

Helping young children to develop positive learning dispositions

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking
Guidelines for good practice: Learning and developing through interactions (pp.27-51), Learning and developing through play (pp.57 and 103-106), Supporting learning and development through assessment (pp.72-102)

Síolta Standards

1: Rights of the Child, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

6: Play, C6.7

7: Curriculum, C7.2, 7.6

Research Digests linked to the above

Standards

Aistear's themes describe what children need to learn from birth onwards and outlines learning in **four interconnected aspects: skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding, and dispositions.**

Skills for children like communicating, mark-making, cutting, climbing, and problem-solving, **attitudes and values** like respect for themselves and others, care for the environment, and positive attitudes to learning and to life, **knowledge and understanding** like classifying objects using colour and size, or learning that symbols such as letters or numbers have meaning.

What is a disposition?

Aistear defines dispositions as 'enduring habits of mind and action. A disposition is the tendency to respond to situations in characteristic ways' (*Aistear*, 2009, p.54).

Positive **dispositions** mentioned in *Aistear* are independence, curiosity, concentration, creativity, responsibility, resilience, patience, perseverance, playfulness, imagination, being interested in things, enjoying problem-solving, being a good listener, assessing and taking risks, being friendly, wanting to communicate, being accepting of others and of differences, being considerate, being happy, cooperating with others.

Aistear also describes children's learning in terms of **dispositions** that children need in order to achieve their full potential. Dispositions, such as **curiosity, independence, resilience, and perseverance** are often described as innate or natural character traits that children possess from birth. However, children's inborn dispositions vary and it is important to remember that adult-child interactions and relationships, and the experiences children are exposed to can have an impact on the development of positive learning dispositions.

Why are dispositions important?

Learning dispositions have an impact on a child's overall ability to learn and progress. Dispositions develop alongside and in conjunction with children's acquisition of knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding. For example, a group of children constructing with wooden blocks are developing the physical skills of grasping, placing and stacking, and learning about shape and size, while at the same time developing the positive disposition of **concentration** and rejoicing in their problem-solving **skills** as they build. They may be learning too that we do not always succeed the first time, that we may have to try again and again as the blocks come tumbling down or as another child runs by and collapses their tower, and this helps them to develop the dispositions of **patience, perseverance and resilience**.

Dispositions can be **positive or negative** - some dispositions are less helpful than others for children's learning and development. Dispositions are not fixed and they can be encouraged and strengthened, or weakened over time. Practitioners should try to reinforce positive dispositions. For example, children who are never given the opportunity to dress themselves or to tidy up will tend to rely too much on the adult and can develop **learned helplessness** (a negative disposition). By encouraging children to be responsible for their own belongings and by getting them to help sweep up or put things in the recycling, practitioners are helping them to develop the positive dispositions of **independence** and **self-reliance**. If a child is naturally **anxious** and wary of new situations or people, practitioners can encourage the child to be more **adventurous** and **flexible** by introducing changes gradually, explaining what will happen before change occurs and by giving lots of reassurance.

Dispositions can be encouraged or discouraged, and strengthened or weakened, through experience and through interactions with others and the environment.

How can I encourage positive dispositions?

Learning dispositions have an impact on a child's overall ability to learn and progress. By being aware of the kind of dispositions that are helpful, practitioners can plan for a supportive environment and interactions that will encourage positive dispositions. For example,

- model the disposition
- show that you value the disposition
- provide opportunities for children to develop dispositions (time, space, equipment or encouragement).
- take individual differences and preferences into account, for example by introducing changes gradually, or by giving extra support to a child who needs it.

More detail on how you might encourage the development of positive dispositions is outlined below.

Encouraging independence and resilience:

- Provide an environment that enables children to be more **independent** - accessible storage, picture labels on shelving and boxes, low sinks for hand-washing, low-level coat and apron racks, and space for personal items.
- Provide children with tasks to develop responsibility e.g. helping set up activities, turning off lights, distributing drinks, tidying away the props, paints and toys etc. (**independence**)
- Allow children to choose activities and make decisions (at an appropriate level)
 - *Do you want to go inside now or stay outside for a bit longer? (independence)*
- Wait before you offer help, allow the child time to find a solution, and if there is still a difficulty, ask the child *Which part would you like help with?*
- Suggest strategies and model ways of coping with the inevitable failures and disappointments in life in order to develop **resilience** - both acknowledging children's feelings and perhaps suggesting an alternative strategy:
 - *We were planning to have a picnic today, but it's much too wet. What do you think we could do instead? Maybe we could have our picnic inside today, and go to the park tomorrow?*
- With older children, it might be good to use drama/role play/puppetry sometimes to encourage and model certain dispositions.

Encourage concentration and perseverance:

- Show that you value the disposition, by noticing and commenting on it. When a child has spent a long time focusing on something, or has finally managed to complete something you could say: *I saw you working hard on that- it looks great now!*
- Encourage children to **problem-solve** for themselves:
 - *We don't have enough cups for everyone, what shall we do?*
 - *How can we get the water wheel to turn?*
- Provide encouragement to **persevere and try again**, as needed:
 - *Nearly there – one more step and you'll be at the top.*
 - *Oh no, the ramp for the cars didn't work again, what else could we try?*
- Give children space and time when they are absorbed in a task or activity, and make sure they are not disturbed unnecessarily by other children or by adults:
 - *Don't disturb Sean and Lia just now, they are concentrating really hard on getting all those shapes into place.*
 - *We will add a bit of time here so that you can finish making the construction before we head back inside.*

Encourage curiosity and a willingness to learn:

- Follow the child's lead - notice what they are interested in and respond to their questions.
- Provide a variety of opportunities to experience and explore different objects and environments, and talk about what you and the children see, feel, and do:
 - *Feel the bark on the cherry tree- it's much smoother and shinier than the oak tree, isn't it?*
 - *What's making that noise, I wonder?*

- Model **curiosity, and a willingness to learn**: *That's an interesting bug you've found. I don't know what it is. I haven't seen one of those before. I wonder how we could find out more about it?*
- Encourage children to **think of different ways that they might solve a problem**, rather than immediately providing a solution:
 - *What could we find that would be long enough to bridge the gap? Where could you look for something like that? Which friend might be able to help?*

You might give clues rather than providing an immediate answer - *I can see it from here, it's near something blue, it's not on top of the table.*
- Show that you are **interested** in lots of different things, and share your own interests. For example, a love of gardening, baking, athletics or playing a musical instrument.

- Provide new and interesting activities over time as well as familiar ones, or rotate activities in one part of the setting while keeping children's favourites (**enjoying new things, enjoying exploring**). See the sample learning opportunities in *Aistear's themes* for ideas.

book corner and sharing books with children encourages them to see books and reading as something to be enjoyed.

Strategies and interactions like these will help children develop holistically, so that as they acquire the skills and knowledge they need, they are also developing positive dispositions that will benefit them both now and in the future. It's also important to explain the importance of positive learning dispositions to parents and to encourage them to watch out for and support them at home.

**Encouraging creativity, collaboration
and other dispositions**

- Provide opportunities for the kind of interactions that will allow the child to put their dispositions like ***cooperation, collaborating with others, being social*** into action. Encourage children to co-operate, by giving lots of opportunities for interactions with peers, and for working in pairs or small groups on tasks or projects:
 - *You and Lana really worked well together to build the house. Would you like to sit together for snack?*
 - Have pair rotas for some jobs etc so that children get to mix.
 - Experiences like art, water and sand, and play with open-ended and loose materials like stones, twigs or shells, all encourage ***creativity and imagination***.
 - Allow children to use materials in different and innovative ways, or to combine different materials (***creativity, imagination***).
 - Listening to stories and reading together encourages ***concentration, imagination, curiosity***. Providing a quiet comfortable

Assessing dispositions

Aistear's guidelines on *Supporting learning and development through assessment* (2009, pp72-102) discuss the importance of observing what children do, make and say over time, and using this information to plan for future experiences. The Guidelines (p. 74) suggest that the adult should look for evidence of the child's progress across **four interconnected aspects as outlined above: skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding and dispositions.**

Dispositions can be difficult to assess and it may only become clear that a child possesses a certain disposition after getting to know a child over a period of time. Observing children as they interact and play allows us to see how they demonstrate their dispositions and it is important to include dispositions in assessment as **positive dispositions** are being increasingly recognised as being crucial for children's learning and development!