

Aistear... a new journey



The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

September is synonymous with thoughts of new beginnings. This is especially so in the case of thousands of junior infants who, full of excitement and adventure, set off on their journey through primary education. October this year represents another 'beginning' with the launch of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

What is Aistear?

Aistear is the new **early childhood curriculum framework** for children from birth to six years in Ireland. Because early childhood marks the beginning of children's lifelong learning journeys, this framework is called *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey.

It provides information to help practitioners, including infant teachers and Early Start teachers, to plan for and provide enjoyable and appropriately challenging learning experiences that will allow all children grow and develop as competent and confident learners. *Aistear* describes

the types of learning experiences that are important for children in early childhood, and offers lots of practical ideas and suggestions. Examples of how this learning might be nurtured are also given.

Who is Aistear for?

Aistear is for all children from birth to six years. This means it can be used in a range of settings such as children's own homes, childminding settings, crèches, nurseries, playgroups, pre-schools, naíonraí, Early Start Units and in infant classes in primary schools.

Taking a look inside ...

Aistear has two parts.

Part 1 sets out **12 principles**. Many of these are similar to the principles in the *Primary School Curriculum* with some additions, for example a principle on learning through play and one on children as citizens. Part 1 also describes the **content of children's learning**. Unlike the *Primary School Curriculum*, *Aistear* does this using four themes rather than using subjects and curriculum areas. The themes are

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

Each theme connects with most, if not all, of the subjects in the *Primary School Curriculum*.

Well-being

This theme is about children being confident, happy and healthy.

Identity and Belonging

This theme is about children developing a positive sense of who they are, and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community.

Communicating

This theme is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence, in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.

Exploring and Thinking

This theme is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world. They do this by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning and forming, testing and refining ideas.



Through the themes, *Aistear* focuses on developing children's dispositions and skills, nurturing attitudes and values, and building knowledge and understanding of their world:

dispositions such as curiosity, independence, perseverance, and playfulness

- **skills** such as walking, climbing, cutting, and mark-making
- **attitudes and values** such as respect for others, care for the environment and positive attitudes to learning and to life
- **knowledge and understanding** such as developing a sense of colour, shape and number, learning how things work and that words have meaning.

Part 2 of *Aistear* consists of **four sets of guidelines**. These focus on

- enriching learning through interactions
- learning through play
- using assessment to support learning
- working with parents.

A **User Guide** gives practical information on how you can use *Aistear* in your infant classroom or Early Start Unit.

What's in *Aistear* for me?

Lots! Examples from practice are a defining feature of *Aistear's* guidelines. The examples are known as *learning experiences* and show how key messages in the guidelines might look in action in different settings including pre-schools and infant classrooms. The guidelines also give practical ideas and suggestions for using different types of play to extend children's learning, strategies to interact with children; methods to assess children's learning and plan for the next steps, and ways to involve parents in their children's learning. *Thinking about my practice* questions are included to help you reflect on what you do and say to support children's learning and development, and plan for how this can be improved.

And on the subject of using play to support children's learning and development, you might be interested in reading Fiona Giblin's story, also in this edition of **info@ncca**, about how she uses socio-dramatic play in her junior infant classroom.



Absolutely loved the appendix of resources for play...Every infant teacher should have this list now!

Found the learning experiences very beneficial, realistic, helpful, relevant, interesting and practical.

Reflection boxes: Throughout both sets of guidelines beneficial, critical and grounding in that they take the theory and ensure some critical self-evaluation.

Primary school teacher, Co. Galway



Well done to all involved! Excellent self-reflection boxes, exemplars are perfect for highlighting the points being made.

Primary school teacher, Co. Kerry



Questions and connections

Alongside recent developments such as the free pre-school year for all children between 3 years, 3 months and 4 years, 6 months, the launch of *Aistear* marks an exciting time in early childhood education in Ireland. Equally, it raises questions.

How does *Aistear* link with the

Primary School Curriculum or the Early Start Curricular Guidelines?

To help answer questions like this one the NCCA will work with practitioners, children and parents to gather examples of *Aistear* in action across a variety of settings. These examples might include short video clips, photographs, and samples of children's work and their conversations with adults and other children.

How does *Aistear* link with *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006)?

This may be another question in your mind especially if you are using *Siolta* as a self-reflection tool to review and develop your early years practice. *Aistear* can help you work towards a number of the standards in *Siolta* such as curriculum, environments, identity and belonging, partnership with parents, interactions and play.

When and where can I get a copy of *Aistear*?

Aistear will be published on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie/earlylearning and on CD-ROM in October 2009. Keep an eye on the website for details of how you can get your copy.

After publication, the NCCA will begin the work of gathering examples of *Aistear* in settings. If you would like to take part please email newsletter@ncca.ie; we'd be delighted to hear from you.

