

Toddlers: 18 months to three years

Amy



Photo C.1: Amy

Amy (Photo C.1) is two and a half years old. She is an only child and lives with her parents in the south-east of Ireland. Amy is a mature and articulate little girl and she attends a childcare centre called An Leabh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra every weekday, from 7.30 a.m. until around 5.00 p.m. while her Mum and Dad are at work.

An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra – Background and Context

In 1997 a community naíonra, an Irish medium pre-school for three to five year olds, was set up in the village. In 1999, with funding from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme a childcare centre called An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra was built. The centre continues to promote the use of Irish and is open from 7.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Monday to Friday. There are 68 children on the role ranging in age from four months to eight years. Two children with special needs attend the centre. A good relationship is maintained with the local primary school (an English-medium school) which has approximately 70 children and three teachers. There are three rooms in An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra including a baby room, a toddler room and a naíonra. Both a sessional and full-time service are offered in the naíonra. Amy is one of nine children in the toddler room. There are two staff members with Amy in the toddler room at all times. Anne, the room leader, has completed a BA in Early Childhood Studies, while the assistant, Margaret, has FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council) Level Five Childcare Training.

Curriculum and assessment

The Manager of An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra told me that the aim of the staff is to provide the best possible care and education for the children who attend the centre. The centre's mission statement is:

to provide a quality, child-centred, welcoming, language-rich environment where Irish is absorbed by the child naturally through games, songs, fun, where equality and diversity are embraced, and where the health, safety, welfare, needs and rights of all children in our care is of paramount importance.

(An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra Parent Handbook, no date)

The Manager, who recently completed FETAC Level 6 Supervision in Childcare Training, said that parents of the children who attended were very aware of the ethos of the centre. Overall staff try to help the children to be caring people who respect themselves, each other and the environment. In each of the individual rooms the room

leader interprets this in her own particular way. Anne, the room leader in Amy's room explained that she aimed to provide a broad curriculum for the children and that she endeavoured to ensure that the eight areas of development (emotional, social, cognitive, physical, linguistic, creative, moral and spiritual) were supported. There are a variety of child-initiated and adult-led activities throughout the day in the toddler room and a fairly predictable routine is followed. Anne observes the children regularly to ensure they are progressing and she keeps a file of each child's work which is sent home at the end of each term. She also chats regularly to parents informally about their children's progress and around the time of their second birthday she also uses a Developmental Milestone Checklist to assess the children's development. The checklist focuses on their physical, linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional development.

Table 6: A day in the centre for Amy

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| Arrival 7.30 a.m. | When Amy arrives at the centre with her Mum in the morning she is often the first child there. Ellen, a staff member welcomes her and Amy often brings in her bowl of cereal from home because she doesn't feel like eating it when she gets up. |
| Breakfast 8.30 a.m. | Only a small number of children arrive before 9.00 a.m. so Ellen and the children play together and at 8.30 a.m. they have toast and a drink. |
| Activities 9.00 a.m. | Anne and Margaret arrive just before 9.00 a.m. and Amy and the other children help to tidy up the toddler room as this is where all the children who arrive early play together. For about 20 minutes after this, Amy plays freely with the toys often choosing to play with the dolls. At about 9.20 a.m. Amy and her friends play with the sand, the playdough, the water or the lentils. Some mornings they bake, making rice crispie buns or different types of cookies. |
| 10.00 a.m. | Anne reads stories chosen by the children and after story-time singing, dancing and movement take place. |
| ¹⁸ Lón time (lunch) 10.30 a.m. | Amy helps the adults and the other children to tidy up. She washes her hands and gets her lón (lunch) and her drink from the fridge. She usually has a yoghurt drink and some fruit. |
| Nappy change 10.45 a.m. | Amy goes to the changing area with a staff member to have her nappy changed. She chats happily to Anne or Margaret while she is being changed. |
| Outside time 11.00 a.m. | Amy and the other children go outside to play. Amy puts on her coat and hat. She runs around, goes up and down the slide, kicks the ball, plays hide and seek, drives around on the pretend car. |

¹⁸ Throughout this portrait Irish words/phrases used by the practitioners and/or Amy are presented with the English translation.

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| Dinner 12.00 p.m. | Amy comes inside, takes off her coat, washes her hands and sits down to wait for her aunt Pauline (who is the chef in the centre) to bring in her dinner. Amy eats her dinner quickly. After dinner she has her nappy changed and brushes her teeth. She plays until Patricia comes to collect her to take her for her nap. Amy sleeps for about one and a half hours. When she is ready she has her nappy changed and has her tea, a piece of toast or a scone and a drink. |
| Activities 3.30 p.m. | Amy enjoys free-play with her friends. She builds with the blocks or plays with the dolls. Sometimes she threads beads or plays matching games or with the playdough. |
| 4.00 p.m. | Amy helps tidy up and sits in a circle with her friends to listen to a story or to have a chat or sing songs. |
| Outside time 4.15 p.m. | Amy gets ready to go outside again. She plays outside weather permitting or if not she goes to the sensory room. |
| Departure 5.00 p.m. | Amy gets ready to go home. When her Mum or Dad arrives she runs to them and gives them a hug. Anne tells Amy's parent what sort of day she has had and Amy gives Anne a goodbye hug before she waves good-bye to her friends. |

Amy's experiences in An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra

Well-being

The room where Amy spends most of her day is a large rectangular room with direct access to child-sized toilets and to a nappy changing area. There is a door directly to the outside and windows are at the children's level and the window at the front looks on to the outdoor play area. There is bright yellow paint on the walls and the room is at an even temperature with under floor heating. There is a round table in the middle of the room with child-sized chairs around it. The room has a low level sink and a fridge for storing the children's lunches and drinks. There is a blackboard on one wall which is also at child level and there is a full-length mirror. There is a low level press with blocks, jigsaws, tea-sets, dolls and teddy bears. The sand tray is in the corner near the window. There is also a rack for drying paintings attached to the wall. Some materials are stored on high shelves but most things are accessible to the children. Aprons are hanging up in the corner at child level for use at messy play times. The daily routine and policies and procedures are displayed on the walls. The room is bright and inviting to Amy and her friends.

In the mornings Amy's Mum usually settles her in the room and they take off her coat and hang up her bag. Her Mum told me that *Amy enjoys coming to the centre but sometimes she is a bit reluctant on Monday mornings but once she is at the centre she is fine*. Every morning Amy has her breakfast in the centre. Anne commented that food was one of Amy's favourite things. The centre has a healthy eating policy and this is important for the children's well-being. Amy can feed herself and finishes everything she is given to eat. The children sit together at meal times and chat as they eat.

Amy goes for a nap every afternoon. In preparation, she cleans her teeth. Amy's Mum informed me that at home Amy was not keen on brushing her teeth but I didn't observe her showing any dislike for it in the centre. Amy brings a bottle of water with her to bed. Until recently Amy had a soother in the centre (her *dody*) but now she only uses this at bedtime at home. Patricia, a Community Employment staff member, usually stays in the sensory room while the children sleep. The children from the toddler room sleep in the sensory room (as no provision was made for a sleep area in the toddler room when the centre was being built) so before they go up every day Patricia prepares their beds and draws the curtains. Then she collects the children who are going for their nap. While children are sleeping, Patricia knits with the lights off and the curtains drawn, ready to comfort anyone who wakes up. If Patricia can't stay with them when they are asleep, the monitor is plugged in. Amy goes off happily for her nap with Patricia whom she has known since she was a baby. When Amy wakes up Patricia or another staff member brings her back to the toddler room and she likes to sit on Anne's lap or beside her for about 15 to 20 minutes before she gently makes her way back into playing with the others. Amy is up early every morning and this nap in the afternoon is important for her well-being.



Photo C.2: Amy with Margaret

Amy appears to have good relations with the adults in the toddler room. She seems very attached to Anne and Margaret (Photo C.2) and when she wants something or is upset in any way she goes directly to them. On one of the days I visited, Amy banged her head getting out of the cupboard where she had been playing and she was very upset. She ran straight to Anne who picked her up. Anne asked, *What happened Amy? I hurted my head*, Amy said. *Oh your poor head, will I rub it and give it a kiss?* Anne asked. Amy nodded in agreement. After a couple of minutes Amy was all right again and she went to join the others at the table. Owen, another child, asked, *Are you ok?* *Yep*, Amy said, *Anne made my head better.*

Amy is very familiar with the routine of the toddler room and is always given advance warning by Anne when moving on to a new activity. Transitions in the room are handled well and children are never left waiting very long as they move from one activity to another. There is a gentle flow to the day and Amy is happy knowing what is coming next.

Identity and Belonging

Amy lives about nine miles away from An Leanbh Óg Crèche agus Naíonra but her Mum is originally from the area and Amy's aunt works as a chef in the centre so Amy's parents were anxious to have her attend this particular centre even though there were childcare centres closer to where they live. Amy started in the baby room when she was seven months old and settled very well according to her Mum. When she was one and a half she moved to the toddler room, and that is where she was when I visited the centre.

Many of the activities undertaken in the toddler room help to give Amy and her friends a sense of identity and belonging. Group time takes place every morning. This involves a variety of activities such as singing, playing with puppets and reading stories. The children sit around the table and most days they start the session by singing, *Dia dhuit (Hello)* (followed by each child's name) – *Dia dhuit Amy, Dia dhuit Ali* continuing until all the names have been called out and ending with *it's time to say Dia dhuit*. Singing each child's name allows the children to learn one another's names and makes each child feel special.

Displays of Amy's work also promote her sense of belonging in the group. There are a number of individual and group displays on the walls such as hand-prints of each child, nail brush paintings, cardboard balloons that each of the children painted themselves, a large beach display (Photo C.3) which I saw the children make, paintings and collages of pasted cut-outs from magazines. Each piece of work is identified by the child or children's name(s) on it. Displays are changed regularly. There is also a selection of children's photos at the back of the door including some of Amy.

The children's birthday display on the wall also helps to give the children a sense of belonging and identity in the room. Starting with the youngest and ending with the oldest, the dates of birth are stuck on to different animals and a little celebration is held for each child when it is his/her birthday. Amy's date of birth is attached to a lion.



C.3: Amy and friends making a beach display C.4: Amy and Owen in a cubby hole

Some days, especially if the weather is too bad to go outside, Margaret or Anne takes the children in small groups to the sensory room. Here they blow bubbles, make jigsaws and/or listen to some soft music. Going to the sensory room gives Amy some time in a small group of two or three children and it allows for some one-to-one interaction with Margaret or Anne. Amy chats a lot when she is in the sensory room. She also loves climbing into the cupboard and hiding where no one can see her. Cubby holes appear to be something that Amy likes as she often empties out the contents of the cupboard in the toddler room and climbs in herself instead (Photo C.4).

Amy spends a considerable amount of time in the centre, about 45 hours per week. She clearly feels a sense of identity and belonging there. Her Mum told me that when she is at home Amy often talks about or pretends she is in the centre. She regularly mentions Anne and Margaret and in particular she talks about two of her friends, Lily and Caoimhe. Mum said that sometimes Amy pretends she is Anne and lines up her dolls and calls them by her two best friends' names. She tells them a story with the book pointing towards them making sure they can see the pictures just like Anne does in the centre.

Communicating

Amy can express herself clearly, asking questions and explaining what she wants. Through being in the centre she has quite a vocabulary of Irish words. When asked about the benefits for Amy of attending the centre one of the things her Mum mentioned was Amy's use of Irish words. Mum commented that Amy often used Irish words at home, for example, Amy often says, *where are my brógaí (shoes)?* or *I want a deoch (drink)*. Amy also regularly intersperses her use of English with Irish words throughout the day in the centre. On one of my visits, Amy was listening to Anne reading a story about a little boy called Buster who was getting dressed. The story related how Buster put on his *geansaí (jumper)*, *stocaí (socks)*, *bríste (trousers)*, *brógaí (shoes)* and *hata (hat)*. In the middle of the story, Amy interjected saying, *I have my pink bríste (trousers) on today.*¹⁹

Anne and Margaret communicate with Amy in a number of ways and they use a mixture of English and Irish in the toddler room. They get down to Amy's physical level regularly and they listen when she has something to say. In the toddler room there are a number of books in both English and Irish. Story-time is part of the routine everyday and I observed Amy getting her turn pointing out things in the books such as different animals, foods, modes of transport. When looking at the book on transport Anne showed the children pictures and asked, *What are they and where do we see them?* When the picture of the tractor came up Anne asked, *Does any one have a tractor at home?* Amy responded, *My Daddy has a tarracóir (tractor)*. Amy is very familiar with the picture books about different animals, foods and fruits and can name all the

¹⁹ Like many of the other parents, Amy's parents do not use Irish in their home. The practitioners in the setting greet the parents in Irish and the parents learn words and phrases from the children.

objects. She also relates what she sees in the books to her own life. For example one day when I was in the centre she interjected, *I have those (grapes and apples) for my lón (lunch)* and when looking at a book about teeth she commented, *I wash my teeth too*. Hearing and discussing stories which are relevant and familiar help strengthen Amy's sense of identity and belonging as well as extending her vocabulary and understanding. Amy is familiar with many of the books and stories in the centre and can often predict what is going to happen next. Sometimes she and the other children just like to sit on the mat and explore the books themselves, turning the pages, pointing out things they are familiar with, and talking about what they see. (Photo C.5).



Photo C.5: Amy looking at the books



Photo C.6: Amy dancing with friends

Neither Amy's Mum nor Anne highlighted dancing as being one of Amy's favourite activities. However, from my observations I think singing and dancing are two things that Amy really loves. In the centre she is quite serious and as Anne said, *Amy is like a little mother, wanting to know everything that is going on, helping the little ones* and so on. When she dances Amy's whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated (Photo C.6). She particularly enjoys *Heads, shoulders, knees and toes; I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow* and *Istigh sa sú (In the Zoo)*. She also clearly enjoys it when Margaret or Anne takes out the musical instruments and she loves marching around the room making lots of music and noise. 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 seems to enjoy the freedom to express herself through a different medium.

Exploring and Thinking

Painting, playing with sand (Photo C.7), water, lentils and playdough give Amy lots of opportunities to be creative and to explore and think. Anne said that one of the many things that Amy enjoyed was messy play: finger painting, sand, water and so on. Her Mum also confirmed this, noting that Amy's favourite things in the toddler room were water and sand. Amy often likes to play with the sand near Anne and on one of my visits Anne and Amy played together making cakes. Amy filled a plastic saucer with sand and asked Anne, *Would you like some cake?* Anne responded, *Yes, have you any cream?* Amy said, *Yes* and put more sand in the saucer and offered it to Anne. Anne said, *Thank you*, and proceeded to eat the cake with her fingers. Amy said, *You must use a spoon when you are eating your cake*, and then Amy handed a spoon to Anne. Anne said, *O.K. thanks* and then proceeded to "eat" the cake that Amy had given her.

Amy often moves from the sand to play with the baby bath that has lentils in it. On one of the occasions I was in the room Amy felt the lentils running through her fingers. She held an empty plastic water bottle and carefully poured the lentils into it with a spoon and then emptied it out, repeating the activity over and over again. Anne talked to Amy about filling and emptying, about heavy and light. Amy had a full bottle while Anne's bottle was empty. Anne asked Amy, *Which is empty? Which is full? Which is heavy? Which is light?* Lily came over and wanted to take Amy's bottle. Amy started to cry and complained to Anne that Lily was trying to take her bottle. Anne asked how they could solve the problem and Amy found an empty bottle and handed it to Lily and they began to play together (Photo C.8).



Photo C.7: Amy at sand play



Photo C.8: Amy and Lily at with the lentils

On another visit, I observed Amy chatting to Lily during playdough time. She told Lily, *I'm going to make a dog*. She asked Anne, *Will you make a dog for me?* Anne said, *I won't make it for you but I will help*, and she came over and they all worked together making different things, sharing the rollers, plastic knives and shapes. Amy often hums some of the songs that they sing in the centre when she is playing with the playdough. Another activity that Amy does on most days is colouring on blank pages with large chunky crayons. She colours with her right hand. (Photo C.9). Anne sits beside Amy sometimes when she is colouring and she often asks Amy to tell her about her picture.



Photo C.9: Amy drawing



Photo C.10: Amy doing jigsaws

Amy is able to complete the jigsaws that are available to her in the centre and she concentrates really hard when she is doing them, moving the pieces around until she finds the correct places to put them (Photo C.10). Sometimes she asks Anne or Margaret for assistance. I heard them advising her to move the piece around or to try another piece but generally she could complete them herself. Some days Amy plays the *Abracadabra* game. I saw this game on a few of the occasions when I visited and Amy enjoyed taking her turns at trying to remember what had disappeared. During the game, Anne got a tray and placed three or four items on it such as a toy phone, a hairbrush, a teacup, a book. Anne then covered it with a tea towel, waved her hand over it, said *Abracadabra*, and picked up the tea towel hiding one item inside. Amy and her friends each had a turn at trying to identify what had disappeared. Anne continued to do it until all four items were gone and repeated the game to ensure everyone got a chance to play.

Outdoors at the centre Amy has lots of opportunities to explore. Children usually spend from lón (lunch time) to dinnertime outside (weather permitting). Her Mum said that Amy loved playing outside at the centre and she enjoyed spending time outside at home too, sitting on the ride-on lawn mower with her Dad when it was not moving and going to the local lake to feed the ducks. Anne said that outside Amy liked the slide and playing with the other children. The staff prioritise outside time every day and the Manager often lets staff know the weather forecast so that the routine can be changed around to make sure the children go outside early if it is going to rain.

The outside play area is at the front of the building as the site is very small with no space at the back. It is safely secured by a wall and a gate. The floor surface is cushioned and there is a large caterpillar which children can climb through. There is a play house and a large slide which is supervised at all times. There are different sized balls available to the children as well as two seesaws and some ride-on cars. The children are really disappointed when they can't go outside. One day when I visited Anne said, *It is raining, we may not be able to go outside today.* Amy asked Anne to check several times to see if the rain had stopped. When the rain did eventually stop, the children and staff ran out and used towels to dry all the equipment so that they could enjoy their time outdoors.

Outside I observed Amy spending lots of time on the slide developing the skills of climbing and sliding. I watched Anne encourage Amy to takes turns with the other children helping her to learn to share. Amy is still a bit nervous and I heard her say on a few occasions, *Anne, hold me won't you?* Anne encouraged Amy to master the task on her own but was always close by which provided Amy with the confidence and security to try it herself, knowing Anne could help if she was scared.

Amy also regularly plays hide and seek with Anne and two or three other children. Anne told me that Amy thoroughly enjoyed this game. I was able to witness this game on one of my visits and would agree that it was something Amy really enjoys. The children ran off and hid. Anne stood at the door with eyes covered counting to ten. Then she ran off to find the children. They squealed with delight when she found them. Then Anne hid while they stood at the door with eyes covered, though I caught them cheating by taking a peep once or twice (Photo C.11). After a few seconds of waiting

the children ran off trying to discover where Anne was and they squealed with excitement when they found her hiding behind the play house.



Photo C.11: Amy and Caoimhe playing hide and seek

Conclusion

Amy is usually collected by her Mum and gives her a big hug when she arrives. When she gets home in the evening Amy enjoys playing with her dolls. She also enjoys books, colouring and playing with water. She listens to a story downstairs before she goes to bed with her *dody* (soother). At weekends helping her Mum wash the dishes, shopping, visiting her small cousins and going off with her Dad who is a part-time farmer are some of her favourite activities. Mum said, *the centre is a big part of Amy's life and I feel she is very well cared for while she is there and that she benefits from being there, especially socially.*