

Aistear Síolta

Practice Guide

**Information booklet:
Planning and assessing
for children's learning and
development
(Birth-6 years)**

Connections to Aistear and Síolta

Aistear

Themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking
Guidelines for good practice: [Supporting learning and development through assessment](#) (pp.72-102) [User Guide](#) (pp.12-22)

Síolta Standards

1: [Rights of the Child](#), C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

6: [Play](#), C6.3, 6.5, 6.7

7: [Curriculum](#), C7.1, 7.5, 7.6

[Research Digests](#) linked to the above Standards

There are different types of planning - long-term, medium-term, short-term and spontaneous. All are important and contribute to curriculum development.

The *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* supports practitioners to use *Aistear* and *Síolta* together to build an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum. This type of curriculum uses children's and practitioners' interests, questions and experiences as starting points for curriculum planning. At times, topics emerge from children's engagement with people, materials, ideas and events, triggering their curiosity and motivation to learn. At other times, practitioners introduce specific topics linked to *Aistear's* learning goals to support children's learning and development. In partnership with children, practitioners identify ideas or inquiries that become the focus for learning.

An emergent, inquiry-based curriculum does not 'just happen'. It comes about when skilled, reflective practitioners provide a learning environment and supportive interactions that enable children to engage in experiences that interest them and that support their learning. Effective planning helps to ensure that the curriculum does this and involves practitioners reflecting on what learning to support, how to do this and when. This planning takes account of children's current interests and inquiries, their learning and development over the year as well as what is happening around them such as family and community events and seasonal celebrations.

Table 1 outlines the types of planning involved in building an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum.

Table 1: Long-term, medium-term, short-term and spontaneous planning

Type of planning	Focus	Extracts from plans
Long-term	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Long-term planning involves outlining, in broad terms, what a setting intends to do to support children's learning and development over a long period of time, for example, a year. The plan is based on the setting's mission or vision statement and Curriculum Statement (see <i>Curriculum Foundations, Element 1</i>) and might be no more than 1-2 A4 pages. When developing long-term plans: • Describe the types of experiences that your setting will provide for children in a particular period such as a year. • Use headings such as dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, and knowledge and understanding to explain your setting's long-term aspirations for children. • Use Aistear's themes to outline how you intend to provide for children's well-being, support their communication, encourage exploring and thinking, and support the development of a strong sense of identity and belonging. 	<p>Extracts from a long-term plan could read:</p> <p><i>We nurture positive dispositions. We encourage babies, toddlers and young children to be curious. We do this by encouraging them to ask questions, to explore resources in the environment freely and to look at books and images.</i></p> <p><i>We encourage babies, toddlers and young children to be persistent. We do this by supporting them to stick at things, to try a little harder to complete something. However, we do not force children to finish tasks.</i></p> <p><i>In our baby room, we believe babies learn best in a loving, nurturing environment. We provide lots of time on the floor so babies can develop physical skills such as rolling, crawling, cruising and walking. We spend time on the floor with them - supporting them and encouraging them to be curious, active, hands-on learners. We talk to the babies a lot, putting words on their experiences and expanding their vocabulary.</i></p>

Type of planning	Focus	Extracts from plans
<p>Medium-term</p>	<p>Medium-term planning involves thinking about broad topics that may arise and interest the children, as well as seasonal events/ celebrations coming up in a particular month or term. When developing medium-term plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify seasonal events and celebrations such as Christmas, Halloween, Mother's Day and Diwali that are coming up. Medium-term plans show how a seasonal event or celebration might be approached with the children—the types of experiences that might be provided, the resources that might be used, and the trips that might be planned. • Identify broad topics that might interest the children. These might include <i>My family, The seasons, My community, Road safety</i>. Make these relevant and meaningful by starting from what children know already and what they want to find out. Introduce these ideas at a time that children are interested or as the topic crops up arising from something that happens in the children's lives. • Do some preparation for experiences related to the identified topics so that if or when the topics emerge from children's interests or experiences, you have some planning already completed on possible experiences and some resources already gathered. For example, if an interest on Transport arises, think about what open-ended materials you already have, what books or images you could provide, what songs or rhymes might be relevant? • Think about possible life events for children of this age, for example, moving house or a new baby arriving. Think about what you could do to help the children prepare for these events, for example, introducing particular props, stories and conversations. • Planning a medium-term action arising from children's inquiries such as a visit from a vet, or a visit to a farm to deepen and enrich learning. 	<p>Extracts from a medium-term-plan could read:</p> <p><i>Valentine's Day is coming up. We can ask the toddlers what they think Valentine's Day is. We might bake heart-shaped biscuits. We could have magazines and ask the toddlers to find and cut out pictures like their family. Need to ensure that all the children can see pictures they can identify with.</i></p> <p><i>Beep-Beep Day (Road safety day) is on this month. The books, CDs and rhymes related to road safety are in the store-room. We will use heavy tape to make zebra crossings in the yard, with traffic-lights made from paper plates by the interested children in the pre-school group.</i></p> <p><i>Last year there was a huge interest in cars after Beep Beep Day so there are some car magazines if the same thing happens this year. We have some new wooden cars and tractors and we can put those on the shelves the week before Beep Beep Day.</i></p> <p><i>The pre-schoolers will be going to the fire station this month, date to be arranged. Parents must be notified in good time, so they can volunteer to come on the walk with us.</i></p> <p><i>Nathan's family are moving house in the next few months, so we need to be aware of gathering resources such as picture books, removal vans and packing boxes for the home area. We will listen extra-carefully to his comments and observe how he is playing as the day comes near. We will keep in touch with his parents also.</i></p> <p><i>As ever remember to follow the children's lead and be creative when planning how to build on interests and in how seasonal events are experienced by the children!</i></p>

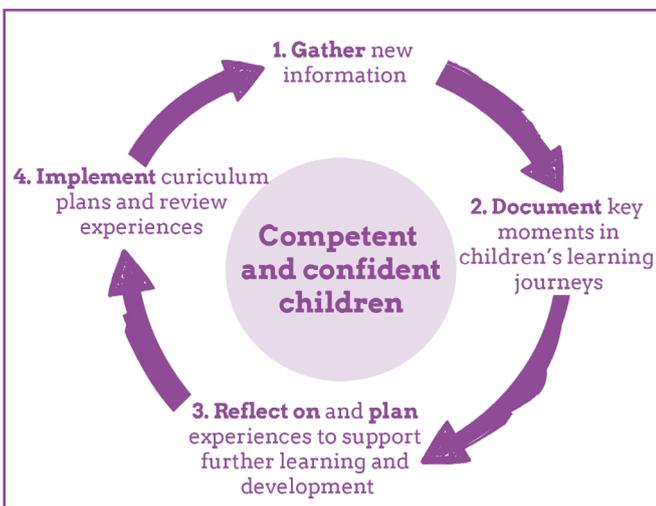
Type of planning	Focus	Extracts from plans
Short-term	<p>Short-term planning involves responding to children's current interests and inquiries, events and news in their families and communities. As children get older national events may spark their interest also.</p> <p>When developing short-term plans:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure children's curiosity is aroused and valued and the development of the play and discussion is child-led and rich in learning on a day-to-day basis. • Provide children with wide-ranging experiences relating to current interests. Use stories, songs, books, props, images, conversations and children's and adults' own experiences to enable children to explore topics and extend their thinking and understanding. • Discuss seasonal events, festivals and celebrations. At this stage, you are responding to the children's reaction to the introduction or discussion and following their line of inquiry rather than yours. • Develop meaningful documentation to show what occurred and the learning that took place. 	<p>Extracts from a short-term plan could read:</p> <p><i>Due to the success of Beep Beep Day, there is a lot of talk about cars, lorries and tractors. The car magazines are in the room and we will bring in more about tractors and lorries this week.</i></p> <p><i>Talk more about safety-belts and being safe in the car.</i></p> <p><i>Print off images of children safely strapped in cars and display them.</i></p> <p><i>Redo the chalk zebra crossing as children are still interested.</i></p> <p><i>Magazines for Valentine's Day are ready and we are also sending a note home asking for a family photo to be brought in or emailed. Laminate and cut photos into a few pieces to make 'jig-saws' – maybe 6 pieces for older children, 3 might be enough for younger children.</i></p> <p><i>One child mentioned love hearts in the shops for Valentine's Day. Get heart-shaped paper for art area and the children can draw on it if they wish.</i></p> <p><i>Support oral language</i> <i>Ask and note what words children use for family members and make sure we use them too. Talk about where the photos were taken and introduce new language as you talk about the photos.</i></p>
Spontaneous	<p>Spontaneous planning refers to planning 'in the moment' while responding to something that engages children's immediate interest, for example, on a walk children see a spider's web and become enthralled by it. Meaningful documentation is required to show what occurred and the learning that took place.</p>	<p>An excerpt from spontaneous planning could read:</p> <p><i>Ralph's mammy got a new car. We brought the toddlers out to see it. Lots of talk on colours. We will bring the colour books into the room. We will mix paints later today.</i></p>

There are a number of templates in the *Aistear Síolta Practice Guide* to support you in planning and assessing:

- [Long-term planning template](#)
- [Medium-term planning template](#)
- [Short-term planning template](#)
- [Learning record template](#)

It may be helpful to think of planning as a cycle. This is illustrated in Figure 1. While there are four stages in this cycle these stages might not always be in this order and do they not all take the same length of time.

Figure 1: Cycle of planning and assessing for learning



1. **Gathering** information about children's learning and development can be done in many different ways. These include children self-assessing as well as using more practitioner-led methods such as observing and listening. Being tuned in to and noticing what children are communicating, non-verbally or verbally, gives great insight into what engages them and what they currently know, understand and can do. Slowing down and focusing on individual children is key to gathering this type of rich information.

2. **Documenting** provides a rich picture of each child's learning and development journey. As a practitioner or as a team, you decide what works best for you and the children in terms of

- *how* to document
- *what* to document
- *when* to do this and *how often*
- *how* you will use the documentation.

The use of drawings, photos, conversations and video clips enables children to be involved in documenting their own learning and development. This deepens their learning and also gives more information to work with as you move through the planning and assessing cycle. Using the documentation and *Aistear's* Themes, Aims and Learning Goals will enable you to describe children's learning and development and plan for next steps.

3. **Reflecting on and planning** involves making judgements based on rich pictures about what and how children are learning and deciding how that can be developed further. Short-term plans made on a day-to-day basis will also be informed by the medium- and long-term plans.

4. **Implementing curriculum plans** involves putting the plans into action. As plans are implemented, on-going reflection ensures that the experience or activity planned has responded to children's interests and inquiries and has appropriately supported their learning and development. In doing this, further information is gathered and so the cycle begins again.

An example of short-term planning in an emergent inquiry-based curriculum

This example shows how the same 'spark of interest' can be followed and responded to in different ways depending on the ages of the children and their previous knowledge and experiences.

The children (babies, toddlers and young children) noticed a bird when you are outside. The documented examples below show how this experience might support different learning depending on the age of the children and the aspect of the event that engaged their interest.

In the **baby room**: *The babies noticed the pre-school children looking at birds so when we came inside we got a book with photos of birds. Then we took out some soft toy birds from the Owl Babies set. I pointed out the bird-feeder and tomorrow we will bring babies to see it being filled.*

You gauge their interest in the experience and if the interest is continuing, you could, for example, introduce more language giving different names of birds, all the time observing their interest and focus.

In the **toddler room**: *The toddlers saw the pre-school children looking at birds. They loved seeing the birds swooping to the bird-table and flying away again. Several toddlers were pretending to fly! Inside we got some open-ended material from the store room and watched to see how the children used it. One child stuck feathers to the page with glue. As the experiences unfold you observe, all the time taking your cue from the children's expressions and words.*



Pre-school children: *One of the children commented on the way the birds flew to the bird-feeder. Another said the bird was bringing food to babies in a nest. We watched to see where the birds were flying from and flying to. When we went in, one child went to the junk art box and made a bird from lollipop sticks and coloured it brown and red, saying it was a robin. Another child noted that birds come here for the summer. One boy made a bird's nest with some wool and put ping-pong balls in it for eggs, like the nest he saw at Grandad's.*

You gauge their interest in the experience and if the interest is continuing, you could introduce more bird-related language. For example, giving different names of birds, discussing how they fly, what they eat or the colours of their feathers. You could also look at the *Owl Babies* books and puppets, discuss wings and beaks, all the time observing their interest and focus.

Don't Forget

Involve the children in an age-appropriate way. Don't research ideas and activities FOR them, do it WITH them. Have plenty of drawing, junk-art and open-ended materials available. For example, try to have colours that reflect the birds in your area or the pictures the children are looking at. If you can, take photos of the birds in your outdoor area. Have books and magazines that reflect the interest and perhaps use the internet to look up topics related to birds.

Documenting and assessing

Portfolios, learning journals, or display boards can be used to document and record what is happening, again **with** the children. Involving the babies, toddlers or young children in this kind of discussion and documenting deepens their learning and understanding and can spark new lines of inquiry to follow. As you record what interested the children and how that emergent interest developed, look at *Aistear's* Themes, Aims and Learning Goals and use them to describe what learning and development has taken place for the children and to plan for further learning. Use photos, children's drawing and brief text to demonstrate what and how learning took place. The Learning record template may help you to capture this information.

Reflecting on what has happened, how you responded and the short-term and spontaneous planning that occurred, influences the medium-term and ultimately the long-term planning process. In this way, all parts of the planning and assessing process are inter-related.