

The Framework for Early Learning
Children's early learning and development -
Executive Summary

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Executive summary

This background paper *Children's early learning and development*, sets out the theory and research underpinning children's early learning and development behind the *Framework for Early Learning*. The paper essentially responds to the question - how should we envision and understand the child as a young learner? The paper begins by outlining the context for early childhood care and education in Ireland by referring to our economic and social climate, the increasingly multicultural nature of society and relevant legislation and policy. Drawing on centuries of research, the modern day view of the child is one of him/her being a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; a young citizen and participator in many contexts (family, early childhood setting, community and society); actively learning in reciprocal relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present rather than his/her future. Building on this image of the child, key messages about how children learn and develop are condensed in this executive summary.

Equality and diversity

- All children are individuals, unique in their abilities, from a rich diversity of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. Children have the right to be treated with respect, positive regard and dignity.
- Biases develop very early in young children. Through participating in everyday activities and play, children absorb powerful messages from people, the environment and community regarding their identity, culture and social values.
- By exploring the attributes of their own and other cultures in everyday practice, children come to appreciate their common humanity as well as enjoying an optimal environment for cognitive, emotional and social growth.
- Children should be enabled to acknowledge, respect and affirm diversity in order to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination. Warm, democratic relationships support children's development in this regard.

Active learning and meaning making

- Through active learning, the baby, toddler and young child follow their personal interests and goals through first hand experiences of the world around them, individually, in pairs, in groups, in families and in the community.
- Learning is a continual process of meaning making; it is not a linear input/output process. Active learning, physical and intellectual engagement with people (ideas) and materials (experiences), self and group directed problem-solving and repetition are at the heart of learning and development.
- The adult has a responsibility to provide rich environments where children are able to explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with a variety of real life and diverse materials and where children can ask questions, make hypothesis and develop their thinking.
- Children learn in collaboration with others yet have to construct learning for themselves. True collaborative exploration takes place where all participants influence the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation.

Relationships

- The importance of the role of the adult and the establishment of positive relationships between the adult and child are critical in enhancing and enriching the child's learning and development.
- The child should experience trust, autonomy, initiative, empathy and self-confidence as the foundation for socialisation. The formation of attachment is especially important for the young child's emotional and social development.
- The participation of parents in their children's learning improves children's motivation and promotes a sense of partnership in the learning process.
- Children's evolving membership in their culture begins in the family and spirals outward as children engage with their peers. The child learns and develops in context and as part of his/her community and society.

Communication and language

- Social interaction, language, and scaffolding from adults are central in forming the child's mind. Children's development of both receptive and expressive language is integral to all development particularly intellectual functioning and later literacy.
- Some level of language development occurs naturally by children experiencing a language-rich environment; fuller development of children's language capacities requires targeted teaching and encouragement of children's verbal expression.
- Through language, the child becomes part of his/her culture, seeks the co-operation of others in his/her activities, integrates new experiences into an existing knowledge base and reflects on his/her actions.
- In order to provide appropriate scaffolding for the child in learning and developing a shared context of meaning and experience must be established. The adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances or gestures. Through shared experiences, the child gradually makes sense of the world and of adult meaning. This process requires a close and nurturing relationship between adult and child.

The environment

- Children learn through their senses both indoors and outdoors, in a supportive environment.
- There is a requirement on adults to provide a range of challenging and interesting indoor and outdoor experiences for children.
- The environment should offer children opportunities to actively explore, to work independently and with others, to make decisions and follow through with their ideas, to solve problems, to engage in real activities and to experience co-operative, symbolic, dramatic or pretend play.
- The most effective learning comes from simple but versatile materials which are accessible to children. The learning environment should extend children's imagination and be adaptable to suit their learning needs and level of understanding.

Play

- Play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development.
- Through relationships in play, children develop and demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking and problem-solving capacities.
- The most effective play settings have a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities.
- Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children's learning.

The whole child in context

- Holistic learning and development involves all areas of development and embraces a view of the whole child developing in the context of family, home and community.
- Young children do not learn in discrete units; they make connections across their learning with these connections changing and developing with new experiences.
- A framework which uses themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking) to present children's early learning and development offers a way of moving from thinking about learning and development in discrete developmental domains to thinking about these in a more holistic and integrated way.
- The traditional domains such as cognitive, social, physical, creative, spiritual development and so on permeate the themes mentioned above. Consequently, the thematic framework supports children's learning and development in a way which is more natural and enjoyable for young children.

Early childhood curriculum

- The early childhood curriculum is concerned with the totality of the policies and practices established in the setting, the relationships between all participants, the experiences provided, the resources, the physical environment, the teaching and learning styles and the systems of assessment.
- An appropriate curriculum for young children, views learning as a process.
- The child's interests, strengths, culture, needs and learning styles are placed at the centre of planning for his/her learning and development.

- Providing appropriate learning experiences for children requires practitioners to have knowledge of child development in order to support children's learning and development and to forward plan for a wide range of appropriate curriculum experiences.

In conclusion, early childhood care and education is enhanced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. From this perspective, learning and development are inextricably intertwined and are enmeshed within the milieu of social relationships. The child develops not in isolation but in the context of family, neighbourhood, community, society and public policies. Children's early learning and development, therefore, is a matter for the whole of society.