2005) define it in its broadest sense, along three dimensions; behaviour with or on behalf of children; attitudes and beliefs about parenting or education; and expectations for children's futures. Other definitions of parental involvement are based on the belief that it needs to be divided into two independent components - parents as supporters of their children's care and education, and parents as active partners. The ideal, and often most unattainable, model would combine and promote both roles. That is, parental involvement could be defined as the participation of parents in the development and education of their children from birth onwards, in recognition of the fact that they are the primary influence in their children's lives.

Epstein (2001) presents a comprehensive model of parental involvement. She observes how children grow and learn through three overlapping spheres of influence, which must form partnerships, in order to effectively meet the needs of the child: the family, the setting and the community. This model is based on six elements of parental involvement: *Parenting*, considers helping all families to establish home environments which support children as learners (e.g., parent education and training, family support programmes, etc.). *Volunteering* is based on the recruitment and organisation of parental help and support (e.g., a parent might volunteer to accompany the group on an outing where additional adult supervision is necessary). *Communicating* focuses on designing effective forms of setting-to-home and home-to-setting information exchanges around setting children's activities and progress. This two-way communication is strategic to a child's development, and involves communicating both positive developments (e.g., a child learning the alphabet, walking for the first time) and negative developments (e.g., disruptive behaviour, learning difficulties). *Learning at home* advocates providing information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with learning (e.g., recommended

book lists that are recognised by practitioners as helpful to young children's literacy development). *Decision-making* encourages the inclusion of parents in the decisions made by settings, mainly through the development of parent representative mechanisms. Finally, *collaborating with the community* involves identifying and integrating resources from the community to strengthen the setting's curriculum, family practices and children's learning (e.g., the provision of information for parents on community health, cultural, recreational and social support) ( Research Digest/ Standard 16: Community Involvement).

It should be noted that involving parents in decision-making is one of the strategies that is most difficult to invoke. In families where both parents work, time can be the predominant constraint. In areas of socio-economic disadvantage, limited educational opportunities and the resulting lack of confidence to engage with practitioners may be a contributing factor in non-involvement. Full involvement in decision-making can only be realised when parents are empowered to believe that their contribution is both necessary and welcome. Information evenings, for example, could present options to parents, as could regular newsletters, etc.

Inherent to any definition of parental involvement must be an acknowledgment of its variability – that is, the changing nature of parental involvement within the context of an evolving society. Changes in the family dynamic, for example, have resulted in a current model that encompasses family priorities, an emphasis on the intrinsic strengths of families, and recognition of the influence of broader neighbourhood and community settings. In an Irish context, there are some key statistics that illustrate a dramatic change in family structures (Barnardos, 2002:7):

- Approximately 1.2 million Irish adults are parents, 47% of men are fathers and 51% of women are mothers
- Ireland has the highest proportion (24%) of children in the birth to 14 years age category in the overall population of the European Union



- In 1998, approximately 12% of all dependent children lived with just one parent (compared to a figure of around 5% in 1983)

Partnership

Parents and practitioners bring unique elements to the home/setting. Parents know about the home situation, their extended family, significant people in their child's life, culture, health, history, adversities and issues related to the individual child (Fitzgerald, 2004). Practitioners have knowledge about the needs of all children in the setting, child development and learning, curriculum activities and peer relationships. The contribution of each to the partnership could be modelled as follows.

Parents could:

- Read to younger children, encouraging them to participate and learn
- Promote engagement with practitioners
- Encourage children's efforts in learning
- Keep in touch with practitioners, keeping them up-to-date with any significant changes in the child's home environment that may hinder learning (e.g., moving house, divorce, death, and so forth)
- Volunteer to participate in setting activities
- Join and participate in advisory or decision-making activities


Practitioners could:

- Seek out opportunities for professional development and training in parental involvement
- Try to make parents feel welcome in the setting, beyond merely dropping off and collecting their children
- Learn about the different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds of the children in their care and know how to communicate with families from diverse backgrounds

- Facilitate parent's work schedules when creating parental involvement opportunities
- Keep parents informed of their child's performance and setting activities, by means of meetings, phone calls, notes, and so forth
- Provide opportunities for parents to visit the setting, observe activities and provide feedback
- Invite and encourage parents to participate on relevant committees

These actions represent a thumbnail sketch of the kind of activities that can contribute to successful parental involvement in ECCE. Fostering this type of partnership can often be stressful and problematic, and so depends on three primary factors (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000): A recognition of the fact that staff-parent relationships are immersed in knowledge-power struggles; the management of staff-parent relationships in such a way that gives parents a real voice without threatening staff's identity as professionals; and collaboration with parents to build sustainable 'interpretive communities' based on shared understanding of the child. Reynolds and Clements (2005) further conclude that a coordinated partnership system of ECCE should span at least the first five years of a child's life and that family services and parental involvement activities must be intensive and comprehensive.

Policies and procedures

An important factor in determining both the extent and quality of parental involvement is the degree to which family partnership forms a central part of the setting's philosophy and practices. Fitzgerald (2004) suggests three themes around family involvement and support that could be used to guide policy formation and practice: parental involvement needs to be individualised and reflective of the diversity of families; parents need to be active partners and should be provided with opportunities to participate; and services should be organised in ways that allow and enable families to feel competent. As with all policies and procedures, they should be used to guide quality practice and provision ( Research Digest/Standard 10: Organisation), and made available to all relevant stakeholders.



Implementing the Standard

Settings should ensure that staff and parents have both formal and informal opportunities for communication and information sharing about the child. While the formal opportunities may seem quite apparent (e.g., meetings with parents), due consideration should also be given to creating informal interaction with parents, and may begin with something as fundamental as making them feel welcome within the setting. The practitioner needs to ensure that this communication supports the child's learning and development, and could achieve this through:

- Accessing parents' expert knowledge of their child's development and learning
- Communicating information to parents about their child's development and learning
- Integrating parent's knowledge and input into the planning and assessment of children's learning and development
- Supporting parents in understanding their child's learning and development

Parental involvement in the setting can be supported and encouraged through a variety of means. The setting could, for example, consider opportunities for parents within its management structure, or facilitate parents to participate based on their interests, abilities and cultures. It is vitally important that the setting uses its policies and procedures to support this type of engagement. Examples of this include:

- Positive promotion of the parental role
- Involving parents in the management of the setting
- Ensuring that parents have read and understood policies and procedures
- Involving parents in the compilation of policies for the setting
- Processes for the regular review and update of policies

- Ensuring that policy is translated into practice
- Documentation of procedures
- Ensuring that everyone understands and follows these procedures

Conclusion

A number of various interrelated factors have served to highlight the importance of parental involvement in ECCE, particularly in the last decade. At the very least, these include: the diversification of family structures; a concern with a shift in parent-child relations and its perceived implications for social cohesion; a policy shift towards prevention and early intervention in the fight against social exclusion; and a growing emphasis on children's rights (Clavero, 2001). Any response to such shifting dynamics needs to be outlined in a sustainable framework for supporting parents. The true achievement of such can only be realised once parents are recognised as experts in terms of knowing their own children, access to all relevant supports is facilitated, a partnership approach is fostered, and all planning is achieved in a locally responsive way. As the *Supporting Parents Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2002:57) highlights, this type of investment in parents is beneficial to all involved:

“Parental involvement in programmes of early childhood development maximises outcomes for their children and is an added element of quality in the programmes. Parents also benefit where parental support is provided, often gaining new skills and confidence and an ability to contribute in new ways to their communities.”



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Research Digest Standard 5 Interactions



Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

Introduction

Interactions, whether they are between children themselves, children and adults or between adults, intersect all areas of child development – social, physical, emotional, intellectual and linguistic. They are a strategic means by which children’s knowledge, skills, understanding and abilities are exercised and extended, through both direct engagement with the child and the process of modelling.

The role of the practitioner in terms of ensuring constructive interactions with, and between, children is demanding: it is powerful, varied, essential and dynamic, and can be enhanced through reflection and self-challenge. In addition to the physical or more obvious interactions (e.g., listening, eye-contact, talking with the child), the practitioner needs to be equally aware of the overall context of this type of learning and so, is challenged to observe the less apparent components. These include considering the individual child’s feelings, interacting for meaningful lengths of time, being age and developmentally appropriate and following the child’s lead. During care routines, for example, the practitioner needs to be aware of the child’s signals and cues and needs to respond appropriately and consistently. Further challenge lies in the fact that the same levels of perception and response may need to be exercised across different age ranges. A small baby, for example, may simply lie and listen as her/his nappy is being changed, distinguishing the voice of the key worker as they describe what they are doing. A young toddler may carry her/his nappy to the changing area and join in with a song or rhyme with the relevant key worker, and a young child may need to establish agreement about the need to wash her/his hands so that she/he may return to play as soon as possible. All of these activities require delicate and responsive practitioners who understand the value of thoughtful interactions (French and Murphy, 2005).

From a socialisation perspective, interactions develop a child's relationship with other children and adults. From what they are actively engaged in and what they observe happening around them, children gain knowledge about people in different contexts, as they share activities and experiences (Moyles and Adams, 2001). This is further enhanced by the practitioner's role as she/he interacts with the child, considering individual dispositions and encouraging positive identities, a sense of belonging and self-confidence. The emotional and intellectual development of the child is equally broadened through interactions. Children's daily experiences contribute significantly to their feelings about themselves and about others, as well as to their individual styles of thinking and knowledge-processing. Their linguistic capacity is developed through both verbal and non-verbal interactions, as they experience spoken, written and body language.


The impact of positive, meaningful interactions within the wider context of child development is founded and complemented by the presence (physical and emotional) of a responsive and reflective practitioner.

Recent Research

Peer interaction

Friendship amongst young children should not be underestimated, particularly in out-of-home settings. Adults need to foster children's friendships between the children they care for as these relationships act to enhance the child's self-esteem and self-worth (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2005). In addition, studies of typically developing children's interactions with their peers in unstructured settings (such as in playgroups or free-play), demonstrate increasingly complex play and the development of social networks (Guralnick *et al.*, 2006). The day should be planned and paced to ensure that there are numerous opportunities for children to engage with peers in child-to-child encounters. In practical terms this means that groups are kept small and that the ratio of adults to children is high to encourage positive interactions (French, 2003). In order to achieve this, recommended strategies for adults include:

- Encouraging children to interact with one another in ways appropriate to their developmental levels
- Finding many opportunities to refer children to an older or more able peer for help
- Looking for and supporting children's spontaneous co-operative efforts
- In large group work, ensuring each child can make a specific contribution (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation [HERF], 2001)

There are children who experience difficulty in engaging with their peers. This can be characterised by poorly organised (difficulties in entering and sustaining play) and conflict-prone interactions. There are many influences on behaviour. The child may, for example, have a specific developmental delay, have limited prior experience of positive interactions, have a challenging temperament, be tired, hungry or simply having a bad day. What is clear is that patterns of behaviour are shaped, strengthened or counteracted by the child's relationships and experiences. Sensitive, responsive, positive adults in an accepting, low stress environment ameliorate these influences (French, 2007). Practitioners may model play behaviours ( Research Digest/ Standard 6: Play) and in conflict situations, adults and children may work together using a problem-solving approach to mediate conflicts. Social conflicts can be approached calmly, firmly and patiently as a first step.

The children's feelings are then recognised and acknowledged and information gathered in order to:

- Restate the problem according to what the children say
- Ask for ideas for solutions
- Restate the suggested solution(s)
- Ask the children to make a decision about which one to choose
- Encourage children to act on their decisions

The adult must then be prepared to provide follow-up support for the child (HERF, 2001).

When children practice resolving conflicts from an early age, they develop and exercise necessary social skills and they begin to understand how to respect the needs of others, while simultaneously meeting their own (French, 2003).

Interactions between adults and children

The past ten years of research have attested to the knowledge that the quality of young children's experience is closely linked to the interactions between the child and her/his caregivers. The early years of a child's life signal a time of unique dependency, during which caregiving routines (eating, sleeping and bodily care), in a stimulating environment, are appreciated as opportunities to develop a relationship with the child (CECDE, 2005). Care and education are not separate, but must be integrated within the child's relational experiences. Children in secure relationships with adults are more likely to:

- Explore their environment, thereby enhancing their learning and development
- Be more sociable and interact better with peers
- Display verbal precision
- Perform better at cognitive tasks

Conversely, adults who are not responsive to children (who may locate themselves nearby but not engage in children's play) have a negative effect on children's early years' experiences; their social interactions and cognitive activities are less complex (Lobman, 2006). Careful consideration must be given to the countless opportunities to foster active learning, language, cognitive, emotional, spiritual and moral development and problem solving. Adult support must be a constant in all interactions from greeting the child on arrival to saying goodbye at departure (French and Murphy, 2005).

We communicate in several ways and so language forms only a small part of interaction. Children need security and warmth with a key adult where they learn the rules of communication

through shared meaning of their experiences, and where their early attempts to converse are valued, interpreted and responded to (David *et al.*, 2002). This is especially important in the first years of life, particularly for those who have a specific language delay or who do not speak English or Irish as their first language. The child's ability to communicate is not fully developed, and the adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances or gestures (French, 2007). It is up to the practitioner to get to know the young person and match her/his response to the child. A child, for example, who hesitates to reach out for new experiences, a face, new food, or new piece of play equipment needs more time to grow accustomed to that new experience. Some children like gregarious experiences such as tickling and singing noisily, while others prefer quieter, more gentle experiences (French and Murphy, 2005). Ahsam *et al.*, (2006) established that training in language acquisition, interaction strategies and appropriate modelling are the key ingredients which supported 'making time to talk', encouraging children's initiation and open questions, 'calm time', and finding opportunities to praise children. The use of specific language games such as turn-taking, story-telling, and picture sequencing with small groups (of three children) gave children confidence, especially those who were not used to speaking in large groups.

Studies have shown that when adults learn to effectively use a range of adult-child interaction strategies they can enhance the length and quality of children's interactions through 'sustained shared thinking'. This is where two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to clarify an idea, solve a problem, or evaluate an activity. It was found that this was most likely to occur when children were interacting individually with an adult or with a single peer partner; both contributing and participating equally as partners. Periods of 'sustained shared thinking' are essential for effective early years practice which extends child-initiated interactions and contributes to intellectual challenge. Furthermore, a balance between child-led and adult-led interactions and between an open-framework approach (where children have free choice in instructive environments) and more





focused group work with direct instruction is in evidence in the most effective settings (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Further key practitioner behaviours supportive of children's learning and development in relational activities have been identified in research (Lobman, 2006). These include:

- Sensitivity to children's current activities
- Responding to children's cues
- Observing and elaborating children's learning by adding information and materials to the activity at hand and thereby taking it to the next level (with both adult and child as equal participants in learning)
- Maintaining a focus on what children are doing
- Offering choice, and opportunities to investigate
- Giving directions stemming from what children are already engaged in
- Introducing uninvolved children to new activities

Interactions between adults

The collaborative, focused efforts of the adults in children's lives draw together the elements of providing a safe, inviting and stimulating environment, caring child-centred routines and enriching experiences to enhance children's learning and development. Throughout each day, members of the practitioner team work together to observe and support the children in their service. The practitioner team also works in partnership with parents/carers, exchanging child observations and striving to provide consistency between children's at-home and away-from-home experiences ( Research Digests/Standards 12: Communication and  3: Parents and Families).

Trusting collegial relationships amongst practitioners, in stable and consistent teams, are fostered by members who practice open communication. This involves speaking in an honest, straightforward way. It implies sharing genuine feelings and opinions and taking turns speaking and listening respectfully

to each other, drawing on strengths and differences amongst team members. This dynamic provides an authentic experience for children and models respect for difference and contrast. Turn-taking, pausing and listening will ensure that focused discussion about setting issues and the needs of the children can take place. Even colleagues committed to the principles of open communication do not always agree. However their commitment ensures that they engage in joint problem solving/conflict resolution in order to reach a solution to support them in their common interest – the child (French and Murphy, 2005).

Implementing the Standard

Progressing onwards from a theoretical framework, there are a number of practical ways in which constructive and meaningful interactions can be fostered across the three domains; child/child, child/adult and adult/adult.

Child/child

In order to ensure that each child is enabled to interact with her/his peers and with children of different ages, the practitioner may consider what opportunities are presented throughout the daily routine. These could include:

- Seating arrangements
- Layout of space
- Different activity areas
- Meal/snack times

To further support positive interactions, certain strategies can be used to manage conflicts between children:

- Helping children resolve conflict themselves without imposing solutions (e.g., negotiation, compromise, listening, naming emotions, acknowledging feelings)

- Providing guidance and discipline which is supportive
- Reflecting realistic expectations for the child's age and individual development

Child/adult

With a focus on process rather than outcomes, the process of child/adult interactions needs to be balanced between talking and listening. Both the formal and informal parts of the daily routine can be used to achieve this balance, where various opportunities for sensitive and respectful interactions arise:

- Greetings
- Care routines
- One-to-one interactions
- Small or large group activities
- Incidental conversation
- Games

Adult/adult

It is vital that the interactions between adults within, and associated with the setting, act as a model of respect, support and partnership for the child. As this impacts directly on the child's learning and development, adults within the setting can demonstrate positive (both verbal and non-verbal) interactions:

- Co-operation
- Helping
- Turn-taking
- Showing kindness
- Problem-solving

Conclusion

Attention to effective interactions is critical to the provision of quality early childhood care and education experiences. It constitutes a pivotal part of a child's development, and so must be rooted firmly in policies, procedures and practice that are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

It is equally important that the understanding and practice of interactions is process (as opposed to outcome) focused, and that interactions between adults themselves and between adults and children are recognised as being as significant as those between children. As Fallon (2004:96) points out:

“The importance of secure early attachment relationships to the child's well-being cannot be overstated. Furthermore, secure, respectful and caring relationships with adults provide a crucial context for supporting learning.”

Meaningful interactions follow the child's lead and interests, and challenge the child appropriately. The development and delivery of such is dependent on the presence of a responsive, reflective practitioner that is willing to challenge her/himself on a daily basis within the setting.

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Research Digest **Standard 6 Play**



Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.

Introduction

Play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development, and offers significant opportunities for both learning and teaching.

"Play at its best in education situations, provides not only a real medium for learning but enables discerning and knowledgeable adults to learn about children and their needs." (Moyles, 1989:xi)

The challenge for practitioners who work to support the young child's learning and development is to engage with the child's play in a way which enhances it and opens up new vistas of learning and fun.

In order for it to be enjoyable and beneficial, young children need to spend a significant amount of time within the setting engaged in play/exploration, and these and other playful activities should be central to the daily routine. An understanding of child development is central to the achievement of this, primarily as it provides a continuum on which the practitioner can determine what is developmentally appropriate in terms of play. While singing and rhyming may be used to engage in play with very young babies, for example, interactive story-time may be more developmentally appropriate for older children.

Another important feature of play is that it enables the child to explore, to be creative and to use her/his previous learning to make new meanings. Open-ended play items, for example, can be provided which lead the child to explore different properties in the environment, both indoor and outdoor.

The next section of the Research Digest considers these aspects of play and their relationship to quality practice, as well as providing research evidence around resourcing play and the importance of choice and interaction.

Recent Research

Play, learning and development

In play, children develop and demonstrate exploration, creativity, spirituality, imagination, experimentation, manipulation, expression of ideas, social and interaction skills, divergent and abstract thinking, and problem-solving capacities (Bruce, 2001). These skills are essential for the consolidation of learning and the construction of meaning and knowledge. Research has demonstrated that young children who are more engrossed in their free play (thereby demonstrating higher levels of motivation) manifest more cognitively sophisticated play than peers who are less engrossed. Furthermore, adults who demonstrate warmth and supportive responses positively influence task-directedness, organisation, sustained play activity and pride in personal achievement in young children (CECDE, 2005).

While children are biologically primed to play from birth, they need other people to trigger those biological processes (Bruce, 2001). Babies need sensitive adults who will not allow frustrations to develop. If the joy of play goes, it takes with it the potential for deep learning. Toddlers develop the capacity to engage in critical aspects of play; pretending, imagining, and creating props for play with role rehearsals. They begin to use symbols and develop mastery of new activities. Whereas struggle is an important feature of early learning, children who are always struggling will become reluctant learners if they do not get enough practice to gain the dexterity they need in order to enjoy what they have learnt. The enjoyment of writing stories has its roots in socio-dramatic play in which the child develops scenes with a story line and adventurous characters (Bruce, 2001). The literature further emphasises that 'structured' play should provide both security and intellectual challenge; these two factors are largely determined by the developmental appropriateness of the activities (CECDE, 2005). Children who learn actively from birth are more likely to have positive dispositions to learning. This has life long implications. These children are curious and interested in what they are doing and they experience fun, enjoyment and, with repetition, the

probability of success. They develop competence and subsequent confidence. Open, optimistic, risk-taking and resilient, they are intrinsically motivated to learn (French, 2007).

Resourcing play

David *et al.* (2002) have noted the 'one hundred languages' that children use daily to share and communicate their ideas playfully. These include singing, dancing, talking, story-making, painting, mark-making, patterns, building, animating puppets and other playthings, model-making, gardening, looking after animals, and so forth. Such playful activity needs to be encouraged at all stages of the day and not confined to specific periods – even routine activities can be done playfully.

If play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality (In-Career Development Team, 1998). Lack of resources – in the form of appropriate equipment and high pupil:teacher ratios – can result in a gap between child-centred curriculum provision and its implementation (Murphy, 2004). High quality play is nurtured by adults providing a resource rich and aesthetically pleasing environment (indoors and outdoors) where children are able to touch, manipulate, explore, and experiment with a variety of materials. Socio-dramatic play can be supported by both specific materials such as a train set or dressing-up clothes, or more open-ended items such as blocks or big and small boxes. The latter are more likely to support more imaginative and complex play scripts (In-Career Development Team, 1998).

Play is an extensive pathway to learning and as such, professional knowledge and expertise is critical in planning and engaging in playing, learning and teaching (Murphy, 2004). This involves practitioners developing informed insights into the styles and patterns of learning for each child; her/his preferences, needs, identities, friendships and interests, and extending their own knowledge about pedagogical processes and curriculum. Play provides a lens into children's minds, revealing meanings and patterns not evident in formal contexts. It can help practitioners to understand the meaning of play-based and child-initiated activities, to fine tune their provision, to help children to become



master players and to inform the co-construction of the curriculum (Wood and Attfield, 2005). The skill of the practitioner lies in fusing the developmental needs of children with the concepts and values required for progression in any area of learning. Curriculum plans need to be reflected on daily, to identify, for example:


- What the children learned that day
- How the specific needs of children were addressed
- What special interests can be built upon
- How each child can be helped to experience success tomorrow

Materials and activities offered will consequently prove to be more diverse, challenging, appropriate to the context of development and enriching in generating critical skills (French, 2003).

Choice and interaction

The importance of activity and first hand experiences (where children can touch, smell and taste as opposed to looking at photographs or plastic replicas) in supporting children's early learning and development is dependent on the adult's role in providing for and enriching this activity. Children must have access to a range of stimulating materials and experiences. Adults should provide children with learning opportunities for responsible choice and independence. Babies need access to objects to explore and discover their weight, smell, texture, as well as colour, in a safe environment. The adult is in a position, having carefully laid out the objects and checked for safety, to facilitate the child's exploration in freedom. Toddlers need more manipulative and creative materials, as well as equipment to climb, bounce on and slide down. Young children have increasing capacities for language and inquiry, a growing ability to understand another point of view, and are developing interests in representation and symbols, such as pictures, numbers and words, and are increasingly physically active (French, 2003).

The consensus in research has moved firmly towards learning and developing in collaboration with others, democracy between adult and child, as well as between child and child (French, 2007).

Children are born as social beings whose social competence is enhanced through being and playing with others ( Research Digest/Standard 14: Identity and Belonging). Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) conclude that the adult is key in supporting play by:


- Developing appropriate and close relationships with continuity of care through key worker systems
- Being emotionally present
- Devising play experiences that support children's understandings of relationships and feelings
- Engaging in play sensitively and sharing care effectively with parents

Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children's learning (French, 2007). Moyles and Adams (2002) identified that although adults endorsed the educational benefits of play, they were unsure of their role and how to assess the outcomes of play. While acknowledging the challenges for adults in participating in play, the evidence is clear that children can gain self-confidence, self-esteem and self-knowledge by engaging with and being supported by adults. Responsive adults enter their play as co-participants rather than ignoring, limiting the activity, having a pre-determined goal, redirecting children from their activities, interrupting or dominating an activity. Children do not require adults to become like large children, but to respect the play situation, honour the evolved rules and remain connected in the play. Children need time for individual exploration and reflection and for one-to-one interactions, which is critical for later literacy. The play opportunities provided should support children's freedom, imagination, social learning and cognitive learning equally. The most effective pedagogy is both 'teaching' and providing freely chosen yet potentially instructive play activities; therefore a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated learning should be ensured. In essence, the pleasure of play is the natural vehicle for integrated holistic development and learning (French, 2007).

Implementing the Standard

The opportunities for play/exploration provided for a child should mirror her/his stage of development, give the child the freedom to achieve mastery and success, and challenge the child to make the transition to new learning and development. In order to determine if this is being achieved, the reflective practitioner needs to consider:

- The type of play the child is currently engaging in – is it functional, constructive, symbolic, imaginative or socio-dramatic play?
- The range of opportunities provided for the child so that she/he can fully explore this type of play (appropriate environment, meaningful interactions, curriculum, etc.)
- Whether or not these opportunities are giving the child a sense of control and of being competent



Interactions ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions) are intrinsic to the relationship between play and learning and so, it is vital that each child has opportunities for play/exploration with other children, with participating and supportive adults and by themselves, where appropriate. To ensure that this is happening on a regular basis, the practitioner could reflect on the following:

- How often does she/he participate in play with the child?
- What form does her/his participation take?
- What strategies can be used to support and enable the child who may have difficulties 'gaining entry' to and sustaining play with other children, or who may be consistently excluded from play?
- Consider situations where a child may wish to play alone and how she/he may facilitate that or, conversely, determine it inappropriate

As evidenced by the research outlined in the previous section, play is not a discrete setting practice, but an extensive pathway to learning. As such, opportunities for play should not be 'incidental', but should be devised in conjunction with planning for curriculum/programme implementation. Furthermore, they should be adapted to meet changing learning and development requirements. Examples of how this may be achieved include:


- Considering how planning for learning through play accommodates the individual child, setting, local context and specific needs (special needs, disadvantage, linguistic needs, and so forth)
- Considering the frequency with which planning for play and curriculum/programme implementation is undertaken (daily, weekly, monthly or on a term basis)
- The management and evaluation of documentation and planning

Conclusion

From preparation to participation, play is a central context for a child's early learning and development. Children in the birth to six years age category are evolving their interpersonal skills. Considerable social learning is, therefore, involved in adapting to becoming part of a group ( Research Digests/Standards 13: Transitions and  14: Identity and Belonging). Play/exploration needs to be an integral part of this learning process and should, accordingly, form a major part of a setting's curriculum/programme.

The opportunities for play/exploration should be developmentally appropriate, while simultaneously challenging the child to make the transition to new learning and development. Play can, for example, facilitate imaginary worlds where new forms of social relations and new patterns of decision-making and power are explored.

If children are to become self-sufficient learners, they must

recognise that they can use space and resources for themselves. To that end, each learning area and activity in the setting needs to have plenty of relevant equipment and materials for the child ( also Research Digest/Standard 2: Environments).

Acknowledging that play in the early years presents a basis for the evolution of learning, the reflective practitioner can ensure the centrality of play/exploration within quality practice by identifying children's particular needs and appropriate adult responses. By doing so, the child is taught, supported and encouraged to engage in exploration, creativity and meaning-making processes in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and, where appropriate, alone.

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Research Digest **Standard 7 Curriculum**



Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

Introduction

Curriculum ‘...refers to all learning experiences, whether formal or informal, planned or unplanned, which contribute to a child’s development’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004:2). The most widely referenced curriculum in Ireland currently is the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). It celebrates the uniqueness of the child and seeks to nurture the child in all dimensions of her/his development: moral, spiritual, creative, aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, physical and social. The emerging *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) is underpinned by the following principles:

- The child is a ‘whole’ individual learning in context
- Early childhood care and education should be child-centred
- Early learning and development are holistic
- The child is an active participant and ‘meaning maker’
- Play is the natural medium for learning
- Adult participation aids learning
- Learning occurs through interaction
- Curriculum is a process
- Parental involvement is central
- Curriculum should promote equity and diversity (French, 2007)

From the practitioner’s perspective, a curriculum should guide her/him in their teaching aims, help her/him to keep progression in mind and enable her/him to provide structure to the child’s day. At a broader level, the holistic development and learning of a child should be encouraged through the implementation of a well-referenced curriculum or programme, based on established and verifiable principles of child development. This implementation should be achieved through a variety of adult strategies, close and supportive relationships within the setting and a wide range of experiences which are made available to the child.

Recent Research

Verifiable implemented curriculum

Siraj-Blatchford (1998) highlights the defining features of an effective curriculum as:

- Its focus on learning
- Its relevance, breadth and balance of knowledge, concepts and skills
- Planning for individual children's abilities
- Assessment
- A developmental approach to learning, building on prior knowledge and interests

Furthermore, variety and pace within the curriculum, and attention to children's ability to concentrate and persevere, is required.

There are many comprehensive and documented educational approaches to promote learning and development in the early years. Pioneers who have significantly influenced mainstream education in Europe and North America include Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia) and Weikart (High/Scope). All were concerned with respect for individual needs, world citizenship, poverty and the concept of community (French, 2007). Some countries have adopted a National Curriculum (*Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning* [UK]; Te Whariki [New Zealand]) and shortly Ireland will launch its own *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004). Documentation of the curriculum and its implementation '*adds enormously to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and is necessary for curriculum planning*' (DES, 1999:11). Curriculum planning ensures that there is something deliberately intended for each child every day to purposely enhance her/his growth, with increasing levels of challenge and complexity as the year progresses. Daily or weekly planning can be recorded using a variety of methods (Neaum and Tallack, 2000). Recording those plans requires staff to think

through the purposes of their curriculum carefully and share curriculum information. Engaging with parents about their child's progress on a weekly or monthly basis is a key indicator of professional practice (Taggart, 2007).

Differentiated and integrated experiences



Meaningful childhood assessment is an integral part of the education process and is informed by observations of children in action, and conversations with children while they are reflecting on their actions. A system for recording significant observations and conversations must be established ensuring that records are used to inform and influence future planning (Neaum and Tallack, 2000). These observations and conversations enable practitioners to match their provision to the individual and idiosyncratic learning needs, abilities and developmental level of children. This results in the development and delivery of an Individual Plan for each child, particularly those children with special needs (French, 2003). The contribution of each child and her/his innate abilities is the starting point of the curriculum which is delivered to support the distinctive thought processes, learning style, understanding and developmental profile of the child (French, 2007). Getting to know the child's parents will enable practitioners to get to know the child and her/his 'natural curriculum' which supports practitioners in differentiating their planning. As Siraj-Blatchford (1998) points out, when children arrive into the setting, they assume we know everything they do.

The *Framework for Early Learning's* thematic approach to presenting children's learning and development '*conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner and the totality of his/her learning needs*' (NCCA, 2004:22). The themes are:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communication
- Exploring and thinking

For the young child, the distinctions between subjects such as maths or art are not relevant: what is more important is that she/he experiences a coherent integrated learning process that accommodates a variety of elements (DES, 1999:16). The 'whole child' approach is centred on:

- Empathising with fellow human beings
- Cultivating a sense of aesthetics and wonder
- Thinking and developing observation skills
- Engaging in language, music and movement
- Learning experientially through play

This is in contrast to pre-determined subject content to be taught to young children (French, 2007). Curtis and O'Hagan (2003) stress that if play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality. This quality is nurtured by adults providing a rich environment and guiding children so they can develop their confidence as players and learners ( Research Digests/Standards 5: Interactions and  6: Play). This way of thinking continues to support children to grow and develop socially, cognitively and so forth, but in a way which is more natural, more meaningful and more enjoyable for them.

Care-giving routines as a context for learning

Practitioners who understand that care-giving routines provide ample opportunities for learning, also need to consider how greetings, eating, resting, going outside, tidying up, departures and the periods between activities may be conducted to further children's learning about themselves and others. Nappy changing, for example, presents opportunities for warm interactions. Mealtimes are wonderful occasions for social interaction and learning about texture, taste and colour. Children learn healthy habits through washing their hands before meals and brushing their teeth after meals. Children learn independence and problem-solving when doing things for themselves, such as pouring drinks or distributing snacks (French, 2003). In addition, there are daily spontaneous events which are significant for particular children and require support, recording and development. Young children need opportunities for new and

self-directed challenges, co-operative ventures, and sustained projects. Practitioners need to provide resources, challenges, and support for children's widening interests, creative and symbolic expression, representation and problem-solving capacities, geared to their developmental levels (French, 2003).

A consistent feature of contemporary early childhood curriculum models, such as those from New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Italy, is that learning is mediated through warm, complex, responsive, collaborative and reciprocal relationships. Attending to children's emotional state, slowing down and adapting or tuning in to how they see the world is crucial, particularly for young babies. This requires adults to take a more active, participatory role in supporting children's learning (French, 2007). Lessons from Sylva *et al.* (2004) and Taggart (2007), drawn from case studies of settings that had proved successful in promoting children's learning and development, found that effective pedagogy was characterised by:

- The quality of adult-child verbal interactions through 'sustained shared thinking'
- Staff knowledge and understanding of the curriculum
- Knowledge of how young children learn, which is mainly through play
- Adult's skill in supporting children in resolving conflicts
- Helping parents to support children's learning in the home
- Skilled diagnostic assessment of children's learning and consequent strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences

Linking all of the components above, the adult role can be described as a curriculum planning-implementation-observation/evaluation cycle.

Implementing the Standard



From the research, it is evident that a child's learning and development are holistic experiences, that play is central to integrated learning and development and to curriculum/programme implementation. It is therefore necessary for the practitioner to explore her/his understanding of holistic learning and development within her/his setting, and consider how such learning and development is being integrated into everyday practice. The practitioner might consider:

- Learning processes, dispositions and contexts
- Links between developmental domains
- Relationships
- Language
- Socialisation
- Creativity
- Gross/fine motor skills, etc.

In order to ensure effectiveness and validity, the curriculum must be reflected in, and implemented through, the child's daily routine. It should accommodate spontaneous learning opportunities, structured activities, and activities initiated by the child. The practitioner could ensure this by considering:

- How the daily routine, including care routines, is used to implement the curriculum – arrival in the morning, play time, meal times, transitions, etc.
- Aspects of the curriculum that lend themselves to responding to spontaneous learning opportunities which occur during the daily routine – open-ended play items, prompting the child to draw on her/his previous learning in a new context and encouraging the child to recreate and replicate the learning that has taken place in one play area in another

- The extent to which the curriculum can be adapted to support the learning and development of all children, including those with special needs

Planning for curriculum or programme implementation ( Research Digests/Standards 4: Consultation and  8: Planning and Evaluation) should be based on the child's individual profile, which is established through systematic observation and assessment. The various components of these processes include:

- Observation
- Parents
- Child's self-assessment
- Participation in play
- Interactions
- Listening
- Consultation with colleagues
- Reflection
- Ongoing cycles

Conclusion

The concept of curriculum can be quite contentious – different curricula are underpinned by different values and principles, and are informed by diverse assumptions and beliefs about children and their learning capacities. Perhaps bearing in mind where the word comes from might serve as a reminder to how it should be used: 'Curriculum' originates from Latin and translates literally to mean 'racing chariot'. From this, the notion of a racetrack was derived, leading to the meaning 'a course to be run'. For early years practitioners, it is a course which they run everyday, as they encourage and support the holistic development and learning of each child. In order to stay on track, they must ensure that the



curriculum or programme they are working from is verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible.

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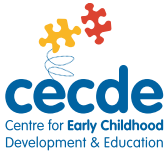
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The National Quality Framework
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Research Digest

Standard 11 Professional Practice

Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, ongoing professional development.



Introduction

The role of the adult in supporting quality early childhood experiences for young children is absolutely central. As Oberheumer and Ulich (1997) state, *'decisions made about staffing will be decisions made about the quality of services'*. In Ireland, since the mid-1990's, we have been discussing the issue of how adults who work in early childhood care and education (ECCE) services for young children should be qualified. Important publications that record our national views on this issue include *The National Childcare Strategy* (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999), *Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999), and *The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector* (DJELR, 2002). *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) is the most recent expression of national consensus on professional practice and the aforementioned Standard is a summary statement of this consensus.

Recent Research

Qualifications

All of the above mentioned policy documents, including *Síolta*, have been informed by national and international research on the relationship between adult qualifications and dispositions, and the quality of service provision in ECCE. In Ireland, there is no statutory requirement to be formally qualified to work with young children in ECCE settings (except in the case of primary teachers in primary schools). However, a strong commitment to qualifications has been made in practice as research has made it clear that there is a strong correlation between qualifications levels of adults working in services and the quality of the service. Many studies support this premise, including Arnett (1989) who discovered that a higher level of training in caregivers was related to more positive attitudes towards the children and less authoritarian styles of interaction. Howes (1997) proposed that teachers with the highest levels of education scored best on the Classroom Interaction Scale, and that classrooms that complied with professional standards had more effective teachers and more positive child outcomes.

While these US based studies could be considered to be from significantly different populations of practitioners than the Irish context, one of the most rigorous and respected research studies of recent years has been conducted much closer to home in Britain and Northern Ireland. Amongst a wide range of noteworthy findings, the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project* found that the higher the qualification levels among managers, the higher the setting scored on quality (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Values and principles

Whilst qualifications are important, research has also shown that professional practice in ECCE needs to be guided and informed by a set of core values and principles (Rodd, 2006). These can be expressed as a code of ethics, which are usually developed by the membership of the ECCE sector. They are important because working with young children and their families is often challenging and regularly requires practitioners to make quick decisions

without the support and guidance of other professionals. A code of ethics/set of core values is an essential support in such situations, as it ensures that practice is grounded in evidence. It also assists practitioners in setting boundaries about what is acceptable professional behaviour (Dally, 2007). In Ireland, the National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) has published a useful document discussing ethical practice in ECCE. In this publication, the role of a code of ethics is described in detail and includes:

"...assisting the practitioner in exploring solutions to complex situations; acting as a guide for early childhood professionals to maintain high standards; allowing childcare personnel to explore their motivation for working in a childcare setting" (NCNA, 2005:4).

Laevers (2005) conducted a thematic review of non-traditional, highly regarded early education systems (High/Scope [USA], Reggio Emilia [Italy], Experiential Learning [Belgium] and *Te Whariki* [New Zealand]). He identified six characteristics of professional practice in early childhood education considered to be the cornerstones of any educational model of the future:

- Respect for the child
- An open framework (curriculum) approach
- A rich environment
- A process of representation
- Communication, interaction and dialogue
- Observation and monitoring

Reflective practice

In much of the literature regarding professional practice in ECCE, reference is made to the importance of reflective practice and ongoing professional development as the essential processes to ensure that high standards of quality provision are maintained (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999; UNESCO, 2004). Reflective practice requires that the individual practitioner engages in thought processes that make her/him aware, in a critical way, of her/his everyday activities with a view to continuously improving and refining practice. These processes could be illustrated as follows:

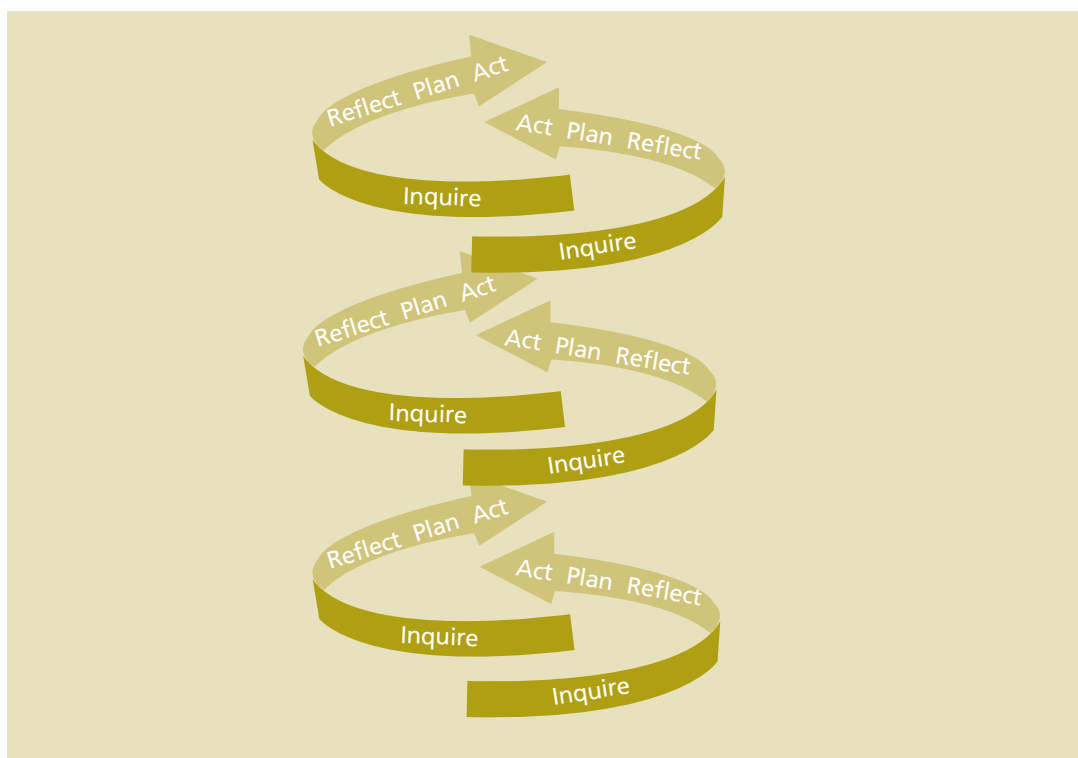



Fig. 11.1: Thought processes for improving and refining practice

Professional development

A practitioner's capacity to engage in reflective practice can be supported and enhanced by regular and ongoing professional development activities. These can take a variety of forms including attendance at conferences, observation of practice in other ECCE settings and formal in-service courses. Research on Continuing Professional Development (CPD) courses for professionals highlights the fact that there are important characteristics that should be present if the course is to be effective. These include that the course:

".....be embedded in the context of practice; engage and challenge the personal belief systems of the participant; stimulate and promote reflection in participants; integrate new knowledge with practice and recognise discourse as central to learning; recognise the need for continuity between old and new through practice; acknowledge the significance of the meaning making process and understand the need for time for its achievement" (Duignan, 2003:51).

Dispositions

Working with young children and families is a challenging and demanding professional choice. In modern society, the early childhood professional needs to be fully prepared to meet these challenges in a professional manner. In addition to ensuring that qualifications have provided the necessary pre-service education including the core knowledge, skills and competence for professional practice, the individual practitioner must have a genuine commitment to working positively with children and families. The disposition essential to professional practice in ECCE has been identified as one which combines sensitivity and empathy with the ability to be objective and practical ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions).

Implementing the Standard

As already outlined, the Irish ECCE workforce has made strong commitments to becoming appropriately qualified for this demanding and challenging career choice. It is essential that continued efforts are made to ensure that all staff working with young children attain at least entry level qualifications (FETAC Level 5 or equivalent) or in the case of managerial staff, Bachelors degree level (or equivalent). Information on the range and nature of courses available can be accessed directly from the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) or the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). In addition, the City and County Childcare Committees and National Voluntary Childcare Organisations will be able to support practitioners who wish to find out more about nationally accredited training, as well as CPD opportunities.

In order to ensure that the setting supports and promotes regular opportunity for practitioners to reflect upon and review their practice, the following steps could be taken:

- **Unqualified staff, or those in the process of acquiring training and qualifications, need to be resourced and supported to achieve their own learning goals**

- One qualified and experienced staff member in the setting is clearly identified as having responsibility for supporting staff in training or students on placement
- As part of ongoing professional development, staff should be encouraged in their own reflective practice. Keeping a practice journal or a portfolio of professional activities, for example, is a good source of insight and learning
- All staff (particularly new staff) should become fully familiar with all policy documents that specify the principles within which the setting operates

Constant updating and refreshing of professional skills and knowledge is necessary to realise this Standard in practice. This can be achieved in a variety of ways ranging from participation in regular in-service training or other formal courses, to engaging in reading and research related to practice. It is important that such activities are valued and recognised in the setting. For example:

- Staff should be encouraged to participate in network meetings with other practitioners, to attend seminars and conferences, or to visit colleagues in other settings
- Time should be set aside regularly in the setting, either at a weekly team meeting or once a month to talk about staff experiences of professional development activities, allowing them to share the new knowledge and insight they have gained
- Regular time should be given to discussing challenges that arise in the course of practice and staff should be encouraged to engage in research activities to contribute to formulating solutions or changing practice
- Where possible, internet access should be provided to enable staff to use online resource material for education or networking activities
- An important aspect of professional development is being able to get constructive and supportive feedback from colleagues on their own practice. This should be available to staff regularly

Conclusion

Practicing in a professional capacity in an early childhood education setting is a complex and challenging career choice. The role of the adult is of central importance in achieving quality in both provision of the service and in the experiences of young children. Staff must be appropriately qualified for the level of responsibility and practice expected of them in the setting. An early childhood education setting should be recognised and developed as a learning environment, not only for the children but also for the adults staffing it. Processes should be in place to ensure that all staff operate to an agreed set of core principles that promote the creation of a respectful, democratic community of practice conducive to encouraging reflective practice, ongoing research and CPD. As adults, we are role models for children in all aspects of our behaviour and must provide ethical leadership and guidance through our everyday actions.



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Notes:



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Research Digest Standard 13 Transitions



Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.

Introduction


Young children may experience many transitions in their lives; from home to an early childhood setting, between early childhood settings, from there to primary school and from one aspect of the daily routine to the next. The early years mark the beginning of these various transitions and so, early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings have a tremendous role in laying strong foundations for ensuring the continuity of experiences for young children. In order to support these transitions, and to make them meaningful to everyone involved, effective management and a variety of communication systems ( Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication) are required. This involves developing policies, procedures and practice that promote consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent) and the close involvement of parents and relevant professionals.

Socio-cultural factors are paramount to any understanding of transitions. The child and her/his surrounding environment are not separate entities. Rather, the child is part of a social matrix where previous experiences influence the speed and comfort at which she/he can make the transition from one setting to another. Personal, family and background experiences, for example, impact on a child's adjustment to a new setting. When making a transition, the child is leaving behind (albeit temporarily) someplace where they have an established sense of identity, and beginning someplace where they will engage in new experiences, face physical, social, and behavioural changes, and meet with new challenges and expectations. This raises issues of continuity and discontinuity. It is, therefore, imperative that transitions are facilitated in a sensitive, responsive and smooth manner.

Recent Research

Consistent key relationships

Transitions are eased by the child's experience, from birth onwards, of reliable, stable, continuous, and loving relationships. Close and direct contact by the primary caregiver with the settings, along with careful thought applied to the transitions children experience in their care, is required (Keinig, 2002). This can be facilitated in early childhood settings through a key worker system, where each child and family is assigned a person who has a particular responsibility for liaison with the child and family, and who may:


- Undertake a home visit in advance of a child coming to the centre
- Assess, understand and plan to meet the child and parent's/ carer's needs
- Link closely with parents/carers in helping to settle the child into the centre
- Understand cultural differences and/or key words from a child's first language
- Make contact at the beginning and end of each day with the child and parent/carer
- Ensure that transitions within the daily routine are sensitively planned (e.g., children are alerted to the next activity, have choice regarding who to sit beside, are given sufficient time to finish their previous activity)
- Monitor the curriculum offered to the children for depth, balance, and relevance ( Research Digest/Standard 7: Curriculum)
- Provide an update on progress and advice to other team members, and take part in reviews with the children
- Support the child in the transition to school
- Bridge the worlds of home and the setting (French, 2003; French and Murphy, 2005)

The provision of reminders of home, such as special toys, blankets and soothers, and photographs of special people and pets, can also support the transition from home to the setting (French and Murphy, 2005). Dockett and Perry (2002) identified two elements of school readiness research that have been ignored – first, the significance of children’s ability to form meaningful relationships and, second, understanding issues from the child’s perspective. Cassidy (2005) concurs; children are rarely, if ever, consulted on their experience of the transition to school. For them, knowing the rules and having friends when starting school are the most significant factors (Dockett and Perry, 2002). Smooth transitions are supported by consultation and communication between settings (home, early childhood service, school and specialist staff), sharing information and establishing welcoming environments for the child and family (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002).

Appropriate liaison and consultation within and between settings

Research has highlighted the significance of smooth transitions between settings and the long-term impact of how these transitions are experienced (Dockett and Perry, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Keinig, 2002; Cassidy, 2005; O’Kane and Hayes, 2006). Success in earlier transitions can positively influence subsequent ones. Conceptualised as ‘border crossing’, children need support to mark and successfully negotiate transitions (Keinig, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2005).

In order for children to feel ‘suitable’ (e.g., having feelings of well-being, identity, belonging and capability to succeed), Brostrom (2002) explores the requirement for children being ready for school, and also for schools being ready for children. She enumerates several practical activities that are considered to be positive in supporting transitions, including positive liaison (based on personal contact prior to children starting school), collecting information on the child’s interests and needs, and ongoing communication regarding activities and the curriculum. Each context is different; the important thing is for settings (e.g., childminders, early childhood services, schools) to

proactively connect and collaborate with parents on the kind of information sharing that is useful ( Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication). Brostrom (2002) recommends the use of photographs, children's drawings and favourite stories forwarded from the earlier setting. Margetts (2002) advises the establishment of a local transitions team in order to develop effective transition programmes. In Ireland, in communities experiencing social and economic disadvantage, the Home School Community Liaison Teacher works to support and facilitate smooth transitions.

Policy and procedures on Transitions


Cassidy (2005) conceptualises the differences in the learning environments between settings and the potential pressures and anxieties that may be exacerbated by such for young children. The importance of continuity within and between settings has been recognised, in terms of learning experiences, relationships, and physical differences such as class size and adult: child ratios. This necessitates a common language and understanding regarding transitions (Brostrom, 2002; Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). In a national study in Ireland regarding the transition to school, only 10% of preschools have a transition policy and implementation plan, and levels of communication between preschool and primary school are reportedly low (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Having recorded, clear and disseminated policies and procedures ensures that children, parents, early childhood and school staff have a shared focus and direction for supporting children in the transition to school (Dockett and Perry, 2002; O'Kane and Hayes, 2006).

Children with low self-esteem, those who have difficulty sitting still, listening and concentrating, and those with behavioural problems are challenged in the transition to school. It is, therefore, important to develop independence, self-reliance, concentration, communication, and language skills in young children (O'Kane and Hayes, 2006). Skills in problem-solving, social competence, determination and '*knowing about not knowing and what to do about it*' were also identified (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002:126). Fabian and Dunlop (2005) refer to the power of play in bridging the transitions from one educational phase to the next. They believe that it can develop children's understanding of the

new situation/curriculum, encourage confidence and competence, and progress learning. How these skills are supported can be articulated in a general transitions policy which may include a key worker policy, a recording system, a 'settling in' policy, a play policy and a 'moving on' policy to support continuity between settings (French, 2003).

Implementing the Standard

Smooth transitions should be facilitated and promoted through the provision of consistent key relationships within the setting. How the setting achieves this can be determined by a number of factors:


- Experience of the adults
- Presence of the same adults throughout the year
- Ensuring sensitivity to the child's needs at transition times throughout the day ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions)
- Providing secure attachment relationships with adults in the setting
- Acknowledging how these secure relationships facilitate the easy transition of children into/within/from the setting
- Key worker system in operation

In addition to appropriate liaison within a setting, smooth transitions are promoted through similar liaison between settings. The child's transition into/within/from settings can be supported through:

- The collection of information before the child enters the setting
- Sharing this information appropriately within the setting
- Making connections with other relevant settings/schools/organisations/individuals

- Providing information and advice to other settings/schools/ organisations/ individuals when the child is transferring from one setting to another

In ensuring that transitions are made as smooth as possible for children and their parents, children themselves and the relevant professionals should be consulted and involved in the process. A setting can encourage such engagement by:

- Enabling staff and parents to meet and discuss issues prior to enrolment
- Providing opportunities to visit the setting prior to enrolment
- Introducing children to the setting following enrolment
- Facilitating and encouraging parents to spend time in the setting with their child following enrolment
- Accessing information about the child from parents and/or previous settings
- Providing information to other settings, with parental consent ( Research Digest/Standard 12: Communication)
- Recognising how formal and informal links with other relevant organisations or agencies in the community can support transitions

Policies and procedures related to children's transitions should be reviewed and updated regularly, and translated into everyday practice. All procedures should be well-documented and made known to relevant staff and adults.

Conclusion

There is a certain irony inherent in the discussion of transitions, which centres on how a transition is deemed successful or not. While a transition is often assessed as being the relatively short 'settling in' period for a child beginning in a new setting, the reality is that the transition's impact can only be fully evaluated over time, through factors such as curriculum, relationships, communication skills, and so forth. Well-functioning transitions support a child's current and future capacities for learning and development.

At a contextual level, communication between parents and settings is vital in ensuring smooth transitions. This is particularly relevant when the heterogeneous nature of current Irish society is considered. Where so many ethnic, cultural and linguistic variables exist, settings need to demonstrate their capacity to meet diversity by facilitating the cultural background of each child. Transitions, therefore, are highly dependant on effective partnerships, which should be characterised by consultation and involvement.

Transitions don't simply mark the progression from one setting to another. They represent change on many levels, ranging from the daily experiences of children in settings to the broader themes of culture, identity, roles, and status. Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote the sensitive handling and management of these changes.



Resources for Transitions

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French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

French, G. and Murphy, P. (2005). *Once in a Lifetime: Early Childhood Care and Education for Children from Birth to Three*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Keinig, A. (2002). The Importance of Social Adjustment for Future Success (in) Fabian, H. and Dunlop, A. (Eds.). *Transitions in the Early Years: Debating Continuity and Progression for Children in Early Education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer, pp. 23-37.

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O’Kane, M. and Hayes, N. (2006). The Transition to School in Ireland: Views of Preschool and Primary School Teachers. *International Journal of Transitions in Childhood*, Volume 2, pp. 4–16.

Children’s Books

Anholt, L. (2005). *Going to Playgroup*. London: Orchard Books. [Explores a child’s fear of leaving her mother and going to a new, unfamiliar place].

Edwards, B. and Flintoft, A. (2004). *My First Day at Nursery School*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. [Prepares children for separation from their parents].

Forward, T. (2004). *The First Day of School*. London: Doubleday. [Prepares children for the transition to primary school].

Teague, K. (1991). *Anna Goes to School*. London: Magi Publications. [Charts a little girl’s first day at school and the changes in her routine].

Worth, B. (1991). *Bye-Bye High Chair*. New York: Muppet Babies Big Steps Series (Golden Books). [Designed for toddlers, in preparation for the transition the nursery/pre-school setting].

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Research Digest

Standard 14 Identity and Belonging



Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group-identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.

Introduction

Issues of identity and belonging are key to any discussion of childhood development (in particular to the socialisation component) and create strong foundations on which future learning and interaction patterns are predicated ( Research Digest/Standard 5: Interactions). If, for example, children form positive attitudes towards difference from a very early age, they are more likely to grow up appreciating diversity as a normal part of their lives. This kind of learning needs to be reflective of the fact that twenty-first century Ireland is an increasingly pluralistic society. In order to ensure harmony within this multiculturalism, it is essential that children learn from an early age to respect other individuals and groups.

As a precursor to tolerance and mutual understanding, it is equally important that each child is given opportunities to develop her/his own sense of identity and belonging. It is, after all, only once a child has an established sense of self that she/he can begin to identify with other children and adults that she/he encounters in the setting on a regular basis. As Smith *et al.* (2003:181) conclude *'a sense of self is used as a reference point for understanding others.'*

Identity is a general term for how people think about themselves, and can refer to all aspects of the 'self' – physical appearance, personality, ability, age, gender or ethnic group. The concept of belonging is inextricably linked to that of identity, as it is how a person evaluates their importance within a particular setting (e.g., family, peer group, care setting). In order to feel a true sense of belonging within a setting, for example, a child needs to understand that her/his being there extends far beyond the necessity of parents having to work; the child needs to feel welcome, understood, included and valued.

The early years setting plays a central role in the promotion of positive identities and a strong sense of belonging among children. After infancy, it is the child's peers that provide the major reference group for children and is often the first point of contact and influence beyond the immediate family. It therefore represents a time of great challenge to the individual child, who continues to develop a sense of self, while simultaneously developing an


understanding of her/his own emotions. She/he is also learning to categorise others and their emotional expressions. As ever, the practitioner is fundamental to this process. While all the time bearing in mind that how a child feels about her/himself is not innate, but learned, the practitioner needs to ensure that the setting provides a confident self- and group-identity.

For both children and practitioners, the sense of who we are (especially when all around us is changing at such a fast pace) is fundamental. Ethnic and racial diversity have powerful consequences for identity. For practitioners and teachers, learning to juggle the multiple realities and often conflicting expectations of a diverse society, is an incredible challenge. The effective practitioner is largely 'unscripted' for such tasks, forced to act and react on the spot as situations arise, and to adapt to the changing needs of her/his particular setting.

Recent Research

Identity formation


Identity formation is a complex process that is never completed (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). From birth to maturity, a child's standpoint (from which she/he views the behaviours of others and attempts to understand the world around her/him) is constantly evolving. This process of socialisation is central to any understanding of identity, and is dependent on a variety of factors, ranging from 'nature-nurture' to family and peer influences, as well as cultural considerations. These socio-cultural aspects of socialisation are paramount. They highlight the fact that the child is not a constant, universal organism operating in a vacuum but is, instead, an inherently social being. She/he is influenced by her/his immediate contacts, by a particular culture (ideologies, values, attitudes, laws, customs, etc.) and by a diversity of other social influences involving reciprocal relationships (e.g., what happens at home influences what happens at the setting and vice versa). The development of identity, therefore, primarily comes from experience; children acquire new ideas about themselves and others, and modify old ones, as they encounter their social and physical world (O'Dwyer, 2006).

The image of oneself as a distinct person is crucial in order to establish a sense of identity. Initially, this sense of self is established through ongoing contact with one person, generally the mother figure in a baby's life. Between the ages of nine and twelve months, an infant is capable of distinguishing between pictorial representations of themselves and others – they smile more, and look for longer, at pictures of themselves than of other babies of the same age (Smith *et al.*, 2003). As the toddler develops into the pre-school years, other people contribute to a broader view of this identity. Through their different behaviours, these people will help a child to know who she/he is. At three or four years of age, the family structure provides the child with a sense of personal continuity, and so has a powerful effect on their sense of identity (Dowling, 2000). When a child begins at a crèche or nursery, the practitioner shares this responsibility ( Research Digest/Standard 13: Transitions). They become a further influence on the child's sense of self, and of others, as they teach her/him how to interact, how to establish and maintain friendships, how to manage conflict, and so forth. The reflective practitioner helps each child to build a personal, multiple self-image and a vitally important sense of belonging. This involves understanding how each child thinks and knowing what interests her/him. In order to feel comfortable and have a sense of belonging within a setting, a child needs to know that she/he is known and that her/his behaviour is understood.

When children begin attending childcare and education settings, they leave the familiar patterns and values of home life and face a world where there are different people who may do things differently or have different values. This represents further challenges to the practitioner. As Vandebroek (2000:5) concludes:

“Educators can help children to experience the negotiation between different reference groups. They have this responsibility exactly because they represent the first new milieu that a child experiences outside the home environment. Early childcare is the place where the child will be confronted (probably for the first time) with society's diversity and complexity.”

An early years setting can create, strengthen and promote positive self- and group-identity in three principal ways (Schellekens, 2001) by aiming to:

- Promote identification by offering recognition, increasing empathy and stimulating curiosity. By exchanging experiences, adventures and emotions, children discover similarities and differences together. They learn that everyone has her/his own identity, own home environment, character, feelings and style of behaviour
- Increase self-confidence by emphasising everyone's strong points; reflecting on one's own strengths and style forms the basis for a positive self-image and for self-confidence, which in turn can promote mutual understanding and respect
- Foster insight into feelings and behaviour and the effect this has on others. The themes of various stories and fairytales, for example, can provide a good opportunity for children to talk about what concerns them. In this way, they explore their inner world and that of others. They find the right words to articulate their feelings, enjoy the similarities and accept the differences, without immediately rejecting 'being different'
- The encouragement of 'healthy communities' who value and understand the influence which early preventative health measures can have on children's well-being ( Research Digest/Standard 16: Community Involvement)

Tolerance and mutual understanding

Today's Irish society is increasingly heterogeneous and diverse. Accepting the fact that children as young as three-years old are capable of holding and expressing prejudicial attitudes can be quite difficult, but research shows that this is the case. We now know that young children have an ethnic awareness of cultural identity and they are not only aware of the ethnic group they belong to, but they already attach a value judgment to it (Vandenbroeck, 2000). The challenge that confronts practitioners, therefore, is to create a learning environment within which existing prejudices are challenged and the potential for developing such attitudes is undermined. Stressing similarity is insufficient, as it is unrealistic to assume that it will somehow remove the tendency by children to make distinctions between themselves and those from different backgrounds

(racial, ethnic, religious, social, etc.). Hand-in-hand with an emphasis on similarity, a strategy that can deal sensitively with difference is required. This type of anti-bias approach seeks to nurture the development of each child to her/his full potential by actively addressing issues of diversity and equity in the early years setting. Murray and O'Doherty (2001) classify an anti-bias curriculum as having four specific goals:

- To nurture each child's construction of a knowledgeable, confident self-concept and group identity
- To promote each child's comfortable, empathic interaction with people from diverse backgrounds
- To foster each child's critical thinking about bias
- To cultivate each child's ability to stand up for her/himself and for others in the face of bias

When considering diversity within the setting, it is important that the practitioner recognises the role of each adult. Developing an open relationship towards and amongst young children requires that practitioners become conscious of their own value judgments and expectations and, furthermore, that they exercise the necessary caution so that these attributes do not determine their communication with children, parents and colleagues (Schellekens, 2001). Murray and O'Doherty (2001) offer further suggestions as to how staff may be encouraged to promote diversity:

- Increase their understanding of terminology (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice)
- Respond to children's biased remarks and actions
- Empower children to resist discrimination
- Know how to deal with and support all children involved when difficult issues arise between two or more children
- Be able to support the home culture of each child
- Help children to develop skills to be critically aware, to empathise and reflect, so that they have a basis on which

to make up their own minds about concepts of fairness and justice

- Know how to build trust and real partnerships with parents when staff are from the dominant culture and parents are not
- Learn how to challenge bias with other adults in a respectful way

Using early childhood care and education (ECCE) in helping children to reach their developmental peak, there are four particular cornerstones that should constitute that learning (cited in O'Dwyer, 2006): *Learning to know* - basic knowledge acquisition; *learning to do* - how children learn to put what they have learned into practice; *learning to be* – the all-round development of the child (e.g., the development of independent, critical thinking); and *learning to live together* – in order to give an accurate view of the world, the setting must first help children to discover who they are. Taken together, the four elements highlight the fact that ECCE should constitute a continuous process of forming 'whole' human beings. This is reflected in the immense responsibility upon each setting to promote positive identities and a strong sense of belonging.

Implementing the Standard

Having explored the fact that a child's sense of identity and belonging can sometimes be challenged by certain stereotypes and misconceptions, it is important that the daily routine within the setting addresses this. Examples of how this may be achieved include:

- Using diverse images of family and community life (photos, drawings, etc.)
- Choosing books and materials that reflect and promote the culture and background of all children present in the setting

- Avoiding the depiction of stereotypical role models and cultural images (based on gender, culture, age, ability, etc.)
- Avoiding bias (e.g., gender, colour, race, religious affiliation, family structure, socio-economic status)

In addition to the actual materials used, there are a number of ways to ensure that the experiences provided for children promote a confident self- and group-identity:

- Staff within the setting should be encouraged to become aware of their own beliefs, values and attitudes to diversity, as well as being responsive and sensitive to the identity and rights of all children
- Language should be a key consideration – communication between English and non-English speaking children should be encouraged, materials and information should be available in the first language of the family, and strategies that encourage children to express themselves both verbally and non-verbally should be devised and implemented
- Parents should be encouraged and supported to share aspects of their culture and background with all within the setting (e.g., food recipes, story-telling, customs)

Though the hope with most of the above suggestions is that they act as preventive measures or safeguards in terms of discrimination, there will inevitably be times when a setting has to counteract discriminatory words or actions, such as racism or bullying. Methods for achieving this could include:

- Identifying and empathising with children and adults affected by discrimination and racism
- Encouraging and supporting staff to discuss difficult situations
- Supporting adults and children to overcome difficult experiences in relation to racism and discrimination
- Provision of ongoing professional development



Conclusion

In the early years, a child is very vulnerable and so every adult and child that she/he encounters has the power to affect her/his behaviour, actions, intentions, learning outcomes and beliefs (Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). When ECCE is presented from a one-sided cultural perspective, children are provided with a view of the world that is both too narrow and unrepresentative. In order to reach a common ground, the experiences of all children in the setting, their questions, their moral values (however basically developed) and their social norms must be openly and appropriately explored. This kind of 'negotiation of meaning' requires an environment in which every child feels respected and valued.

Helping children to develop positive self- and group-identities, while at the same time encouraging them to understand and have similar regard for the identity and rights of others, means infusing a setting with certain underlying or core principles. These values include everything from democratic legitimacy to peace; human rights to a spirit of solidarity; and equal opportunities to personal responsibility. Though academic in their definition, they can be very practical in their implementation. Songs, story-telling, cultural celebrations, role-playing, and so forth, are effective tools that the practitioner can use to ensure that her/his setting provides children with a positive sense of identity and belonging. The establishment of this identity can then, in turn, lead to security in relationships, the prevention of bullying and discrimination, the development of competency, and the provision of purpose and responsibility for children.

Resources for Identity and Belonging

Department of Health and Children (1999). *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. Dublin: Department of Health and Children.

Dowling, M. (2000). *Young Children's Personal, Social and Emotional Development*. London: Paul Chapman Ltd.

Murray, C. and O'Doherty, A. (2001). *'Éist' - Respecting Diversity in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training*. Dublin: Pavee Point.

O'Dwyer, M. (2006). *Learning to Unlearn: Using the Primary School Curriculum to Challenge Prejudice Among Children During the Formative Years*. (Ph.D Thesis). Limerick: University of Limerick.

Schellekens, E. (2001). This is Me: In Search of Your Own Story. *Intercultural Education*, Volume 12, No. 3, pp. 339-347.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2001). Diversity and Learning in the Early Years (in) Pugh, G. (Ed.). *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years: Working Collaboratively for Children*. London: Sage Publications, pp. 96-107.

Smith, P., Cowie, H. and Blades, M. (2003). *Understanding Children's Development* (4th ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Vandenbroeck, M. (2000). *Self-Awareness, Cultural Identity and Connectedness: Three Themes to (Re)Define in Anti-Bias Work*. Paper presented at the European Conference on Quality in Early Childhood Education (EECERA), Institute of Education, London, 29th August–1st September 2000.

Children's Books

Binch, C. (2001). *Silver Shoes*. Great Britain: Frances Lincoln Ltd. [Pictorial representation of a racially diverse family].

Damon, E. (1995). *All Kinds of People*. London: Tango Books. [A lift-the-flap book, looking at different cultures].

Naidoo, B. (1994). *Letang's New Friend*. Essex: Pearson Education Ltd. [Explores issues of identity, belonging and friendship].

McPhail, D. (1996). *Something Special*. London: Penguin. [Children are encouraged to identify their own special qualities and those of their friends].

Willis, J. and Ross, T. (2001). *Susan Laughs*. Great Britain: Red Fox. [Focuses on the abilities of a disabled child].



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Research Digest

Standard 16 Community Involvement



Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adults' and children's engagement with the wider community.

Introduction

Effective early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings see the child in the context of the family, and the family in the context of the wider community (Conaty, 2002). Community involvement in terms of early childhood provision can be mutually beneficial – while children in the setting benefit from new and broadened learning experiences, changing community needs can also be addressed through quality services (e.g., early intervention programmes, parental support). Whalley (2001:133) believes that a community involvement approach fosters good practice through interaction and consultation, where *'...everyone is learning; children, staff, parents and the wider community'*.

Community involvement can take many forms. It begins with an awareness of what amenities, resources and opportunities are available, and is progressed when a setting establishes links which have the potential to extend and develop its involvement in the wider community. It can be greatly enhanced through the establishment of networks and partnerships with both statutory and voluntary organisations. Liaison with local statutory services, such as health providers, can be immensely beneficial in terms of contact with specialist staff, and can facilitate early intervention strategies. Links to childcare organisations can help to keep services up-to-date on ECCE developments in Ireland and abroad, and allow the exchange of information, concerns and ideas. Similarly, contact with specialist organisations, such as those representing Travellers, refugees or children with special needs, can inform a setting's curriculum/programme of activities, through the provision of relevant information, resources and personnel.

The essence of the relationship between ECCE and community involvement lies in the provision of opportunities to children to become familiar with the wider community (beyond the home and setting), which will later become an integral part of their lives. Furthermore, it broadens their range of experiences in terms of learning and development, expanding the curriculum beyond the walls of the setting.

Recent Research

Linking with the wider community

“The bond between parent and child should be the central pivot of educational activitiesthe community has to perceive a commitment to educational change, not for the benefit of the outsiders, but for itself and its children. Teachers for their part must know the cultural access point in the local community. If they do not, they run the grave risk of failing the child and the community they pretend to address.” (Bernard Van Leer Foundation, cited in Conaty, 2002:44)

Cultural practices and traditions tend to have significant influence on the relationship between ECCE settings and community involvement. In Reggio Emilia settings, for example, the pre-school programme is a vital part of the community, a reality reflected in considerable financial support. This tradition of community support for families with young children expands on Italy’s cultural view of children as the collective responsibility of the state (Cadwell, 2002). In Ireland, socio-cultural theory, embedded in the belief that learning is an unfolding, evolutionary process, has greatly influenced ECCE. In particular, its advocacy of a more community-focused approach to learning and development has impacted on the expansion of the social context in which learning takes place.

Pence and Ball (2000) outline general guiding principles for this type of cooperative/community approach, within the framework of a setting’s curriculum/programme:

- Support and reinforcement for community initiative
- Maintenance of multicultural respect (especially as children may be encountering people from different ethnic backgrounds to themselves, or to those they have already become familiar with in their setting)
- Identification of community and individual strengths as the basis for activities and initiatives

- Ensuring a broad ecological perspective and awareness of the child as part of a family and wider community
- Awareness that while the immediate focus is on ECCE, this type of approach should provide the basis for broader child, youth, family and community training and services


These principles are reflective of what Pence and Ball refer to as '*...culturally grounding curriculum through elders contributions*' (2000:43), where children are introduced to members of the wider community who can bring cultural content, historical knowledge and experience with the community's children and families into the setting. These 'elders' provide links between the setting experience and the community experience, and therefore promote an interactionist approach to learning and development. This type of community representative can be drawn from a wide range of sources; parents or grandparents of children within the setting, local Gardaí, storytellers, local business people, community health care workers, and so forth.

In addition to inviting the community into the setting, it is equally important that the setting provides children with opportunities to experience the wider community first-hand. Organised outings such as nature walks and visits to local amenities (parks, sports facilities, libraries, museums, etc.) and involvement in local initiatives such as 'tidy town' competitions provide children with essential opportunities to participate in new and exciting activities, as well as increasing their comprehension of life beyond the context of the home and setting. As French (2003) points out, such outings should consider health and safety procedures (e.g., adequate adult/child ratios), and facilitate expansion of the child's interest and learning (e.g., allowing sufficient time and space for children to observe their surroundings and comment on them).

Promoting children's citizenship in a community context

As learning and development take place in a social context, the child is socialised by factors beyond immediate family and experiences in the daily setting. Contact with the surrounding community provides a child with a rich and diverse learning environment. Children should, therefore, be encouraged and

supported to be active participants in those communities. French (2003) suggests ways in which this type of 'liaison' can be encouraged:

- As part of their everyday activities, children should be able to avail of the opportunities that their local community has to offer (e.g., shops, businesses, recycling banks)
- Children should be provided with knowledge about local areas of physical or spiritual significance, such as rivers or places of worship
- Exercises to ensure smooth transitions for children should be organised ( Research Digest/Standard 13: Transitions). Bringing children to their intended school, for example, showing them around or inviting the Principal in to the setting encourages a smooth transition to school for young children
- Contacts with other local childcare services in the area could be established
- It is important to have a network of local contacts to consult regularly (e.g., local doctor)
- Venturing out into the community enriches children's experiences, by broadening their perspective, encouraging positive exploration and allowing them to make connections between the service and the outside world

Implementing the Standard

Promoting community involvement begins with an awareness of what resources exist at local, regional and national levels. It is, therefore, up to each setting to have a range of information available on the amenities, services and opportunities available that can be used to support and complement the goals and objectives of the service. These type of resources include:

- Professional support - City/County Childcare Committees, trade unions, Traveller organisations, Barnardos, etc.

- Membership organisations - The National Children's Nurseries Association, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, Forbairt Naíonraí Teo, Irish Montessori Education Board, Irish National Teacher's Organisation, etc.
- Other early childhood practitioners and services networks – Border Counties Childcare Network, etc.
- Health services – doctors, public health clinic/nurse, preschool officers, therapists, dentists, Early Intervention Team, etc.
- Parent support – parenting programmes, social clubs/societies, support groups for families of a child with a disability, etc.
- Other ECCE services – parent and toddler groups, crèches, primary schools, after school programmes, etc.
- Education/learner support – schools, adult education classes/centres, training organisations, etc.
- Cultural outlets – theatres, music centres, museums, art centres, libraries, etc.
- Social and environmental facilities and services – parks and gardens, sports centres, fire station, Gardaí, open farms, zoos, etc.
- Internet/websites

Making this information available to staff, parents and other adults within the setting should be done through a variety of media; bulletin boards, newsletters, parents booklets, e-mail, information sharing sessions within the setting, outings, participation in community events, and so forth. It is equally important that this awareness raising is a two-way process, and that the local community is made aware of the activities and services that particular settings contribute to supporting children and families. Again, this should be achieved through newsletters, websites, information meetings and connection with the local media.


Including children is an integral part of community involvement and, accordingly, each setting should actively promote children's citizenship in their local, regional and national community. This



involves ensuring that setting activities are regularly coordinated with community agencies and/or local schools (e.g., transitions policy, local Residents' Associations, community initiatives, sports groups). Promoting children's citizenship should also enable babies and young children to be present and to participate in events and activities within the community. This type of participation should be achieved through:

- Outings and field trips
- Participation in community events, such as market days, school fairs, parades and pageants, etc.
- Facilitating visits to the setting by representatives of a variety of community resources, such as a Garda, fire officer, librarian, shopkeeper, etc.
- Involving children in partnerships with other services, such as visiting the local retirement home, fundraising for various local services and charities, ecological projects, etc.
- Integrating local knowledge, environmental and cultural activities into the curriculum/programme

Conclusion

Social partnership has become a defining characteristic of Irish legislative changes and processes in the past few years, stemming primarily from the strength of community development initiatives. This community 'buy-in' comes from the ground, where people with a sense of community belonging and involvement work collaboratively to improve various aspects of their lives (education, health, accommodation, service provision, etc.). Exposing young children to this wider community through ECCE not only provides opportunities for broadening their learning and development experiences, but also introduces them to the concept of community, providing them with a sense of belonging to something bigger than their immediate home or setting environments. In doing so, it introduces them to an extensive social system with the potential to foster both self - and group - identity ( Research Digest Standard 14: Identity and Belonging).

Resources for Community Involvement

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Conaty, C. (2002). *Including All: Home, School and Community United in Education*. Dublin: Veritas.

French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos.

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