

Babies: Birth to 18 months

Cathal

Cathal (Photo A.1) is nine months old and is the first and only child in his family. He is a happy, sociable and affectionate baby. At home Cathal gets pleasure from singing, music and interacting with people. He enjoys fun games with his Mum and Dad as well as going on walks, going to the park and visiting his granny. Cathal attends a childcare centre called Happy Start Nursery in the north-west of Ireland.



Photo A.1: Cathal

Happy Start Nursery - Background and context

Happy Start Nursery is a privately run early years service offering full day care, sessional care and after school care for young children. The nursery was established in 1997 with the assistance of a grant from the local Enterprise Board. The service was extended in 2002 with the support of a grant from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. The nursery is situated in a scenic rural townland with a population of approximately 100 people. This is approximately two miles from the nearest town which over the past fifteen years has become one of the most rapidly growing centres of trade and industry in the north-west region.

There are currently 42 children on the roll with 25-30 attending on a daily basis. The nursery opens at 8.00 a.m. in the morning and closes at 6.00 p.m., five days per week, 52 weeks per year.

In total, the service employs nine members of staff who have participated in a range of childcare related courses and programmes both accredited and non-accredited. The ongoing professional development of staff is viewed as an integral part of good early years practice, and training opportunities are regularly made available to the staff team.

Curriculum and assessment

The manager of Happy Start Nursery stated that the overall aim of the nursery is to *provide childcare services in a caring, understanding and stimulating environment with a holistic approach to each child's development*. She also stated that nursery staff were guided by principles emerging from research that *children learn at their own pace, participate in activities that they are interested in, and are able to play and work with activities for as long as they choose*.

Five members of staff work in the baby and toddler room. When they plan activities for the younger children, they find that the four broad themes outlined in the *Framework for Early Learning* - Well being, Identity and belonging, Communicating and Exploring and thinking, are particularly useful. The nursery staff are familiar with the four themes as

they have participated in training and professional development organised by the local County Childcare Committee¹ in this area. Within the themes, topics are chosen which will encompass children's abilities, interests and needs as identified by each child's parents and Key Worker².

Staff regularly observe and record aspects of children's learning and development and consider evaluation of children's involvement in the activities as being central to their practice in order to determine suitability to children's individual needs.

When joining the nursery, parents are asked to complete a child profile which contains information specific to the individual child such as – special interests, likes, dislikes, names of family members, favourite books/stories, and so on. A follow up Settling In Report is compiled after approximately one month in the setting to allow parents to know how children have settled in, how they are getting on and if there is a particular area of development staff are going to concentrate on.

In addition to daily verbal exchanges between Key Worker and parents in the morning and evening, a Record of Care sheet is completed daily for babies and toddlers. A record of achievement is compiled over a longer period for pre-school children. The record of achievement is compiled in a scrapbook or file and includes samples of the child's work, photographs, and any comments made by parents either in verbal or written form. Staff regularly take photographs of children participating in activities and these are displayed around the setting for parents to see. Some photographs are sent home, some are added to the child's record of achievement.

Cathal's experiences in Happy Start Nursery

Happy Start Nursery was recommended to Cathal's parents by a friend. Cathal joined the nursery when he was four months old and on average attends for 32 hours per week over four days. Cathal's parents reported an easy transition from home to the

¹ County Childcare Committees are voluntary organisations funded by the Irish Government under the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006-2010 with a remit to support the development of new and existing childcare services at county level.

² The Key Worker system describes how an individual member of the childcare team takes responsibility for the needs of an individual child in order to promote a sense of security and consistency through the development of close relationships and responsive care routines.

nursery which they described as being much more upsetting for them than for Cathal himself.

Table 4: A day in the nursery for Cathal

Arrival 8.15-8.30 a.m.	In the busy atmosphere of the nursery during arrival time in the morning, Cathal flaps his arms and smiles at staff. Verbal exchanges of information take place and Cathal's prepared changing bag is left with staff.
Breakfast 9.00-9.30 a.m.	Cathal eats a bowl of cereal for his breakfast followed by his bottle. He has a good appetite.
Activities	Cathal explores containers and baskets, repeatedly emptying and filling them with different objects. He plays with musical toys and pushes different buttons which play a tune. He claps when the music starts, listens until it finishes, smiles and repeats the sequence. Staff are extremely responsive to his needs and if he shows signs of being bored with an activity he is moved to a different area to keep him stimulated and interested.
Change	His Key Worker, Linda makes the most of this one to one time with Cathal, maintaining eye contact and interacting with him throughout the changing routine. He responds by laughing, cooing and smiling.
Sleep	Staff recognise when Cathal is tired and respond by settling him down for a nap in a cot in the sleep room. The routine is flexible and adapts to Cathal's changing needs. Some days he takes more sleeps than others.
Dinner 12.30-1.00 p.m.	Cathal's favourite dinners include potato, vegetables and gravy, beans and potato or chicken casserole. Linda uses feeding times as an opportunity to develop independence skills for example encouraging him to hold his own bottle or spoon.
Activities	Cathal tries to pull himself up on stable furniture and equipment. Staff respond to this development allowing him plenty of space and encouragement. Linda offers positive reinforcement by clapping and cheering when he succeeds in what he sets out to do and he reciprocates by smiling and clapping.
Change	Changing time is used as an opportunity for play – Linda makes time to touch Cathal's skin with different textured materials and talking and playing with his fingers and toes.
Tea 3.30-4.00 p.m.	Cathal sits in a low chair to eat his dinner and plays peek a boo games with Linda throughout. He eats mashed banana and rusk followed by his bottle.
Activities	Cathal crawls over to a member of staff, she takes him by the hands, and he pulls himself up and dances while the staff member sings. They move over to a vertical mirror on the wall which adds to Cathal's enjoyment of the activity as he can see himself and he squeals with delight.
Change	Linda changes his nappy whilst talking and singing to him and makes the routine fun.
Sleep	Cathal falls asleep in the swing and he is gently lifted by a member of staff and placed in a cot in the sleep room.
Activities	Cathal interacts well with adults on a one to one basis. When the

	manager picked him up, he initiated a 'kissing' game with some lovely reciprocal exchanges, including laughing, giggling and delighted squeals. This was a lovely example of a 1:1 exchange within a trusting and secure relationship which is so important for Cathal's emotional safety and positive self image.
Departure 5.00 p.m.	On seeing his Mum at collection time, Cathal waves his arms, laughs and reaches out to be picked up. His Mum gives him a big hug and Cathal responds with his kissing routine. Linda gives her a verbal overview of Cathal's day. His bottles and record of care document are put in his changing bag, and he is ready to go home.

Well being

The baby and toddler room where Cathal spends most of his day is rectangular in shape and is divided into two areas. The room is brightly painted and large windows facilitate lots of natural light and allow Cathal to see outside. The baby area has a range of different textured floor coverings including carpet, colourful mats, floor cushions and soft cushion floor vinyl making it both comfortable and stimulating for Cathal to explore (Photos A.2 and A3). This area has a sofa for staff to use to feed the babies as well as a range of baby equipment such as low chairs, a swing, and a high chair. The activity area has a ball pool, vertical and horizontal mirrors on the wall, a range of push and pull toys, simple shape sorters, stacking toys, balls, fabric and board books, pop up toys, musical toys, blocks and cubes. Toys are housed in and on top of open low level units within easy access for Cathal who is just becoming mobile. The age range of the children currently in the baby and toddler area is from eight months to two and a half years and consists of seven girls and eight boys.



Photos A. 2 and A.3: Cathal explores his environment

In an effort to provide consistency of care and to promote feeling of security in the out of home setting, a Key Worker called Linda has been assigned to Cathal. Linda's responsibilities include verbal exchanges of information at handover times from and to parents in the morning and evening, interacting with Cathal and always making sure he is stimulated and has something to do (Photo A.4), and generally being aware of his individual needs by responding to his vocalisations, gestures and cues. I observed Linda compiling Cathal's daily Record of Care which included details of feeds, sleeps and changes as well as comments on his form/mood, toys he played with and things he did. 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.



Photo A.4. Cathal and Linda

Identity and Belonging

Cathal's Mum commented that *Cathal adapts well to the nursery on a daily basis and seems happy and comfortable in his surroundings*. He demonstrates this in a number of ways, for example, he smiles and uses positive body language such as smiling and waving his arms when he comes into the setting in the morning, he interacts well with staff and he sleeps and eats well. Cathal's parents recognise that he has a special relationship with Linda, his Key Worker. They find it comforting and reassuring that he has the continuity of one key person outside the home to relate to closely during the

day, particularly if he was upset they feel that Linda would be the best person to comfort him. The Manager of Happy Start Nursery mentioned that she *recognises the positive effects of a good relationship between nursery staff and parents for both Cathal's feelings of security and progress in learning and development.*

Informal daily verbal exchanges promote two-way communication and consistency of care for Cathal between the home and the nursery. Staff believe that an ongoing exchange of information and respectful relationships between parents and staff can also broaden and enrich Cathal's experiences both at home and in the nursery setting.

The environment is clean, bright and child friendly. Throughout the nursery, attractive displays of children's work and colourful photographs of children participating in various activities not only communicate the work of the setting to parents but also demonstrate the value placed on children's individual creations. For young children like Cathal, this also promotes a sense of belonging to the group.

Communicating

Both Cathal's parents and the childcare staff agree that Cathal is a good all rounder as there isn't anything he doesn't particularly enjoy doing. He is good at entertaining himself and very little upsets him. Cathal is extremely sociable and demonstrates an ability to communicate with others in a number of ways. He pays great attention to facial expression and makes eye contact with adults to initiate communication. He watches and imitates adults in clapping hands (Photo A.5) and peek a boo games frequently shaking his head or covering his eyes. His language is developing into conversation conveyed through a variety of jabber using different tones and pitches.



Photo A. 5: Cathal communicating and imitating

Cathal takes great interest in what's going on in the room and can watch adults and other children³ intently for several minutes. He squeals or shouts to attract attention to himself, waits for the adult response and smiles or laughs when he gets it. He has also perfected a kissing routine (Photo A. 6) as a means of communication which he has now worked out always results in positive attention.



Photo A.6: Cathal engaged in his kissing routine

Exploring and Thinking

Cathal can sit up unaided and makes a good effort at trying to reach objects. He has just started to crawl and spends a lot of his activity time on the floor surrounded by toys and activities and soft floor cushions. A soft, comfortable and safe floor space allows him freedom to move, roll, stretch and explore uninterrupted – with the adult close by.



Photos A.7 and A.8: Cathal finds a willing play partner in the mirror

³ Although Cathal watches other children with interest, I did not observe him directly engaging with other babies.

Cathal's favourite place is a corner in the baby activity area with a floor level mirror on the wall. In his reflection he finds a willing play partner and spends time looking at himself, touching and kissing his reflection and chatting and cooing happily (Photos A.7 and A.8). He also enjoys sitting in the ball pool, playing with the pop up toys and activity cubes. He can concentrate on activities and can spend a long time examining objects.

In relation to learning and development, Linda described how she *plays an important role in providing a scaffold for his developing skills*. I observed this during a play situation where Cathal was shaking a cube activity box and lost his grip on the toy. It landed near to him but not within easy reach. Cathal expressed his displeasure at this and Linda lifted the toy and placed it a little nearer to him. In order to reach the toy Cathal had to move onto all fours and reach forward whilst balancing himself with the other hand. Linda demonstrated her knowledge of Cathal's individual stage of development by not simply handing Cathal the toy but by challenging him just enough to motivate him to reach for the toy himself.

Now that Cathal is learning to crawl, Linda ensures that he has adequate space to support this developing skill and that she is there to steady and encourage him when necessary. She also uses the fact that Cathal is a sociable baby, in order to develop his language skills by talking to him, singing songs and rhymes and playing games with him.



Photos A.9 and A.10: Cathal spending time outdoors

Cathal appears to enjoy spending time outdoors (Photos A.9 and A.10) where he explores his surroundings and watches and listens to everything that is going on. The setting has a fenced play area to the front of the building. This area is covered by safety matting and has a slide, a climbing structure, a playhouse, ride on toys and a selection of equipment for games and activities. There is also a large grassy area to the side of the building where children are taken to play circle games and to run around. The babies are taken outside when the weather is good and the younger babies sit in a buggy or propped up with cushions beside a member of staff on a blanket.

Conclusion

As Cathal is an only child, his parents feel that *the key benefits of attending the nursery are being able to mix and interact with other children and adults, develop social skills and assist his speech and language development.* They also like the layout of the baby and toddler room whereby toddlers are encouraged to interact with the younger babies and the babies enjoy watching the older children especially during music and movement activities.

They notice things which Cathal is picking up at nursery and are happy in the knowledge that trained staff are aware of developmental milestones and share this information with them through verbal exchanges and the daily Record of Care document. Cathal's parents particularly like the information about what Cathal actually did during his day in the nursery and look forward to reading the Record of Care document every evening. A recent comment in the document described how Cathal pulled himself up on the ball pool for the first time. Cathal's parents used this information to provide for and extend this experience at home as well. They believe they have a good relationship with staff and find them a good source of information regarding appropriate toys and activities and progress in learning and development. Overall they feel happy and at ease that Cathal seems content in the nursery and his needs are being met.