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## **Childcare in Ireland: Themes & Issues**

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### **Abstract**

In Ireland the policy has been to view childcare as parent's private responsibility resulting in a dearth of public provision, regulation or support for parents since the foundation of the state. Utilising current literature in the field, this paper discusses the need to develop a flexible and responsive childcare system for all children, with special consideration given to the preventive role of childcare for "at risk" children. The gradual emergence of state responsibility for childcare is explored as is the need that this be informed by parents and the often forgotten key stakeholder – children.

**Key Words:** Childcare; Prevention; Quality

### **Introduction**

This article will examine how the childcare system in Ireland has evolved since the early 1990's with a particular emphasis on the issue of provision for those experiencing social exclusion. It will highlight the importance of childcare not just in terms of arguments about disadvantage and compensation but also in the broader terms of children's rights and equality.

### **Background**

Increasingly we are learning of the importance of early experiences to the quality of later life experience and that investment at this stage can be beneficial not only to the

child but society at large. This view has been influenced by the many research studies and practical experiments in psychology and education that have been carried out, written and debated over the past fifty years. (Kellmer Pringle, 1974; Moss & Pence, 1994; Howe, 1996).

The Republic of Ireland has traditionally had a non-interventionist policy with respect to childcare provision. This is explained by certain values prominent in the 1937 Constitution and enshrined in our legislation. These emphasise the responsibility of parents for children coupled with the essential privacy of family life. Heavily influenced by the Catholic Church, the Constitution is often referred to as a catholic social document. The belief that parents would meet the needs of their children meant that families were almost completely unaided by the State. As a result it was only the most “at risk” or deprived children who were deemed eligible for state supported childcare.

Universal day care is widely acknowledged as probably the single most important support for families. (Hardiker et al. 1991). Despite this, McKenna (1990) in a paper entitled *Childcare in Ireland 1990*, set out the following facts:

- Almost all 5 year olds (99%) and half of all 4 year olds attend primary school in this country;
- There is a low level of publicly funded early childhood provision outside the school system (particularly in the 0-3 age group at 2% in 1990) and this is targeted at disadvantaged children;
- The low employment rate among mothers with young children (in 1990 only 23% of mothers with children under 10 worked outside the home)

There is no doubt that childcare is currently in a state of rapid and far-reaching change. These changes, combined with the fact that childcare has become a political and public issue, is evidenced by the number of reports which have been produced on the issue of childcare (see table 1).

The division of early childhood care and education services between the Departments of Health and Education in Ireland has created problems in terms of co-ordination and delays in development of much needed services. The distinction between care and education has meant that only the most at risk children are deemed to be in need of care rather than education. Broadly speaking, children in Ireland are thus seen as the exclusive responsibility of their parents up to the age of two. This is borne out by the

research of Williams and Collins for the ESRI in 1998, which found that 75% of all children in the 0-2 age group are cared for by parents in their own home. This, in conjunction with the fact that children are eligible for primary education from the age of 4, means that in terms of public policy, early childhood barely exists as a stage in its own right.

From the point of view of young children, the division between education and care makes little sense. Rather, as Pugh (1996) argues it owes more to history and the professional jealousies of providers than to the needs of children and their families.

- *Working party on Childcare Facilities for Working parents: Report to the Minister for Labour (1983)*
- *Childcare & Equal Opportunities: Anne McKenna, Employment Equality Agency (1988)*
- *Second Commission on the Status of Women: Report to Government (1993)*
- *Working Group on Childcare Facilities: Report to the Minister for Equality & law Reform (1994)*
- *Strengthening Family Ties: Report of the Commission on the family to the Minister for Social, Community & Family Affairs (1998)*
- *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (1999)*

**Table 1**  
**Reports on Childcare 1983-1999**

### **Overview of Services**

Early primary education (under the Department of Education) represents the largest sector of childcare provision. This department also provides a number of pre-school services to specific groups. The childcare sector (under the Department of Health and Children) is an umbrella term used to cover all forms of non-parental care outside the school system (see table 2).

Playgroups are the most widespread form of provision for pre-school aged children in this country catering for 21%. Importantly, the Commission on the Family (1998) found that homes where the mother is not working use pre-school playgroups equally as much as those where mothers work outside the home. The majority of these playgroups are private and operate in family homes, however community playgroups are becoming increasingly used. David (1993) refers to the powerful and transforming effect on the lives of many women involved in running groups. These are seen as an important resource in disadvantaged areas, not just for the children, but for mothers by enabling them to meet the needs of their own children, to increase their parenting skills by approaching their child and other children in a new way and by working together with other parents to form a nucleus for community development.

Williams and Collins (1998) estimate that 13% of households with children aged 12 years or younger use childminders. These are almost exclusively children whose mothers work outside the home, yet this area of provision is specifically excluded from the Child Care Act, 1991. One possible reason could be that Government policy on childcare to date has excluded children of employed parents, the services being used primarily as a social work resource for “at risk” children.

Workplace nurseries are a developing concept in Ireland. The provision, however, currently takes place mainly in the public sector. *Introducing Family Friendly Initiatives in the Workplace (Employment Equality Agency, 1996)* shows 16 work-based nurseries established by organisations such as the Universities, Aer Rianta, ESB etc., A variety of tax relief, support and training initiatives will be required to provide the impetus for any growth in this sector.

One important area of provision, which has been very neglected by Government, is care for older children outside school hours. Currently, most of this care is provided in an ad hoc manner by family relatives or private childminders, despite the fact that its value has long been recognised. The Commission on the Family (1998) contends that the development of out of school hours provision presents an opportunity to children to be involved in structured activities with their peers but, more specifically, “for children who may not have many opportunities for learning and recreation and may be unoccupied outside of school hours.” (p.248) In the majority of cases parents pay fees for these services. There is no system of tax deduction or cash grants to assist parents with the costs of childcare, although this is currently under review.

**Dept. of Education & Science:**

- Early Start – a pre-school education initiative for children most at risk of not succeeding in education operating in 40 centres throughout the country
- Rutland Street project established in 1969 as an experimental pre-school action research project in Dublin's inner city with the aim of reducing educational disadvantage through the school system
- Programmes for Traveller Families recognising the special needs of this group

**Publicly funded childcare outside school system:**

- Nurseries operated by or on behalf of Health Boards catering mainly for children on referral from the welfare services. In 1996 health Boards grant-aided £2.6 million in respect of 330 centres catering for approximately 8,900 children. (Commission on the Family, 1998)
- Subsidised fees by Health Board for children up to 6 years in community based facilities in areas of disadvantage. It has been estimated that less than 3% of children under 6 years received this service. (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996)
- Voluntary organisations for people with disabilities providing pre-school facilities funded by the Department of health & Children under the Early Intervention programme
- The Pilot Childcare Initiatives introduced by the Department of Justice, Equality & Law Reform in disadvantaged communities designed to improve existing childcare services or for significant building or renovations to set up or expand services
- New Opportunities for Women promotes employment and training measures for women and includes a number of pilot projects on childcare
- Family & Community Services Resource centres provide support programmes for families in disadvantage. These centres offer adult education and training as well as childcare to allow parents access the programmes
- Scheme of grants for locally based women's groups and for lone parents funded by the Department of Social, Community & Family Affairs to encourage participation in education and return to work includes provision of childcare.

**Private non-subsidised childcare**

- Nurseries/crèches
- Childminders
- Private playgroups
- Community Playgroups

**Table 2**

**Range of Non-Parental Care Outside the School System**

### **Growth in Demand for Childcare**

Demand for quantity and quality childcare services has come to the fore in recent years due to a variety of factors which have been well documented in the *Task Force Report on ChildCare Services (1980)* and the *National Childcare Strategy (2000)* including:

- The expansion of employment opportunities for women. Female labour force participation has risen from 34.1% in 1992 to 39.2% in 1997 particularly. The most significant increase within these figures, however, related to participation by married women with children under 5 years;
- The pressures of everyday living with an increasing number of mothers of young families living some distance from relatives and friends;
- The greater demand by parents of young children for leisure time;
- The growing awareness of the value to be derived by some children of regular attendance at a day centre where they have socialisation and educational opportunities;
- The need for alternatives to placing children in full-time care with the recognition that day care can be an important family support service.

Given the significant unregistered private childcare provision, an exact number is difficult to quantify, but estimates are that 1 in 3 of those children (77,000) not attending primary school experience periods of care outside their own home for part of the week. (Commission on the Family, 1988)

The response to this growth in demand has been varied and depends largely on the Government agency involved. The focus has ranged from care of children at risk or disadvantaged; to standards in childcare facilities; to support for women returning to the workforce; and finally, the rights of the child.

### **Developments in Childcare**

The process of change in childcare over the past decade involves:

- Changes in funding - £250 million channelled into the services over a six year period by Government under the *National development Plan (1999)* for the provision of childcare places
- £40 million additional allocation in 2000 with a specific emphasis on schemes to use spare school classrooms for childcare, the introduction of a national after-

school childcare programme and a new National Childminders Initiative involving start-up grants, information campaigns and other supports.

Further EU funding has also been made available for community childcare initiatives under the partnerships;

- The development of a professional identity for childcare and support of personnel - National Association for managers, owners and workers in child care established in 1991;
- The growth in training courses and award of new qualifications. This, however, has developed in an ad hoc manner so that the Expert Working Group on Childcare estimate that there are approximately 90 courses delivered in 58 centres throughout the country.(National Childcare Strategy, 1999); the DIT/NOW Childcare project was set up to look at mechanisms to establish a national standard at different levels against which training could be measured for equivalence, and to develop a system of Accreditation for prior Learning for women with much experience as opposed to formal training in early childhood care and education;
- Increased involvement of parents in the services, particularly through community playgroups;
- Growth in the number of private sector nurseries in response to growing demand for facilities which have not been met by the State (Commission on the Family, 1998);
- Regulation of childcare services through the *Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations, 1996* marks the first ever legislative control over the area and is the beginning of a process to ensure safety and quality in the provision of early childcare services.

More general developments have included the establishment of a Child Care Policy unit within the Department of Health and Children; the appointment of a Junior Minister for Children to the Departments of health, Education and Justice; the development of a National Children's Strategy; and the establishment of a Social Services Inspectorate to monitor and promote services for the care and protection of children. All of these indicate a new political and public awareness of children's issues generally as well as the need to develop childcare specifically.

Two markedly different strategies have evolved, each with important implications for the extent and nature of subsidised childcare. By far the most influential childcare strategy to be developed has been supporting childcare as a necessary adjunct to training and employment. Justice Minister John O'Donoghue in launching the Government's childcare investment plan in April 2000 stated:



“Childcare, by helping parents, is also recognised as an important means of supporting and enabling economic development and regeneration in disadvantaged and marginalised communities.” (Irish Examiner, 2000 p.5)

This Government initiative of prioritising childcare provision in response to economic factors is not new, however. Pugh (1989) provides us with the example of the expansion of day nurseries in England during the second world war, when women were needed in the factories, followed by their closure in the post-war period when policy emphasised the importance of women’s position in the home. In the current climate, concern about lack of supply for the labour market caused by a combination of factors, not least of which are the economic boom coupled with the falling birth rates of the past two decades, has led to interest in the provision of day care services in order to release more women for the labour market. Furthermore, concern with equal opportunities is an extremely influential issue affecting the area of policy in childcare at present and a range of initiatives have been led by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through Local Area Partnerships.

### **Childcare as Prevention/Compensation**

The remit of the Department of Health in relation to childcare is caring for children,

“at risk” through circumstances of social and economic disadvantage. The concept of family support has been part of childcare provision for many decades. However, it has been defined mainly in terms of casework with families to prevent admission of their children into care. By the 1960’s a growing recognition emerged that pre-school/day-care services could be an important preventative measure in working with families. The aim was for pre-schools to make good the deficiencies of the home; providing developmental childcare to children living in poverty with the intent of breaking inter-generational cycles of welfare dependence. As Phillips (1991) argues “Developing pre-school services constituted investments in human development that could serve to prevent poverty.” (Phillips, 1991 cited in Huston, 1991, p.172-3)

The UK National Children’s Bureau in their report *Born to Fail?* which was based on a study involving 10,000 children born in March 1958 highlighted a number of pertinent concerns for childcare as a preventive measure. It indicated that those born into large or single parent families with low incomes and poor housing were much less likely to succeed in school, were likely to be on average three and a half years

behind other children in reading skills and were more likely to exhibit behavioural problems in class.

In addition in 1967 the Plowden Committee in the UK showed special concern about the deprivation suffered by young children living in poor areas or deprived circumstances, not only because their childhood reflects the basic unfairness of our society, but because their deprivation spills over into adult life.

This was the high point of child-centredness in official attitudes in the UK. (Daniel & Ivatts, 1998) A planned expansion in pre-school provision followed which was to some extent compensatory, to give a head start to children who were socially disadvantaged. It reflected a trend in other countries, for example the US, where successive evaluations of compensatory education programmes such as the Perry Pre-school project (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1983) and the Abecedarian project (Ramey & Campbell, 1991) had led educators to view early childhood education as a panacea for school failure among low-income, disadvantaged children. The impact of the Plowden report on policy in the UK, though, was brief and local authority cutbacks formalised in the 1980 Education Act limited its influence. Furthermore, the faith in simply providing pre-school experiences was somewhat misplaced and many of the projects proved unsuccessful in achieving their ambitious aims. It became clear that to be successful programmes would need to involve significant planning and effort, be for sustained periods of time be inclusive of parents and, finally, be complemented by other preventive strategies. (Karweit, 1994).

In Ireland, research has shown that children are more likely to experience poverty than adults; with single parent families and those with three or more children being particularly susceptible to a relatively high risk of poverty. (Callan et al, 1996) Estimates here say that 10% of children are at risk of leaving school early and that these are overwhelmingly from the lower socio-economic groups. (Children's Rights Alliance, 1997). This is highlighted even further by the fact that only 20% of traveller children in the 12 to 15 age group attend school. (INTO, 1992) This means that many will leave school without qualifications or, in some cases, even basic literacy skills.

Nolan & Whelan (1999) reported that childhood economic circumstances and educational attainment are among the factors that are unambiguously causal to current social class. Given all the evidence, we clearly need to prioritise investment in early years.

In Ireland, the Department of Education and the Van Leer foundation supported the setting up of a headstart-type programme called the Rutland Street project in the late 1960's. The successful evaluations of this programme, in part, led to the establishment of the nationally based Early Start initiative. The Early Start programme was established in 1994 when 8 new pre-school centres, linked to primary schools in areas designated as disadvantaged, were set up. The aim was to enhance childrens' development and offset the effects of social disadvantage. It was the first national programme for pre-school aged children that combined education and care. It has since been expanded to cover 1, 680 children in 40 centres.

At present, the main provision of early intervention programmes for disadvantaged young children comes through agencies funded by the Department of Health and the EU. Successive Ministers for Health have recognised day care services as an important support measure for disadvantaged children and families under stress. Furthermore, Section 3 of the *Child Care Act, 1991* made it a function of Health Boards to "provide childcare and family support services". However, the level of provision is woefully limited and falls well short of the target set by the EU of comprehensive publicly funded services for children aged 3-6 years. *The Review of Services for Young Children in the European Union 1990-1995* (1996) provides a comparative overview of provision in publicly funded services for children. From this, we can see that in the 0-3 years age group Ireland features at the bottom at 2%, while the figures for 3-6 year olds are slightly misleading because of the high levels of early school attendance.

Despite the growing body of research highlighting the importance of early intervention with disadvantaged children and the stated commitment of successive Governments to developing this strategy (National Anti-Poverty Strategy, 1997), the evidence is that access to early years provision is not equally available to all. Many of the children who are most in need of early childhood services are least likely to have access to them. For example, *the National Childcare Strategy* (1999) states that,

"in many urban disadvantaged communities often the only formal childcare available is that which is provided by health boards and voluntary organisations, which is usually targeted at children at risk, and thus both hard to access and potentially stigmatising. Community based provision struggles for survival, while private facilities are sporadic and inconsistent in supply". (National Childcare Strategy, 1999, p. 37)

While little research has been done in Ireland, studies in the UK have found substantial contrasts between social classes in their use of early years services. In one study by Osborn and Milbank (1987) only 10% of children with fathers in a professional occupation had no experience of early years services, yet the comparable figure among children with unskilled or unemployed fathers was 44%. Given the heavy reliance in Ireland on the private and voluntary sectors and the high cost of provision, perhaps the figures are not as bad as could be expected here. As Pugh (1996) has outlined "a policy that leaves service development to market forces tends to disadvantage those who are already disadvantaged". (Pugh, 1996, p.14)

From this discussion it is clear that policies that develop a shared responsibility for childcare between parents, the State, the community and professionals have the potential to not only prevent child disadvantage but contribute to a healthy economy.

### **Children's Rights to Affordable, Accessible and Quality Provision**

The field of early years education has a strong ethos of child-centredness, and is very close in its philosophy to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990). It is vitally important to see early years services as a children's rights issue as children have needs for socialisation, recreation and opportunities for exploration irrespective of their parent's employment status.

As well as access to childcare services, children also have the right to high quality services and to participation and consultation with regard to how these services are delivered. Currently, most childcare options available to parents operate beyond the purview of public regulatory scrutiny. Although they provide necessary safeguards, the current regulations apply only to childcare centres or childminders caring for not less than 3 children other than family for payment. This effectively excludes the vast majority of childminders who, as Williams and Collins (1998) reveal, are caring for 1 or 2 children along with their own.

Furthermore, the regulations define quality in the very narrow terms of static elements of the service. There is no reference to the quality of interaction between staff and children, neither was there any consideration of children's views in drawing up the regulations. The Basun Project in the Netherlands is an example of how very young children can contribute in a beneficial way to the planning and provision of childcare and how we as parents and providers thinking we know best, often miss the mark! When asked what children liked best about their centre there was one distinguishing feature - interaction with other children. Several factors were mentioned as being of

secondary, though equal, importance - Toys, Activities and nice staff. (Langsted in Moss, 1994)

In addition, because the regulations set minimum standards there is a danger that these will be seen as equivalent to quality services. In many cases what has thus emerged in this country is economically stratified childcare, where, because of an absence of state support, the quality and variety of alternatives available to middle class families far exceeds the range of options open to less well off families.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the Commission on the Family (1998) pinpoints two stages in the family life cycle which are particularly stressful and where parents need extra support. These are the birth of a first child; and when children are under school-going age. This, alongside the evidence that there are a large number of children in poverty in Ireland and that levels of early school leaving are increasing, highlights the need for a coherent national policy on childcare with a specific emphasis on social exclusion. For too long the Irish Government has relied on others - parents, the private sector and voluntary bodies to take the full burden of childcare. The lack of coherence, commitment and resources regarding childcare in the past must be redressed.

Public policy must assume some key responsibilities in relation to services for children including sharing with parents the cost of childcare for the general population of children, direct assistance for and co-ordination of developments in childcare provision in partnership with the community and voluntary sector for disadvantaged children, and, finally, promoting standards in all services for children. This process has begun, albeit slowly, with the publication of the *National Childcare Strategy* (1999) and the review of the operation of the pre-school regulations by the Expert Working Group on Childcare. However, the current situation with regard to childcare supply and demand has reached crisis point and requires an immediate and integrated response by the Government and social partners.

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## **RESEARCH FOR CHANGE- YOUNG PEOPLE, YOUTH CRIME & THE USE OF CUSTODY ON TEESSIDE**

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**ORGANISATION: THE CHILDREN'S SOCIETY**

### **Abstract**

This Action Research study was established in 1997 by the Society because of our concerns about the sharp increase in the use of custody for children and young people aged under 18 in England and Wales since 1992. Teesside was selected as the site for the enquiry because the local Courts have an established pattern of using high levels of custody for juveniles. The research also took place during a period when the Youth Justice Process in England and Wales was being reformed and reorganised via the Crime and Disorder Act (1998). Multiple methods and sources were used to gather data and produce information. The sources included the views and experiences of serious and/or persistent young offenders and key decision-makers such as Magistrates and Judges. This action research study was designed as an intervention which would challenge and influence decisions within the local Youth Justice System. The project is in the process of developing realistic and viable alternatives to custody for local Courts through Restorative Justice/Victim-Offender Mediation. The evidence of need for this type of intervention was established within the study.

### **Introduction**

#### **Aim of the Study**

This study about "Youth Crime and the Use of Custody on Teesside" was established by The Children's Society as a national and regional response to the substantial increase in the use of custody for young people in England and Wales since 1992.

Teesside was selected as the area where the study should be undertaken because it is one of the locations within England and Wales where there is a pattern of using high levels of custody for young people. Teesside is locked into a cycle of high levels of crime and high levels of incarceration as a response to offending behaviour by young people. This cycle is underpinned by significant levels of socio-economic disadvantage and social exclusions. "Research for Change" explored ways of breaking the Criminal Justice aspects of this cycle from a wide range of perspectives.

The study was a qualitative action research investigation which used multiple methods and sources to gather data and produce information. The sources included the views, experiences