

Helping babies and toddlers 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 the framework outlines learning in **four interconnected aspects: skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding, and dispositions**. **Skills** for babies and toddlers include things like grasping, feeding themselves, walking and communicating non-verbally and verbally. **Attitudes and values** at this age include developing a positive self-image and a positive attitude to learning, while **knowledge and understanding** includes, for example, learning 'rules' for interacting with others like turn-taking.

Aistear also describes children's learning in terms of **dispositions** that babies and toddlers need in order to achieve their full potential. Dispositions, such as independence, curiosity, cautiousness or creativity are often described as innate or natural character traits that children possess from birth. However, adults can have an impact on the development of positive learning dispositions.

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.**

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, as a baby plays a game with an adult of stacking cups and knocking them down again, he/she is learning the **physical skills** of grasping, manipulating and swiping. At the same time, he/she is learning that we do not always succeed the first time, that we may have to try again and again, and is developing the learning dispositions of **patience** and **perseverance**. The adult also needs patience - both to allow the baby to repeat the action or game over and over as long as he/she is interested in it, and to model patience and trying again!

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, babies who are never given the opportunity to feed themselves or toddlers who are never given an opportunity to do things for themselves

will tend to rely too much on the adult and can develop learned **helplessness** (a negative disposition). By encouraging babies and toddlers to hold a spoon and feed themselves (even when it might be quicker and less messy for the adult to feed them) you are helping develop the positive dispositions of **independence** and **self-reliance**. If a baby is naturally **cautious** and wary of new situations or people, practitioners can encourage the child to be more **curious** 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?

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.

Encourage curiosity and a willingness to learn:

A baby or toddler's innate **curiosity** can be encouraged when you observe their interests, give them opportunities to explore and respond to their questions. For example:

- Noticing and talking about whatever has caught their attention.
- Hiding a toy under a box or a cushion for them to find.
- Pointing out and describing things that are interesting such as a plane in the sky or a bird outside the window.
- Making a noise with a squeaky toy and encouraging the baby or toddler to find out where the noise is coming from.
- Encouraging children to explore different textures and different materials - for example mud in the garden feels different to playdough.
- A treasure basket is one way of providing babies (once they can sit up unaided) with novel items to grasp, handle and mouth, while being reassured by an attentive adult. See tip sheet on using a treasure basket with babies [here](#) or watch the video [here](#).
- Model the disposition yourself, showing that you are interested in things, and sharing that interest: *Look, there's a tractor! It's green, like the one your Daddy has at home, isn't it?*
- Reading a story - *Guess what will happen next? What's under the flap? Can you find the frog?*
- Show children ways of finding out more about things: *I wonder what's inside the box? Can we open it? I wonder what the rabbit likes to eat? Does he like carrots, do you think?*

Encourage concentration and persistence:

- Show that you value the disposition. For example, by noticing and commenting when a baby/toddler has spent a long time focusing on something, or has finally managed to complete something:
 - *Well done, Lily, you were playing at the water for a very long time, you must have been really interested.*
 - *Nearly there - one more step and you'll have crawled to the top of the stairs.*
- Be ready to help if they are getting frustrated, but as far as possible, encourage children to do it themselves. *Why don't you get your little step, and then you will be able to reach it?*
- Notice when children are deeply involved in play, and allow them enough time to complete what they are doing. Give advance warning for necessary transitions.
- Listening to stories and reading together encourages **concentration** as well as **imagination** and **curiosity**. Providing a quiet comfortable book corner and sharing books with children encourages them to see books and reading as something to be enjoyed (leading to a positive disposition towards reading later). For a list of picture books for babies click [here](#) and for a list of books for toddlers click [here](#) and [here](#).

Encouraging independence and resilience:

Provide opportunities for the kind of interactions that will allow babies and toddlers to put their positive dispositions into action. For example, to encourage the positive learning dispositions of **independence** and **resilience**:

- Provide an environment that enables babies and toddlers to be more **independent**:
 - Toys that are accessible, see-through storage containers so toddlers can see what's inside, providing low hooks for clothes, low sinks for hand-washing, a safe area to toddle and to climb.
- Toddlers may not yet be able to put on their own shoes or coat, but they can find them and bring them to the adult. For older toddlers, encourage them to help with putting away toys, sweep the floor or wipe down the table.
- At mealtimes, encourage older babies to hold a spoon or finger food and begin to learn to feed themselves.
- Allow babies and toddlers to choose activities and make decisions at an appropriate level (**independence, thinking about actions**): *Do you want to go inside now or stay outside for a bit longer?*
- Suggest strategies and model ways of coping with the inevitable failures and disappointments in children's lives in order to develop **resilience** - both acknowledging children's feelings and perhaps suggesting an alternative strategy.

Encouraging social and other dispositions

- Respond to the baby's or toddler's **efforts to communicate**. *That is a lovely smile Keegan. Acknowledge the babbling sounds that a baby is making - that's a nice song you are singing/ a great story you are telling.*
- Encourage older toddlers to play together and to help each other (**cooperation, collaborating with others, being social**) while recognising that they may still prefer to play alone or alongside others rather than with them. Sand or water play is perfect for this.
- Experiences like finger-painting, water and sand, and playing with open-ended and loose materials like stones and cardboard boxes, all encourage **creativity and imagination** as well as opportunities to enjoy playing with others and develop social skills.
- Help children to **recognise the feelings and needs of others**: *Mark doesn't want to play ball just now - he needs a little quiet time. Maybe Lara would like to play - shall we ask her?*
- Encourage babies and toddlers to **problem-solve**: *Teddy is tired, where will we put him to sleep? We don't have enough cups for everyone, what shall we do?*

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.

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!