

## Section 3: Conclusion

Cathal, Jayne, Seán, Patrick, Amy, Harry, Zachary, Louise, Caroline, Alan, Andrew and Matt have shared their early learning experiences with the NCCA Early Childhood Team. Through listening to the children and sharing in their routines and activities, the NCCA has gained a greater understanding of what life is like for these children in their particular settings.

Collectively, the portraits reinforce many messages from the literature on children's early learning and development. (Many of these messages are highlighted in the NCCA's background paper, *Children's early learning and development*). These messages include

- the role of relationships including the Key Worker system
- the importance of play, and in particular outdoor play
- the influence and role of parents
- the power of communication through media such as movement
- the importance of identity and belonging in children's lives
- the role of culture and diversity
- observing and listening to children.

This concluding section draws on the descriptions of the children's experiences as captured in the different portraits to illustrate these messages 'in action'.





*When the adult picked him up, Cathal initiated a 'kissing' game with some lovely reciprocal exchanges, including laughing, giggling and delighted squeals. This one to one exchange within a trusting and secure relationship is important for Cathal's emotional safety and positive self image (extracted from portrait of Cathal, age 9 months).*

### Relationships

Relationships are a critical context for early learning and the child's learning and development is enhanced by warm and supportive relationships. Attachments through which the baby's needs are met consistently and in a caring and respectful way provide the foundation for the child's well-being and help him/her develop a sense of self and an identity making learning more rewarding, enjoyable and successful. Children are social beings and have a fundamental need to be with familiar, loving adults as well as being with other children during early childhood as they learn from and with others.

***(See also Amy, Harry and Jayne's portraits).***



*The outdoor play area has a cushioned surface with attractive green and red chequered squares. Children are free to choose their own activities and play hopscotch, run around coloured cones and play chase, play with balls and beanbags and hoops and take turns using the tricycles and bicycles. The practitioners join in and encourage the children's activities while ensuring their safe exploration of equipment. Alan says he loves being outside. He says that his favourite things to do outside are playing with the balls and the bikes. He kicks a ball at a target, retrieving it and lining the ball up to kick at the same target again. He is absorbed for more than ten minutes in the activity, clearly repeating and revisiting the same activity in an attempt to perfect his aiming skills (extracted from portrait of Alan, age 5).*

### Outdoor play

The outdoor environment provides young children with a rich learning environment. By being active, less inhibited and free, children learn with an enthusiasm and motivation outdoors that they do not always display indoors.



***(See also Amy, Caroline, Seán and Patrick, and Jayne's portraits).***

### Holistic learning and development

Learning and development in early childhood is profoundly integrated where all aspects are interconnected and interdependent, occurring in a variety of different contexts. The interconnected themes of the early childhood curriculum should be used as a framework to interlace the child's prior experience and learning in the context of supportive relationships rather than emphasising the acquisition of discrete skills in isolation. Learning and development occurs across domains that are mutually supportive and interactive.

**(See also Caroline and Alan's portraits).**



*Much of Matt's learning is highly integrated. Matt was learning about spirals—this stemmed from the children bringing snails to school. Matt and his classmates observed and talked about the spirals on the snails' shells and learned from Ms. Molloy as she described spirals on the walls in Newgrange. Ms. Molloy guided the children in exploring how to make spirals and to use spiralling to mix colours. The children made snails with spiral shells using márla. Matt created a family of snails, some having small shells and others, larger ones. He made food too in case the snails were hungry! The children's enjoyment in learning in this integrated way was evident in the fun and curiosity they showed in their expressions, conversations and questions (extracted from portrait of Matt, age 5 years and 9 months).*

### The role of parents in children's learning

Parents are the primary educators of their children and have a vital role in promoting children's well-being, learning and development. The parent child relationship is qualitatively different from relationships children have with other adults. Parents play a key role in supporting children's learning and do so through relationships, conversations, activities and routines and they support their children's learning in a manner which is informal, fun, appealing and relevant. **(See also Caroline, Cathal and Louise's portraits).**



*Patrick and Seán's mum and dad say that no one can love and care for the boys the way they do. Their priorities in regard to them are that they are happy, healthy and doing what they should be doing for their age and stage of development. They make a priority of spending time with each of the boys on their own. They also play with, reads to, listens to and talks to them. Dad takes the boys to the farm and also plays football with them in the evenings (extracted from portrait of Patrick, age 4 years and Seán, age 19 months).*



When Amy dances, her whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated. She particularly enjoys Heads, shoulders, knees and toes, I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow and Istigh sa sú (In the Zoo). Expressing herself in a variety of ways is important for Amy. Though her mastery of language is excellent she is quite reserved but through music and dance she gets the freedom to express herself through a different medium (extracted from portrait of Amy, age 2½).

### Communication

The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Most children are naturally disposed to communicate and this enables them to establish and maintain social relations with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them. Communication embraces many different ways of giving and receiving information. While most children will use all forms, eventually developing sophisticated verbal skills, some children will rely more heavily on others forms, particularly children with special educational needs. Also some children with good verbal skills will continue to use other forms of non-verbal communication as an important means of expression. **(See also Zachary, Harry, Alan, Louise and Matt's portraits).**



Patrick and Seán also know their community well and have lots of connections in the area they are living. The boys' paternal grandparents live next door and the boys see them daily. Some days, Patrick and Seán and mum go for a walk to the local church. On the way the two boys look in at the cattle in their fields and Patrick climbs their gates as he passes them. As cars drive past, people wave. In this small village everyone knows everyone else and Patrick can tell you who passes in the cars. Clearly these boys have a real sense of who they are and where they belong – at home and in their community (extracted from portrait of Patrick, age 4 years and Seán, age 19 months ).

### The importance of identity and belonging in children's lives

A sense of belonging and identity is important for children. Belonging to a community is about having a sense of connection to a particular group. It is good for children to develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith and language help children to feel valued and respected in society. **(See also Caroline, Louise and Amy's portraits).**

### Culture and diversity

Young children of every cultural or ethnic background need to develop a secure and positive sense of their own identity. Children's family life will be the most significant source of that identity. The early childhood curriculum should emphasise developing young children's own sense of identity and a positive sense of pride in their own family origins. Starting with themselves, young children can develop a sense of belonging to their local community and begin to understand and respect other cultures and traditions. Experiences outside the family for example, within the early childhood setting, can provide opportunities to significantly broaden young children's understanding and learn respect for ways of life with which they are less familiar. It is important that children can see themselves and their family reflected in play resources, visual images and books (**See also Zachary, Amy, Alan and Caroline's portraits**).



*The pre-school staff maintain good links with Louise's parents and the routines, customs and regular events of the Traveller culture is strongly reflected in the curriculum programme. Using themes like horses, and finding out about different countries in Europe, staff explore different aspects of traveller culture meaningful to the children. The emphasis on the Traveller culture within the curriculum allows Louise to explore and express her cultural identity alongside her peers through art, craft, music and dance. Various festivals and celebrations throughout the year provide accessible and relevant opportunities; particularly when adults from the travelling community are invited to participate. Adults from the travelling community occasionally visit the children in the pre-school to tell stories of the 'olden days', to play music and sing songs (extracted from portrait of Louise, age 4).*



*Andrew loves all kinds of oral work, especially singing and performing. There is a regular News Time, when Andrew's teacher chooses two children to act as reporter and cameraman. They take a toy microphone and camera and interview whichever child has brought in something to talk about and show the class. Andrew loves being picked to be the reporter, relaying the other children's questions and asking questions of his own. Andrew asks Megan Where did you get your toy dog? Megan says In Wales. No-one, including Megan, is quite sure where Wales is or how you get there, (it was dark, says Megan) so the teacher takes down the globe and shows them. This leads to an extended discussion, bringing in science and geography as well as language. (extracted from portrait of Andrew, age 5 years 11 months).*

### Learning through play

Play is a natural and universal medium for young children's thinking, learning and development and is central to their well-being. All children need and have a right to play. Children can play on their own or with others and play occurs in a social and cultural context and is a powerful context for learning. For young children, play is a way of strengthening meaningful learning and co-operation with others and it touches on many dimensions of development and provides an integrating mechanism for all aspects of a child's development. While children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved. The adult is central in the play process, emphasising the link between relationships and play as key contexts for learning. Play occurs in relationships between co-players, their actions and the meanings they co-construct in a particular context. **(Integral in all portraits).**



*Harry has a very close affectionate relationship with Molly, his key worker who works with him on a one-to-one basis for two hours everyday. To facilitate the development of his communication skills Molly chats and plays games with him and includes lots of singing activities, mirror games and one-to-one activities in his daily programme. During one play session Molly gets down to his level and introduces a battery operated musical game to him. She demonstrates how to use the toy and supports his hand to do the same. Then she sits back and waits for him to begin. He presses the keys which produce the expected sound and laughs. She begins a turn taking game with him, chatting away to him and encouraging him until she senses his interest waning. The toy is removed and to regain his attention she starts a clapping game (extracted from portrait of Harry, age 3, who has recently been diagnosed with autism).*

### **The Key Worker system**

The key worker system provides an opportunity to establish warm and reciprocal relationships with significant adults involved in children's daily lives and promotes a sense of security and consistency for the child. The key worker system contributes to the young child's emotional comfort and provides pattern and consistency for both the child and his/her parents. The child is more likely to 'risk' new things if they have adult support and a sense of how a familiar adult will respond to their ventures. The system is also very important to parents, as they need to know who to talk to and share information with, about their child. **(See also Amy and Cathal's portraits).**

### **Observing and listening to babies and young children**

The child is not the sole learner in the play situation. The adult too is a learner. He/she is an observer of children's play and a listener of their playscripts and discussions. These strategies help the adult to understand the play – its context, it's 'story', the children's thinking and ideas, their command and range of language, as well as interests and emotions. This information enables the adult to enter the play at opportune points, with sensitivity. But it also allows him/her to extend and enrich the play in the most appropriate way for each child. **(See Cathal's portrait for the importance of responsive care for babies and young children. See also Matt and Louise's portraits).**



*In addition to daily verbal exchanges between Cathal's key worker and his parent's morning and evening, a record of care sheet is completed daily for all babies and toddlers. Ongoing observation allows the key worker to tune into Cathal's learning and development needs and this information is used to inform the planning of further experiences and activities. The daily record of care document includes details of feeds, sleeps and changes as well as comments on his form/mood, toys he played with and things he did. Key learning or development moments for example, pulling himself up on a piece of furniture are recorded so that the experience can be replicated at home. At the end of each day, the completed record of care is put into Cathal's changing bag for his parents to read at home and a copy is retained on his personal file in the nursery (extracted from portrait of Cathal, age 9 months).*

## Using the portraits

The portraits have enlivened and enlightened the NCCA's work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. They have enabled the NCCA Team to represent the voices of children in the development process, and to connect the Framework with the everyday experiences and realities of children and practitioners in a range of early childhood settings in Ireland. Together with the findings from the consultation with the early childhood sector in 2004, the background papers currently being developed and an ongoing review of the literature on children's early learning and development, the portraits will feed into the development of the Framework. The Early Childhood Team supported by the wider Early Childhood and Primary Team will use these varied sources to help to ensure the *Framework for Early Learning* can support all children's learning and development throughout early childhood.

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