

## Harry

Harry (Photo E.1) is three years old and is the second youngest in a family of five children who moved to Ireland from Nigeria a number of years ago. He is a happy and good-natured child. At home Harry likes to play with his brothers and sisters and enjoys listening to music, looking at books and watching television. He likes being outdoors and enjoys going for walks with his family and playing on the swings. Harry attends a crèche in the north-east of Ireland from 9.30 a.m. until around 5.00 p.m. Monday to Friday while his Mum and Dad are at work.

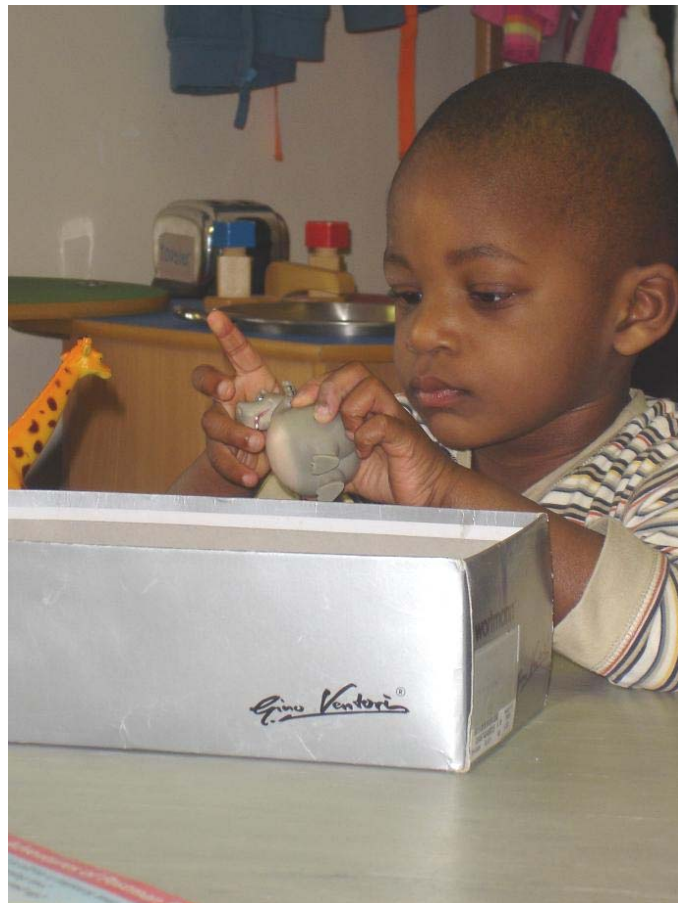


Photo E1: Harry

## Poppyfields community crèche: Background and context

Poppyfields community crèche is located in a large town in the north-east region. It is a community based early years service offering full daycare and part-time/sessional care for toddlers and young children. The service provides affordable childcare for staff, adults returning to work on training schemes and people in the local area. Five children with special needs attend the setting. Poppyfields community crèche is a purpose built childcare centre which is due for renovation and expansion as demand for spaces and resources grow. Currently there are two main rooms—the Acorn Room which caters for young toddlers and the Oak Room for young children where Harry is based. Fifteen children attend this room on a part-time and full-time basis. There are two room leaders and a number of assistants so that the ratio of adult to child is always one to three. Staff members 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 essential and training opportunities are regularly made available to the staff team.

Harry has a Key Worker, Molly, who spends two hours a day with him from 9.30 a.m. to 11.30 a.m. The rest of her time is divided between the other children with special needs. While she has received some training in this area all staff would welcome opportunities to further develop their skills in relation to special educational needs.

## Curriculum and assessment

The Manger informed me that the overall aim of Poppyfields community crèche was to *provide a caring, nurturing and stimulating environment for each child to enable them to reach their full potential*. The room leaders are familiar with the four broad themes outlined in the *Framework for Early Learning* and have recently begun to consider them when planning monthly and termly activities. Daily and weekly activities for the group are planned around topics and their main influence to date on their planning work has been the U.K.'s Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's *Early Learning Goals for under-fives*. Staff explained that they felt that this resource supported them in providing a broad and

balanced curriculum while also ensuring that the children's personal, social, communication, cognitive, physical and creative skills were catered for. The curriculum used in the crèche involves the children learning through play, practical experiences, exploration, discussion and through working individually and with others. Children participate in activities that they are interested in and activities are primarily child-led. Within this there is a predictable structure and routine to each day which the children are clearly used to and there is an air of activity and busyness in the room.

Both room leaders try to ensure that the curriculum and routine provided for the children change according to their needs, interests and the time of year. For example, during term one they find that they tend to concentrate on developing communication and independence skills and there is a strong emphasis on personal, social and health education such as washing hands, eating independently, taking care of own belongings and so on. In term two the focus shifts slightly towards developing creative and mathematical skills. The spring and summer months enable staff to further develop children's physical skills and to expand their knowledge and understanding of the world with trips, outside activities, etc. Opportunities to develop early literacy and numeracy skills occur informally in almost every activity.

As well as listening to the children, staff regularly observe and record aspects of children's learning and development. Examples of their work are collected on an ongoing basis and sent home to parents. The two room leaders get together on a weekly/monthly basis for planning meetings. This gives them an opportunity to share information about individual children's progress. Molly also contributes to discussions about Harry's progress. At the moment all information regarding children's learning and development is relayed verbally and informally to parents on a daily basis. Where a delay in development is perceived it is brought to parents' attention and guidance and suggestions are offered. Where necessary, parents are provided with additional information where access to other supports such as health services, might be beneficial for the child.

## Harry's experiences in Poppyfields Community Crèche

Harry joined the crèche 18 months ago and attends five days per week. Harry's Mum reported a relatively easy transition from home to the crèche. Either his Mum or Dad drops him off at the crèche and he usually arrives around 9.30 a.m. He stays in the crèche until he is picked up at 5.00 p.m. The crèche which would be well-known as catering for children with special needs was recommended to Harry's parents by their doctor when it was noted that his development in certain areas was delayed. Harry has been diagnosed as having autism.

**Table 8: A day in the crèche for Harry**

9.00 to 9.30 a.m.	Harry arrives at the crèche with his Mum or Dad. He is greeted by staff members and runs to an activity. Some mornings he has some breakfast.
9.30 a.m. to 11.30	Harry spends intensive one-on-one time with his Key Worker, Molly.
12.00 p.m.	Harry has dinner with the other children in the crèche and then he plays before getting ready for his nap.
12.30 p.m. to 3.00 p.m.	Harry has a nap.
3.00 p.m. to 3.30 p.m.	Harry plays before having a snack.
3.30 p.m. to 5.00 p.m.	Harry plays in the crèche before getting ready to go home. He listens to stories, looks at books, listens to music, plays with the toy animals.

### Well-being

The crèche is housed in a two-storey building with a long entrance hallway leading to a small reception office, child-sized toilet facilities and a small kitchen area where dinner is prepared each day. On the walls are welcoming notices, information boards, certificates of attainment by the staff and photographs of the children on recent outings. Off this hallway are the two main rooms which are warm, brightly painted and welcoming. Harry spends most of his day in a long rectangular room which is divided into distinct areas such as the sand/water areas, the role play/home area, the library area and the small play area. There are two round tables in the middle of the room for art and table-top activities. The walls are covered with colourful displays of the children's work.

Two large windows at the children's level at one end of the room enable all the children to look outside. The room also has a low level sink, a black board and a full-length mirror on one wall which are also at child level. Aprons are hanging up in the corner at child level for use at sand/water play and a wardrobe for dressing up is within everyone's reach in the home area. There are a wide range of activities and resources available for the children. Some are stored out of reach but most materials such as books, toys, dolls, cars, garages, doll houses, games are accessible to all.

While the crèche has some outdoor space for the children to use there is no outdoor play equipment at present. Activities outdoors usually consist of walks around the local area, trips to the local playground and water pool activities when weather permits during the summer months. However, the crèche has access to an empty prefab next door which they use for additional movement activities such as Gymboree (music and movement sessions) once a week.

If Harry arrives before 9.30 a.m. he has breakfast (Photo E.2). At 12.00 p.m. dinner is served to all the children. Harry has learned to feed himself independently this year and tries out more tastes and textures in what he eats. The crèche has a healthy eating policy and this is very important for the children's well-being.



Photo E.2: Harry at breakfast time

Although Harry's autism has only recently been confirmed it was clear to the staff from the outset that Harry would need additional adult attention in the crèche in order to meet

his learning and developmental needs. Molly, Harry's Key Worker, has been assigned to work with all of the children with special needs in the crèche so she tries to make maximum use of her daily two-hour session with Harry. During this period Molly works exclusively on a one-to-one basis with Harry (Photo E.3) ensuring that he is stimulated and engaged in a range of activities and encouraging his emerging communication skills. When Molly moves to the other room to work with the other children Harry is supported by the room leaders and assistant staff. During my visits, staff were concentrating on developing links with the Health Board's Intervention Team to ensure that the work they were doing with Harry was appropriate to his stage of development. Both Molly and the two room leaders were looking forward to receiving some additional guidance and ideas for extending Harry's learning.

Harry spends a considerable amount of time in the crèche each week and additional one-to-one attention through Key Worker hours is high on their list of priorities for the staff. As Harry has now been formally assessed as having autism, the Intervention Team will work with Harry's parents and with Harry himself. Harry has already had one or two sessions with a Speech Therapist from the Intervention Team and the use of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is being considered with Harry to progress his communication skills.



Photo E.3: Harry with Molly

## Identity and Belonging

Harry appears to be very content in the crèche and he runs in the door every morning and heads straight for an activity. Although he is not able to communicate verbally Harry's Mum explained that, *if Harry didn't want to be here, believe me, we would know!* Harry clearly identifies with Molly and is very attached to her. When he has difficulty finding something or needs help with a particular activity he seeks her out. She reads his individual gestures, expressions and body language and uses these to interpret and respond to his needs each day. Lack of verbal communication skills means that it is a challenge for Harry to interact with his peers. Far from wishing to play in isolation, he plays quite happily alongside and often in close proximity to the other children and they relate well to him.

Harry appears to have developed a sense of identity within the group. On several occasions he noticed me taking photographs and insisted on looking at them in the display setting. As I scrolled through the digital photos of the other children he laughed and looked around as if to try and spot the other children. Harry appears to be very comfortable with all of the adults in the group and is not disturbed by the changes as staff members relieve each other for breaks. He appears to be very aware of the setting's routine and rules and was observed pushing the boundaries from time to time to get the desired attention. For example, he knew that standing on a stool in the dressing up corner was dangerous and not allowed and when he did it he started laughing and looked around for the expected response from the adults!

## Communicating

Harry is at the pre-verbal stage of communication and relies very much on vocalisations, gestures and movements to communicate with others. His language consists mainly of babble of different tones and pitches. He takes great interest in what is going on in the room and watches adults and other children intently. He moves around the room quite independently. If he wants adult attention he uses a number of approaches. He might pull an adult towards the desired object or alternatively he babbles or shouts to attract

attention to himself. He rarely appears to be upset and generally shows displeasure by moving away.

Harry has a very close affectionate relationship with Molly. To facilitate the development of his communication skills she chats and plays games with him and includes lots of singing activities, mirror games and one-to-one activities in his daily programme. She interacts sensitively with Harry using a range of techniques and provides a responsive environment for him. During one play session I observed Molly getting down to Harry's physical level and introducing a battery operated musical game to him. She demonstrated how to use the toy and supported Harry's hand to do the same. Then she waited for him to repeat the activity. He pressed the keys which produced the expected sound and Harry laughed. She began a turn taking game with him, chatting to him and encouraging him until she sensed his interest waning. Molly removed the toy and to regain his attention she started a clapping game. Sensing his waning attention, she took his hand and began the old game, *Round and round the garden like a teddy bear*. When she tickled him he laughed and she repeated the activity and then stopped. Harry waited for a response from her and when none was forthcoming he took her hand and put it back on his for the game to begin all over again. This was a typical example of the one-to-one exchanges that Harry experienced with Molly in the setting during my visits.



Photo E.4: Harry with tape recorder

Harry loves music and enjoys playing with pop up toys, tape recorders and musical instruments. It seems as though he can't get close enough to the tape recorder as he puts his ears to the stereo output to feel the vibrations. He also clearly enjoys it when Molly or the Gymboree lady takes out the musical instruments. Sometimes he likes

marching around the room making lots of noise. Other times he is more interested in the technology itself and tries to turn the tape recorder on and off himself (Photo E.4). His Mum told me that Harry, *stands very close to the television at home which can annoy his siblings and he has also taken a shine to turning on and off his sister's laptop.*

Harry also loves picture books and spends long periods each day exploring the books in the library (Photos E.5, E.6 and E.7). When he finds a book that interests him he becomes completely absorbed. His Mum said that, *he loves nursery rhymes* and she reads him stories and nursery rhymes every night. His favourite is *Twinkle, twinkle, little star*. During one of my visits I observed Harry banging some toys on the table while vocalising and humming away to himself and the distinctive tune of *Twinkle, twinkle* could be clearly identified.



Photos E5, E6 and E7: Harry exploring books in the library

## Exploring and Thinking

Harry shows great interest in a lot of activities and likes lots of variety. When he is tired he shows only fleeting interest in games and activities but when he is alert he can become completely absorbed in his work. By mid-afternoon Harry is very tired and needs a nap. Once he is awake again he busily explores his environment. Harry is a very tactile child and will smell, squeeze and sometimes mouth new objects. He observes objects at very close range and is particularly drawn to bright colours. He notices the tiniest detail about objects, for example, logos on the cover of books or games. Aside from his interest in books, as noted earlier, Harry shows a great interest in animals, animal pictures, plastic animals and stuffed animals (Photos E.8 and E.9). Staff commented to

me that, *he thoroughly enjoyed meeting them [the animals] close up on a recent trip to a farm*. Harry has a box of farm and zoo animals that he plays with each day. He empties the box and begins examining them one by one in minute detail. He has a few favourites that he carries around with him including a little grey dog and a replica of the Disney character *Tigger*. This interest extends to Disney books about *Tigger* which Harry scans through quickly before zooming in on *Tigger's* picture. Harry's Mum also remarked on his interest in Disney books and Disney films. Interestingly although there was a *Tigger* outfit in the dressing up area, Harry showed no interest in wearing it himself. However, as soon as another child put it on Harry went over to him or her in a flash and began to follow the child around, touching and rubbing the costume.



Photos E.8 and E.9: Harry with the toy animals

Harry rarely sits down and is usually to be found leaning against the table or against an adult. However, during my visits some new chairs had arrived for the library area and Harry really seemed to enjoy sitting on these observing the other children or reading his books (Photo E.10). The only thing Harry appears to show no interest in is messy play, particularly the water play area. Surprisingly staff noted that *Harry absolutely loved the outdoor water play during the hot spell of weather*. His Mum also commented that *he loves to be outside, with the air on his face*, and he enjoys playground and outdoor activities with his siblings.



Photo E.10: Harry on one of the new chairs

The adults in the room, and in particular Molly, play an important role in extending Harry's learning and development. Molly sits close to Harry monitoring his interest and ability level, providing him with appropriate toys, encouraging him and ensuring that he is challenged and that he gets the optimum amount of attention without becoming too dependent on her.

## Conclusion

Harry's parents view his experiences in the Poppyfields community crèche in a very positive light. They explained that they feel he needs the structure and routine that attending the crèche provides. The main benefits they identified included the development of his social and communication skills. Harry's Mum is very pleased with the progress he has made to date and has great hopes for Harry's future. Staff are also pleased with Harry's achievements and can see the progress since he started in the crèche. In a year's time Harry will leave the crèche and it is not clear yet where he will go to primary school. There are a number of special schools in the area including a special school for children with autism but Harry's Mum would prefer him to attend a mainstream setting. Overall Harry's parents feel happy that Harry seems content in the crèche and that his needs are being met. His Mum sums it up by saying *the key thing for me is that Harry is happy with the people here in the crèche and that he certainly is.*