

Seán and Patrick

Seán is nineteen months old. His brother Patrick is four years and nine months old. They also have a brother called Gerard who is six. Seán is an outgoing, sociable little boy and Patrick is a confident and talkative child (Photo D.1). Their Dad, Eamonn, is a farmer and their Mum, Sineád, is a Public Health Nurse. The family lives on a farm on the outskirts of a village in the south-east. Mum job-shares and works three days one week and two the next. Dad works full-time on the farm. A childminder called Brenda comes into the boys' own home to look after them while their Mum and Dad are at work. This portrait looks at Seán and Patrick in the context of their home experiences.¹⁸



Photo D.1: Seán and Patrick with Mum

¹⁸ The boys' Dad was very involved in their early learning and development as illustrated through the portrait. Much of the information from the parents' perspective was given by the Mum, as the Dad was not available to chat to me during my visits to the boys' home.

Table 7: A day for Seán and Patrick at home

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| Wake up 7.30 a.m. to 8.00 a.m. | Seán wakes around 7.30 a.m. and his Mum gives him a bottle of milk to drink in his cot. At around 8.00 a.m. she gets him changed and dressed and he comes downstairs to have his breakfast. Patrick usually wakes around 8.00 a.m. and gets dressed himself and comes downstairs to have his breakfast. |
| 9.00 a.m. | Three mornings a week Patrick goes to playschool. On the other two mornings he goes off to the farm with his Dad. Seán spends time with his Mum or he goes off in the jeep with his Dad when Patrick is in playschool. |
| 11.00 a.m. | Seán has a snack with Mum. |
| 11.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. | Seán plays inside or outside or he goes for a walk with his Mum and they go to collect Patrick from playschool at 12.30 p.m. |
| 1.00 p.m. | The boys have their dinner with Mum and Dad or they have a light lunch with Dad and Brenda if Mum is at work. |
| 2.00 p.m. | The boys and their Mum go to collect their older brother from school. |
| 2.30 p.m. | Seán goes for a nap and the two older boys play together. |
| 4.00 p.m. | Seán gets up, has a drink and plays with his brothers or by himself. |
| 6.00 p.m. | The family have their tea or if Mum is working they all have their dinner together in the evenings. Dad and Mum spend some time with the boys before bed. |
| 7.30 p.m. | The boys have a bath and a story before bed. |

Seán and Patrick's experiences at home

Well-being

Patrick and Seán live in a two-storey house and have access to a fully secured garden with lots of equipment including a sand tray with a digger, a slide, two swings and a see-saw, a goal-post, ride-on cars and tractors. The area at the side of the house contains a large number of pots where the boys have sown a variety of seeds and plants such as lettuce, parsley, onions and strawberries. The kitchen has a homely feel to it with an Aga cooker, a big bowl of fruit on the counter and a high chair for Seán in the corner. When Mum is at work, Brenda their childminder comes into Patrick's and Seán's home to look after them. Before Seán was born, the two older boys went to another childminder's house. The childminder was moving away so Mum and Dad decided to look for someone to come and look after the boys in their own home. Mum and Dad feel that there are a lot of benefits to this. The boys' own home is secure, the

garden is fenced in and dangerous things are kept out of reach. Mum leaves food for the family so she knows what they are eating. If the boys are not going to school or playschool they don't have to get out of bed before Mum goes to work. Mum said it was especially good in the winter as the boys were at home nice and cosy by the fire when she and Dad arrived home from work. Mum told me that she was *glad that Seán gets to sleep in his own cot and gets fed in his own high chair*. She felt *the boys love being in their own house having all their own toys around them*. Mum said she and Dad felt that the current arrangement with the childminder coming to the boys' home was much better for the boys, and that they were much happier with the situation and so were the boys.

Dad calls in at home regularly during the day for meals and often takes the boys off with him in the jeep. Granny who lives next door also calls in and Seán or Patrick might go over to her house and stay there for a while. Dad and Granny are also there to provide backup for Brenda if needed. Mum commented to me that the boys liked Brenda, the childminder, and that Seán had known her since he was a baby. Sometimes Seán gets a little upset when Mum is going to work but he is fine after a couple of minutes. The days the childminder is with Seán are much the same as when Mum is at home. Brenda takes him for walks, takes him out in the garden and keeps him in his usual routine. When Brenda is there Patrick usually goes to playschool in the mornings and then goes off with Dad after dinner or plays with his brothers. Mum commented that she and Dad *were happy knowing that the boys are being well cared for. We feel that being with the childminder increases their independence and socialisation*.

Patrick goes to a local playschool three mornings a week. There is two staff in the setting with about eight children. Gerard went there too before he started primary school and Seán will attend when he is three. Mum and Dad chose it for their children because it had a great reputation and because it was convenient and local and so the children would meet others who would be starting school with them. The curriculum is play based and the staff are very warm and friendly, Mum told me. She said they greeted the children brightly every morning and *always tell you how your child is getting on*. Mum believed that the benefits for Patrick of attending playschool included getting him used to a structured environment, mixing with his own age group and making friends independently of his big brother. She said it also allowed him to get used to

adults other than his parents and childminder. Mum said that Patrick loved playschool and ran in every morning. Secure relationships are central to children's well-being and attachment to adults other than parents is really important for young children. Through the childminder and the playschool Patrick has the benefit of close relationships with adults and children in his own community.

On being asked about the benefits for the boys of being with their parents, Mum stated that no one could love and care for them the way they did. She said that she and Dad ensured that the boys had a proper diet, that they got plenty of sleep and exercise, and that they followed a fairly consistent routine, going to bed at the same time, getting up at around the same time and so on. She said they understood the boys, knew what they needed, provided stimulation for them, were patient with them, offered them comfort especially if they fell or were upset about anything and gave them lots of hugs. She said they made a point of praising and encouraging the boys and their priorities in regard to the boys were that they were happy, healthy and doing what they should be doing for their age and stage of development.

Identity and Belonging

Patrick and Seán live on a farm and they readily identify with this. Seán loves anything to do with farming including tractors, books about cows that you can feel and toy animals. Some mornings, especially if Patrick is at playschool, Seán goes off in the jeep with his Dad around the farm. Mum said he loves to look out from his car seat at the cows. Patrick also loves anything to do with farming. On the days he is not going to playschool he likes to go off to the farm with his Dad in the morning. I asked Patrick what he did on the farm and he told me that he *checks the cattle, walks the fields, takes the wrapping off the silage bales*. Mum said a particularly good day for Patrick was a day when he spent time with his Dad going to the farm or playing football. (Photo D.2). Mum said, *Dad is a very important part of the boys' lives and they learn from both of us*.



Photo D.2: Patrick and Gerard playing football with Dad

Patrick and Seán know their community well and have lots of connections in the area in which they are living. The boys' paternal grandparents live next door and the boys see them daily. Sometimes Granddad collects Patrick when playschool is over. (Photo D.3). Granddad is 82 and walks a bit slowly but his Mum said *Patrick always walks along with him and never runs away*. Some days, Patrick, 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. (Photo D.4). As cars drive past, people wave. In this small village everyone knows everyone else and on the day I went for the walk with Mum and the two boys, Patrick was able to tell me exactly who passed in the cars.



Photo D.3: Patrick with his Granddad



Photo D.4: Patrick climbing a farm gate

Patrick also knows who owns the fields across the road and he made a point of telling me that *they're not ours* [the fields], *they're Brendan Mulligan's*. On the way to the

church the boys pass the local primary school. Sometimes, as they did on the day I was with them, they go by at 11.00 a.m. when the children are outside playing. Many of the children know Patrick by name and say hello to him. Sometimes his brother Gerard sees him pass and comes over to say hi and to have a race, Gerard inside the school wall, Patrick outside. At the beginning of the church wall Gerard said *Good-bye, see you later* and ran off to join his classmates. Patrick ran on to open the gate on the way into the church to make room for Seán's buggy. Inside the church Patrick pressed the button to light a candle (Photo D.5) and then sat beside his Mum to say a prayer.



Photo D.5: The boys in the church

The way their home is organised communicates a sense of belonging to the boys. There are a variety of children's toys and books scattered around. Lots of photos of the three boys hang on the walls. Coat hooks are at child level, wellingtons and shoes are stored just inside the back door on two shelves accessible to the boys and the hallway is covered in paintings by the children. Gerard the oldest boy has one wall of the hall for displaying his work while Patrick has the other. Patrick proudly showed me his wall and told me *I have more pictures than Gerard*.

With three boys in the house Mum said she and Dad prioritised spending time with each of the boys on their own to give them a sense of their own identity. While Patrick is at playschool Mum has some one-to-one time with Seán, reading a story, going for a walk or playing on the swing. Patrick also spends time on his own with Mum. Sometimes she takes him swimming or shopping or they read a book together or do some baking at home. He also helps his Mum a lot around the house. She told me that he was *a great little helper*. He puts dirty clothes in the washing machine, makes his

bed and on one of the days I visited, he had just finished vacuuming the kitchen floor. Trips enjoyed by Patrick include going shopping with Mum, going to the playground in town, visiting his maternal Granny and Granddad, visiting cousins, going swimming, going to the cinema and the seaside. He also talks a lot about big brother Gerard and he told me that he enjoyed playing hurling, hide and seek, chase and playing tractors and football with him. Dad takes each of the boys to the farm on his own during the course of the week and spends time with them in the evenings when he gets in from work. He also takes the two bigger boys, Patrick and Gerard to hurling and football training at the local primary school every Sunday morning. Clearly Patrick and Seán have a real sense of who they are and where they belong both at home and in their community.

Communicating

Both Seán and Patrick communicate well. Patrick speaks clearly and can articulate himself very well. When asked about the playschool he attends Patrick gave me lots of information. He told me that his best friend at playschool was James. On being asked what he liked best about playschool Patrick said, *lunch time and playing outside*. I asked him if they had things to play with outside and he told me there were lots of things to play with including a playhouse, tricycles, a see saw, a scooter and a sand pit. Patrick expressed a preference for going on the scooter and going on nature walks to see the sheep. Patrick's strong connection to his experience of living on a farm is clearly evident again here. Indoors at playschool, Patrick said his favourite things were books, playdough, painting, colouring, jigsaws and tidying up. He also told me that he liked the day his Mum came into the playschool. She talked to the children about going on a visit to the doctor and about healthy eating and the kind of things to bring to playschool for lunch. Patrick told me, *We got dressed up as nurses and doctors and it was great fun*. On being asked what the grown-ups do in the playschool Patrick said, *They tell you what to do, let us paint, make the playdough, have a party if it's your birthday and they have a copy that you have to do letters in*. Patrick is a very confident child who seems to love everything about his life. When asked whether there was anything that he didn't like, he said *Nothing*, and his Mum said there was nothing either.

Mum said that Seán was a very easy-going and content little boy who was only beginning to use words but she said they (his Mum and Dad) could generally understand what he wanted and that they facilitated him expressing himself by listening to him babbling and by interpreting things for him. She explained that when she was out walking with him, she pointed things out and named them for him and that Dad did the same when he and Seán were together on the farm. Mum also commented that even though Seán didn't have many words he could make himself understood and if his brothers took something away from him he let them know that he wanted it back and that they tended to give back whatever it was they took from him fairly quickly!

Seán points a lot to get what he wants and he and Patrick get along very well together often without saying a word. On one of the occasions I visited the family the two boys played together at the sand tray (Photo D.6) digging, sharing shovels and working together without uttering a word. There was non-verbal communication going on that was interesting to watch. Seán was shovelling sand from the sand tray into the wheelbarrow. Patrick came over and Seán gave him a shovel. Patrick followed Seán's lead shovelling the sand into the wheelbarrow. When the wheelbarrow was full Patrick emptied it on to the grass. Both boys started to shovel the sand back into the wheelbarrow. Seán was having trouble doing this, he grunted as he tried to get the shovel into the sand but the toy digger was impeding him. Patrick moved the digger and Seán began shovelling the sand enthusiastically into the wheelbarrow. This was done without one word being exchanged between the boys.

Seán loves going outside and Mum said that any day Seán gets to go out was a good day for him. If the door opens he runs out or if the door is closed, he stands beside it with his coat and if the weather is dry at all, Mum lets him go out because she knows he loves it. Seán doesn't need words to tell Mum that he wants to go out. He appears to be a happy little boy and he communicates this in a number of ways, by smiling as he toddles around the house, by using positive body language and good eye contact and by interacting well with his Mum, Dad and brothers.



Photo D.6: The boys at the sand tray

Photo D.7: Reading a story with Mum

Mum communicates with the boys in a number of different ways. She talks to them, listens to them, smiles at them, gets down to their physical level and hugs them. I observed Mum and the boys communicating during a story time session (Photo D.7). Seán sat on Mum's knee and Patrick sat beside her. Both boys listened intently to the story of *That's not my kitten* which Mum said was Seán's favourite. The boys got the opportunity to feel the book and Mum asked questions along the way. She targeted her interactions to suit each boy's stage of learning. She asked Seán to show her the kitten, the bed, the chair. She asked Patrick to count the flowers and to tell her what colour the kitten was. Patrick interjected to ask questions and at one stage told Mum she was holding the book upside down, when she was holding it the right way up. For the last page you have to turn the book upside down to find the kitten! Seán pointed at the pictures and throughout the story Mum smiled and used non-verbal communication as well as language and the boys responded positively.

Exploring and Thinking

Seán explores inside and outside at home. His Mum said he loves climbing on chairs, stairs and anything he sees. He loves his trucks and his dinky cars and flicking through his books. Seán also likes emptying drawers, taking saucepans out of the cupboard, emptying the toy box. In the utility room there is a cupboard with no safety catches where there are things that are safe for Seán to play with. His favourite is a selection of plastic pudding bowls. He takes them out, stacks them up, puts things into them and sometimes even puts them on his head (Photo D.8).



Photo D.8: Seán with the pudding bowl

Some mornings, Seán tries to help Mum empty the dishwasher or the washing machine. He also likes turning on and off the television with the remote control which is something his Mum doesn't always like! Playing peek-a-boo is another thing that Seán does regularly. He hides out in the hall and pops his head around the corner of the kitchen and Mum asks, *Where is he?* Seán runs down the hall squealing with delight and repeats the activity several times. I played this game with Seán and he absolutely loved it and didn't want it to stop. Seán's favourite trips and activities include going to the swings in the local playground, sitting in his buggy looking at the cows, being in the back of the jeep going around the farm, going to the church to light a candle, sitting on Dad's lap on the tractor or on the ride-on-lawnmower holding the steering wheel when it is not moving (Photo D.9). He also likes sitting in the shopping trolley and putting things in and taking them out.



Photo D.9: The boys with Dad on the lawnmower

Outside Seán digs with his shovel and sometimes plays with the compost if Mum is working in the garden. If his Mum is hanging out the washing he hands her the pegs. Seán often tries to kick a ball and sometimes he just stands and watches his brothers playing football. *Seán loves to play with his brothers and wants to be part of the gang*, commented his Mum. He also likes Mum to push him on the swing. He laughs as she pushes him higher and higher and he gets upset when she tries to bring him inside.

Patrick also gets lots of opportunities at home to explore and to think. He plays with the blocks and I observed him talking to himself as he was building up the blocks. I heard him say *I made a tower. This is a big tower, it would win a medal*. His Mum told him that it was a very tall tower. He built the tower higher and then knocked it down only to rebuild it and do the same thing again, constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing. Outdoors at home Patrick said he liked to play in the sandpit, on the swings, with his tractor, watering plants with the hose, using his small wheelbarrow and using his own tools to help Mum in the garden. On being asked what his favourite toy was, Patrick announced *the big red tractor Santa gave me for Christmas is just the best* (Photo D.10).



Photo D.10: Patrick on his red tractor

Photo D.11: The boys on the phone to Dad

In the sand tray Patrick pours and measures, shovels and feels different textures—wet sand, dry sand, water, stones. He moves around on his tractor going forward and reversing. Most days when Patrick comes home from playschool he rings his Dad on the phone and if he is nearby he comes to collect him to go farming. His Mum calls out the mobile number and Patrick keys the numbers in himself. Patrick talks to Dad and

then hands the phone to Seán (Photo D.11). Through using the phone Patrick has a very good understanding of the numbers one to ten. Not only can he recite them but he can also recognise them on the phone pad, on books and on car registration plates. Down on the farm he counts the animals and discovers different aspects of nature such as calves being born, crops being saved and the changing of the seasons. While helping his Mum or Granny bake, he is learning about weights and measures, about different textures and temperatures. Through reading stories with Mum Patrick gets opportunities to explore and think. Patrick's favourite book is about tractors and diggers and Mum read it for him on one of the occasions I visited the family. Patrick clearly loved it and talked about his own tractor enthusiastically during the story. He explored concepts through the story comparing the size of the wheels on his tractor with the ones in the book and I heard him say, *I think mine are wider*. Mum and Patrick looked at the picture of the digger and Mum asked Patrick, *Is it like our one?* Patrick told her, *It isn't because the bucket for scooping up is different*. The book also talked about tractors from bygone days and Mum told Patrick about Granddad's old tractor. Patrick was really interested and wanted to know how it worked and how fast it went. Mum said she was not sure and that they would have to ask Granddad the next time they saw him.

Conclusion

At the moment Seán has just progressed from babyhood to toddlerhood. He has learned to walk, climb, feed himself and is becoming independent. Mum feels that she and his Dad help him learn and develop by talking to him, playing with him, singing, telling stories, letting him take part in tasks like brushing the floor and dusting or doing things down on the farm with Dad. In September, Patrick will be starting in the local primary school which is only a few hundred yards away from his own house. It is a two-teacher school with thirty-two pupils at present. There will be two other children starting in junior infants with Patrick and he will be in a composite classroom with junior and senior infants, first and second class. Patrick is already very familiar with the school from collecting his big brother Gerard and his Mum said *We don't expect him to have any problems starting. He just can't wait to go*. Patrick and Seán are two very happy and healthy little boys. They enjoy being at home with their family and have lots of opportunities to learn there.