

Creating and Using the Learning Environment Pillar: Overview

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, *Communicating*, Exploring and Thinking
Guidelines for good practice: Learning and developing through play (pp.56-57 and 103-106), Learning and developing through interactions (p.28, 30, 42)

Síolta Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3
2: Environments, C2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 2.5, 2.6, 2.7
Research Digests linked to the above *Standards*

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* is intended to help you in your role as curriculum-developer to build, reflect on and extend your curriculum to support babies', toddlers' and young children's early learning and development. Drawing on the early childhood sector's experiences of using *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the Practice Guide includes:

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

Before working with this pillar, we recommend you work on *Curriculum Foundations*.

This document gives an overview of the pillar; **Creating and Using the Learning Environment**. This pillar has a range of resources to help you develop the learning environment in your setting.

Why focus on creating and using the learning environment?

Aistear and *Síolta* highlight the impact which the environment, both indoors and outdoors, has on what and how children learn. A quality learning environment is challenging, stimulating, nurturing and ever-changing as children grow and develop. The two frameworks provide ideas and suggestions on how to create and use the learning environment effectively.

Creating and Using the Learning Environment is one of the pillars in the Practice Guide. This pillar has a number of connections to other pillars including *Nurturing and Extending Interactions* and *Learning through Play*. This short introduction reminds us why the learning environment, inside and outside, is important and gives a brief overview of the set of resources in this part of the Practice Guide and provides suggestions on how you might use these.

Aistear's principle on the learning environment states that,

The learning environment (inside and outside) influences what and how children learn. An inviting environment encourages and helps children to explore and to take advantage of opportunities for fun, choice, freedom, adventure, and challenge (Principles and themes, 2009, p.12).

Similarly, Síolta's principle on environments acknowledges that,

The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development (Síolta Principle, 2006, p.8).

Standard 2 of Síolta on Environments, encourages the development of enriching environments that are well-maintained, safe, accessible, available, adaptable, developmentally appropriate and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences. Síolta's Research Digest on Environments provides further information and references.

Organising, an interaction strategy outlined in Aistear's guidelines, *Learning and developing through interactions* (p.28) states, *Children learn in a well-planned and well-resourced environment. The environment represents all children in the setting and makes learning challenging and fun.* Through planning, resourcing and evaluating, decisions are continually made about equipment, materials and people in the environment and the opportunities that these afford children. While an overall plan for the environment is important, daily changes based on children's interests and ideas should also be included.

Whenever possible, children need to be involved in structuring the environment. The strategy *Structuring the learning environment (Aistear, Guidelines for good practice, p.42)* identifies six areas that need to be considered:

1. Location – where people and things are
2. Boundaries – how areas are separated and divided into small child sized spaces
3. Variety - choice of materials and activities available
4. Storage – where things are kept and displayed
5. Time – the amount of time available for activities
6. Mood and atmosphere – inviting, calm, homelike, busy.

Aistear's guidelines, *Learning and developing through play* (p.57) encourage the provision of a variety of resources including those focusing on diversity, on literacy and numeracy and on supporting children with special educational needs, as well as open-ended materials.

Both frameworks also highlight the importance of daily outdoor experiences in all weather types to promote children's learning and development. *Aistear's Appendix 1: Resources for play* (pp.103-106) provides ideas on a variety of play props, many of which are low-cost, natural and re-cycled. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, it just gives ideas to get you thinking.

Using the resources in this pillar

As with all the pillars in the Practice Guide, there are four categories of resources in *Creating and Using the Learning Environment*:

1. Self-evaluation Tools

These provide prompts to help practitioners reflect on their work in order to identify successes and challenges and to note changes they would like to make.

This tool looks at five elements:

1. Indoor physical layout
2. Indoor displays
3. Indoor resources
4. Outdoor physical layout
5. Outdoor resources.

2. Examples and Ideas for Practice

These materials show examples of how different early childhood settings developed their learning environment.

3. Resources for Sharing

These materials include tip sheets for practitioners on different aspects of the learning environment.

4. Action Planning Tools

A template is provided to help practitioners plan for changes in a particular area of their work in creating and using the learning environment

Each category has resources to support you as you reflect on your practice. You might like to look at the **Self-evaluation Tools** first to help you identify your strengths in creating and using the learning environment as well as noting changes you would like to make. There are two of these, one for practitioners working with children birth-3 years and the other for practitioners working with children aged 3-6 years. After this, you might be interested in looking at examples and ideas from other practitioners. You will find these in Learning Experiences linked to *Aistear's* themes, short podcasts, photo presentations, video clips and practical tip sheets in the sections, *Examples and Ideas for Practice* and *Resources for Sharing* at www.aistearsiolta.ie The *Action Planning Tools* can then help you plan specific changes you want to make in your setting.