



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework **Information for primary schools**

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning in October 2009. The information below provides details about what *Aistear* is, who it is for and how it might be used by primary school teachers to support children's learning and development.

What is *Aistear*?

Aistear is the new **curriculum framework** for children from **birth to six years** in Ireland. It gives information to help plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners. *Aistear* describes the **types of learning** that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions for how this learning might be nurtured. The Framework also provides **guidelines** on aspects of early childhood practice.

Who is *Aistear* for?

Aistear is for practitioners and parents. The term 'practitioner' refers to all those working in a specialised manner with children. This includes teachers working with young children in primary schools. *Aistear* can be used in the range of early childhood settings in Ireland including

- primary schools – mainstream and special schools
- childminding settings
- full and part-time daycare settings
- sessional services
- children's own homes.

What is in *Aistear*?

Aistear is based on 12 broad **principles**¹. Many of these are similar to the principles in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999) with some additional ones, for example, a principle on learning through play and one on children as citizens. Each principle is presented using a short theoretical statement which is then explained from the child's perspective. Many of *Aistear's* principles are also similar to those in *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006).

Aistear uses **four themes** to outline children's learning and development. These themes connect and overlap with each other:

- *Well-being*
- *Identity and Belonging*
- *Communicating*
- *Exploring and Thinking.*

¹ The principles come from national and international research on early childhood education. Much of the research used to develop *Aistear* is summarised in four papers which can be downloaded at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning.

Guidelines offer support in using *Aistear's* principles and themes in working with children. These guidelines describe good practice in

- building partnerships between parents and practitioners
- learning and developing through interactions
- learning and developing through play
- supporting learning and development through assessment.

A **User Guide** gives practical information on how *Aistear* can be used in various settings including pre-schools and infant classrooms.

Does *Aistear* have the same subjects and curriculum areas as the Infant Curriculum?

No. *Aistear* uses the themes *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking* to present the content of children's learning and development. Each **theme connects** with most if not all of the **subjects** in the Infant Curriculum.

How are the themes structured?

Each theme includes *aims* and broad *learning goals* for all children from birth to six years (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Describing children's learning and development through themes



The aims and goals outline the **dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding** that the adult nurtures in children to help them learn and develop. In this way, the aims and goals guide the adult's work with children.

Each theme has a set of *sample learning opportunities*. These give ideas about the many different types of experiences that might help children learn and develop across *Aistear's* aims and learning goals. The sample learning opportunities are, therefore, **suggestions** and can be adapted and extended to suit the children in a particular setting such as a pre-school or an infant classroom.

How are the guidelines structured?

Each set of guidelines describes good practice and includes *learning experiences*. The learning experiences are detailed accounts of children learning through particular activities or events in collaboration with other children and adults, while using various objects, play props or materials. They describe what the children say, do and make during the activities or events. They also show the adult's important role in supporting and extending the children's learning and development. The learning experiences can be searched online at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning and on the *Aistear* CD according to

- the age group of children you work with
- the type of setting you work in
- the *Aistear* theme you want to work on.

What's in *Aistear* for a primary school teacher?

Aistear's guidelines offer lots of **learning experiences** which show how a teacher might help children work towards many of the learning goals in the Framework's four themes and/or the objectives in the Infant Curriculum. Some of these learning experiences focus on supporting children with special educational needs as they learn and develop through a variety of activities and opportunities.

Aistear's guidelines give practical ideas and suggestions for using different types of **play** to extend children's learning; a range of strategies to **interact** with children; a continuum of methods to **assess** children's learning and plan for the next steps; and a number of ways to involve **parents** in their children's learning and development.

Exploring the potential of 'play'

Through the ongoing review of the Primary School Curriculum (NCCA, 2005; 2008), teachers including infant teachers, and principals asked for support in using active learning methodologies in primary classrooms. Play provides a great vehicle for doing this in infant classrooms. The following 'Question and answer' is taken from *Aistear's* User Guide, and gives an insight to the types of practical information and ideas which the new curriculum framework offers primary school teachers in planning for and using play to support young children's learning.

Q: I am a junior infant class teacher and have 28 children in my class. I know *Aistear* prioritises play as a medium for learning. Given my pupil to teacher ratio and the lack of space and equipment how can I incorporate play in my classroom?

A: As you know, play is one of the key ways young children learn and develop. As a teacher, you can be creative in how you incorporate it in your classroom. Below are some ideas that might help you.

First, look at your classroom layout. Could you do with a few less tables or could you rearrange them into a smaller space? Instead of having presses and bookshelves flat against the wall, could you turn them into dividers to create small, child-sized spaces for floor play? Even freeing up a small bit of space can make a difference to the play opportunities that you can provide. Have you thought about moving some activities into the playground? Pretend play and construction activities are even more fun when done outside.

Resources for play can be expensive, so build them up over a number of years. In the meantime, there are alternatives: Shoe-boxes make great building blocks; creative junk art using recyclable materials collected from parents is hugely popular with children; could a parent donate an old baby bath to use as a sand tray?; pretend play could be included in the corner with donations from parents. *Aistear* has a list of play resources in the guidelines, *Learning and developing through play* to give you ideas.

A daily rota of play activities involving, for example, pretend, small-world, construction, and messy play (sand, water and play-dough) is useful in organising play in your classroom. Consider dividing the children into five groups. The groups move from one activity to the next with each new day. Remember to give the groups a few minutes each day to plan together before they start to play; this promotes social skills and learning dispositions. When play is over, it is useful to invite the children to work in pairs and/or groups of three to review their play. Using the rota as a way of organising your play activities will also help you to plan the play environment to match your aims and learning goals, and your work with strands and strand units.

Play is a way of 'doing things' and learning. You can use play throughout the day to implement the curriculum. For example, you could use role-play for *Well-being* and *SPHE*, or dramatise a story for *Communicating, Drama, History, Gaeilge*, and *English* or organise construction activities for *Exploring and Thinking, Maths, Geography*, and *Science*. Play can take time and effort, but you might be pleasantly surprised at the extent to which it can become a routine way to support learning in your infant classroom. And the children will love it!

User Guide, *Aistear* (2009, pp. 11-12)

Where can I find *Aistear*?

Aistear is published in English and in Irish on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning. It is also available on CD-ROM. You might be able to pick up a copy for your school when you visit your local Education Centre.

The NCCA has developed an online *Aistear* toolkit which you'll find at www.ncca.ie/aisteartoolkit. The toolkit provides practical help in becoming familiar with the new curriculum framework and in starting to use it. Over time, it will be expanded to include resources such as video clips of infant practice, photographs of children learning through a variety of play scenarios, and samples of materials used/developed by teachers in their work with young children.

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