Towards a Framework for Early Learning

A CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT
The publication of Towards a Framework for Early Learning represents something of a milestone for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. While the NCCA has an established tradition of consultation with those who work in a wide range of educational settings, this is the first consultative document focused specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Supporting this learning is a new challenge for the NCCA, but working in partnership is an old and well-established practice. It is intended that this publication will serve as a basis for engagement with those who work in or have an interest in this sector of education as the NCCA moves towards the development of a national framework for early learning. Developing the Framework in this way will ensure that it is built on shared understandings and rooted in a common commitment to children, their learning, and their future.

Towards a Framework for Early Learning is itself the product of consultation and collaboration with a wide range of agencies, organisations and individuals who brought multi-disciplinary experience and expertise to bear on the work. The members of the NCCA’s working group on early childhood education played a central role in bringing the document to completion and a number of practitioners, academics and researchers who reviewed the document provided valuable feedback during its development. The ongoing support provided by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was, and continues to be, invaluable and greatly appreciated.

The NCCA team who worked on the development of this document deserve particular acknowledgement – Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive, Cathal de Paor, Bairbre Boylan and Helen Guinan, Education Officers. The commitment of Athene Forster, Director, Curriculum and Assessment, in leading the NCCAs work in early childhood education and in bringing this document to completion is greatly appreciated by those who work alongside her in NCCA.

The completion of the document is not an end, but the beginning of a new phase of the work of developing the framework, work in which all can share through participation in the consultative process mapped out in the concluding section.

Dr. Anne Looney
Chief Executive
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Adults

Adults play a fundamental role in children's early learning. Parent/guardians are the primary caregivers and educators. Other significant adults in children's lives include extended family, childcare workers, early childhood practitioners, and other professionals, such as therapists and social workers. In this consultative document, the term adult is used inclusively to refer to all of these persons.

Assessment

This refers to the practices of observing and reflecting upon children's learning in order to support and extend this learning appropriately.

Attachment

This is the emotional relationship between a child and a particular caregiver, which provides a 'secure base' for the child's nurturance and engagement with his/her environment, including other people.

Child development

Child development can be viewed under the following headings: physical development, intellectual development, social development, emotional development, moral development, and spiritual development.

Childminder

A childminder provides a loving and caring home environment to the child in which his/her learning is supported.

Communication

Communication enables children to express and share their thoughts and feelings and needs with others, to establish and maintain social relationships, to represent, categorise and understand the world around them, and to develop knowledge about their culture. This document presents a broad understanding of communication, embracing non-verbal, verbal and symbolic communication.

Competition

This refers to the knowledge and skills that a child possesses.

Culture

Aspects of culture include language, religion, traditions, education, hygiene, food, diet, and eating habits, music, song, dance, literature and art, leisure activities, and style of dress.

Curriculum

This refers to all learning experiences, whether formal or informal, planned or unplanned, which contribute to a child's development.

Developmentally appropriate

Activities are developmentally appropriate when they reflect a child's particular age and stage of development.

Developmental domain

Areas or domains of development including cognitive (including language), physical, creative, spiritual, personal, social, moral and emotional.

Early childhood

Internationally, early childhood tends to refer to the period from birth to between six and eight years of age. In this document, and for the purposes of developing a framework for early learning in Ireland, it is appropriate to use six years as the upper age limit, given that it marks the beginning of compulsory schooling.

Early childhood setting

This is the setting or environment in which children learn and develop. These settings can be very diverse, and can be within or outside the home. Settings outside the home can include a neighbour's or childminder's home, a nursery, crèche, playgroup, pre-school, infant classroom in mainstream or special school, after-school club, and hospital. They also include similar-type settings in the Gaeltacht. All these settings provide children with opportunities to learn during early childhood.

Emergent literacy

This recognises the importance of early language experience in supporting literacy development among children. Activities involving play, talk and discussion can support the emergence of literacy in a natural and enjoyable way. These experiences provide an important base for later literacy.

Ethnicity

Members of a particular ethnic group may share a particular culture, language, or a way of life.

Exploring and thinking

This is a theme proposed for the Framework for Early Learning. It refers to active exploration of all aspects of the environment in which children may engage. This exploration enables children to interpret their environment by using their intelligence to think in convergent and divergent ways.

Framework for Early Learning

This refers to the framework that will be developed by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector. It will guide and support learning throughout early childhood, from birth to six years inclusively.

Identity and belonging

This is a theme proposed for the framework. Identity refers to the identifying characteristics, behaviours and understandings which children may have, sometimes uniquely, and sometimes shared with others. Shared identities enable children to develop a sense of belonging or a close relationship with or affinity to a particular group.

Individual education plan

This is a plan which uses the information gleaned from the assessment process, to identify the short-term and medium-term learning targets related to the child's special educational needs, and the learning activities designed to respond to those needs.

Language

Language embraces oral, written, and manual communication, and consists of components such as communication - vocabularies and word meaning, form/semantics (grammar - sounds and sentence structure), and use (social use of language).

Learning

Learning can be formal or informal: formal learning consists of learning experiences which have been planned for the child, while informal learning occurs randomly on a continuous basis as the child interacts with the environment.

Learning dispositions

Learning dispositions have been defined as ‘habits of the mind’ (Katz, 1987). They refer to how a child approaches and engages in learning. Some common learning dispositions in early childhood include confidence, courage, perseverance, playsfulness, resilience, responsibility, and trust. Having skills in a certain area is quite different to having a disposition for that area for example, having reading skills is quite different from having a disposition to read.

Learning environment

This is the setting in which learning takes place. It includes both outdoor and indoor environments.

Maturation

This refers to what the child could do, know and understand from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.

Maturity

The sequential emergence of physical and mental characteristics, governed by instructions contained in the child's genetic code and shared by all members of the human species.

Numeracy

Developing an understanding of mathematical numbers and concepts.

Parent/guardian

In this document the term parent/guardian refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators.

These include the father and mother and/or guardians of the child.

Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is the awareness that words can be broken down into constituent sounds. It includes the ability to hear sounds in words in the correct sequence and to segment, count, blend and manipulate them.

Physical skills

As physical development proceeds, the child acquires various physical skills which require co-ordination between sensory input, brain organisation and motor output. These skills often require a great deal of practice before becoming automatic. Gross motor skills use the large muscles in the body and include walking, running, and kicking a ball. Fine motor skills are used in activities such as pointing, using a knife and fork, and writing.

Practitioner

All those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners may have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.

Reciprocity

This involves turn-taking routines during communicative exchanges, between the adult and the child at pre-verbal, verbal and symbolic levels. These exchanges are characterised by mutual interest, enjoyment and communicative intent.

Relevance

This refers to the practices of observing and reflecting upon children's learning in order to support and extend this learning appropriately.

Resilience

This is the emotional relationship between a child and a particular caregiver, which provides a 'secure base' for the child's nurturance and engagement with his/her environment, including other people.

Socialisation

This is the process by which children learn the standards, values, and expected behaviours of their culture and society.

Special educational needs

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) defines children with special educational needs as including those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the classroom is not sufficiently challenging.

Scaffolding

This is a metaphor used to describe the process whereby adults support and guide children's learning, enabling the children to 'perform' at a level beyond their own capabilities.

Sensitive periods

This refers to a period of time when a specific aspect of a child's development would benefit from the presence of appropriate stimulation or experiences.

Social skills

These refer to the ability to be with others, while knowing the appropriate behaviour for particular situations and activities. This behaviour includes the ability to meet, mix and communicate with others; knowing how to share, take turns and accept rules.

Socialisation

This is the process by which children learn the standards, values, and expected behaviours of their culture and society.

Special educational needs

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) defines children with special educational needs as including those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the classroom is not sufficiently challenging.

Valuing

This is a theme proposed for the framework. It refers to all aspects of the physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual health and well-being of the child, which are essential foundations for early and all subsequent learning.

Zone of proximal development

This refers to what the child could do, know and understand with input from a more knowledgeable and skilful person.
Remit of the NCCA

The NCCA’s work in developing a framework for early childhood learning has its legislative basis in the Education Act (1998). The Act states that the NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to

(b) the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools.

(Education Act, 1998, Article 41-1)

This consultative document, Towards a Framework for Early Learning is an important stepping stone in the development of the framework. It is primarily a consultative tool, which the NCCA will use to work in partnership with the early childhood sector in designing the Framework for Early Learning and in planning for its development.

Structure and purpose of the current document

The document comprises five sections:

- rationale and purpose
- the child as a learner
- contexts for learning
- supporting early learning through the assessment process
- building the framework.

As a starting point, the document articulates a clear vision of all children as capable young learners from birth, with rights to be supported and guided in realising their full potential. This vision is an important foundation in furthering the development of the framework.

This outline is for consideration and comment by the early childhood sector.

Consultation and partnership

A variety of curriculum guidance for early childhood already exists in Ireland and there is a need to reflect the diversity and richness of this in the framework. Many organisations, in drawing on a range of experience and expertise, have developed their own guidance which is used in a range of settings. There are also curriculum developments at a national level. The Primary School Curriculum (1999a), developed by the NCCA, guides the learning of children enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (children aged 4+) through Irish and English. Building on the experiences of the Rutland Street Project, the Department of Education and Science developed Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) (children aged 3+). The NCCA will consult widely with the early childhood sector to ensure that the Framework for Early Learning draws and builds on this work.

The development of the framework is a significant milestone in curriculum development in Ireland. The NCCA has a long and established tradition of partnership in its work. Consultation is the cornerstone of this partnership and will enable all those in the early childhood sector to work together in contributing to the development process. Developing the framework in this way provides opportunities to create a unified vision of what constitutes quality in terms of supporting and nurturing early learning for all children in this country, and to reflect this in daily practice.

The NCCA will consult with the early childhood sector both prior to and during the development of the framework. Details of this consultation and partnership are presented in the concluding remarks to this document. It is critical that the sector takes the time to read and to reflect on the central ideas presented in this document, and to respond to the NCCA on these. A response form accompanies the document and is also available at www.ncca.ie. Focus questions are interspersed through this document to guide the reader’s thinking in the case of each of the nine ideas outlined on the response form. Through analysing the responses, the NCCA can draw on the current curriculum work and expertise in the sector, and better ensure that the Framework for Early Learning is a relevant and valuable document for everyone responsible for children from birth to six years.
The child is an active learner, making sense of his/her environment through the senses, movement and language.
1.1 Introduction to section one

This section presents the rationale for the development of the Framework for Early Learning to support learning across the whole early childhood period. It begins by outlining the national context for such an initiative, and proceeds to explore the benefits of early learning. It concludes with a brief discussion of some of the framework's central features.

1.2 The national context

Early childhood is a time when children learn through caring and nurturing relationships. Side by side with this, there is an understanding of children as a community of intuitive young learners with both care and educational needs, and rights.

Care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child's holistic development - this reality must be reflected in the ethos and programme of all services.

(Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999, p.50)

The development of the Framework for Early Learning is timely. Recent policy developments illustrate an emerging endorsement of children’s rights to both care and education:

- Children are recognised as individuals within a family and in the wider community with rights to equal support, care and promotion of their wellbeing.

(desired outcome of recommendations)


Some of the policy and legislative developments in the area of early childhood care and education are summarised in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1: Recent relevant policy and legislative developments in Ireland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Policy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>- Childcare Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>- UN Convention on the Rights of the Child</td>
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<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>- Quality Targets in Services for Young Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>- National Forum on Early Childhood Education - Strengthening Families for Life - Education Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>- National Children's Strategy, Our Children - Their Lives - Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>- Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill</td>
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The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 was a significant turning point in Ireland’s history of supporting children in early childhood. In signing, Ireland accepted a range of international obligations concerning the welfare of children seven of which pertain to the area of their rights to care and education in their formative years.

This was followed by the publication of a Ten-Year Action Programme, Quality Targets in Services for Young Children by the European Commission Network on Childcare (1996) which states that a quality early years programme may only be achieved within a national policy framework. While we now have such a framework, the National Children's Strategy. Our Children - Their Lives (2000) we have no national policy for learning in the early years, a factor noted repeatedly at the National Forum on Early Childhood Education convened in 1998. Concentrating on early learning, this forum paved the way for Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999b). This paper recommends the development of guidelines to support children’s learning throughout early childhood. In addition, the need to support parents/guardians in catering for their children's learning is emphasised. This key message also underpins the more recent Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children: The Supporting Parents Strategy (2002).

1999 also saw the launch of the Primary School Curriculum, the outcome of extensive collaboration and partnership between the education partners. This curriculum, which contains an infant curriculum for children aged four to six years, is based on the latest thinking and research about how children learn, and how that learning can be supported optimally for each child through skilled, sensitive, and informed involvement by a teacher.

The curriculum recognises the integrity of the child's life as a child and aims to cater for his or her needs and potential as they evolve day by day. By meeting these needs, the curriculum enriches the child’s life and the foundations are laid for happiness and fulfillment in later education and in adult life.

(Primary School Curriculum, Introduction, p.6)

The National Children's Strategy, Our Children - Their Lives was launched in 2000 by the National Children's Office. The Strategy presents a vision of the place and rights of children from birth:

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society, where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.

(National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.4)

This vision emphasises the importance of enabling children to experience a fulfilling childhood and to realise their potential. By implication, it highlights the responsibility of adults to support children in achieving this. This strategy, and in particular its vision, is very timely for the development of the Framework for Early Learning.

2000 also saw the commencement of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. This programme aims to enable parents/guardians to avail of training, education, and employment opportunities through the provision of quality childcare supports. This programme provides funding to facilitate both the expansion of the early childhood sector, and the improvement of the quality of services for children.

The recent development of the Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (2002) is also significant. This framework presents guidance on the professional development of those working in the early childhood sector. This is especially relevant to the NCDA's work, given the centrality of the adult-child relationship in supporting and extending early learning.

Another important initiative has been the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002, under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science. The centre has responsibility for the overall co-ordination and development of early childhood education in Ireland, giving rise to areas of mutual interest with the NCDA. A close working relationship between the two organisations is thus important in the development of the Framework for Early Learning. The NCDA has worked in close partnership with the CECDE in developing the current consultative document and will continue to do so.
SECTION 1 RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

SECTION 1 RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

1.3 The benefits of early learning

Early childhood research continues to highlight the extent and nature of learning from birth, and the possibilities for development which this learning offers. Learning actually begins before birth, but this is beyond the scope of the framework. Research is also exploring the relationship between early learning and subsequent learning into adulthood.

As with learning in later life, early learning can be both formal and informal. For example, the child who learns how to tie his/her shoelaces will very likely have been taught to some degree by someone. On the other hand, much of his/her other learning will be incidental and unplanned, such as learning how to greet people, or that night is associated with darkness and day with light. When the child begins school, informal learning will continue to be a part of his/her learning experiences, although the balance between the two may change.

The benefits of early learning, and the reason why learning should be supported in an informed and purposeful way at this stage in a child’s life, can be explained as follows:

- Early learning is the foundation for all subsequent learning (the beginning of lifelong learning).
- Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning.

The foundation of lifelong learning

The period from birth to six years is understood as being a time of life qualitatively different from later childhood and adulthood. It is a time of tremendous growth and development when the young mind, body, and spirit experience change at an unprecedented rate.

Early childhood is... a period of momentous significance for all people... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth.

(Donaldson, O’Reilly and Pratt, 1983, p.1)

Donaldson et al. pinpoint the very centrality of early learning to life itself. It is the foundation to learning for life and learning throughout life. Early experiences shape us as learners. By the end of our early childhood years we have reached important conclusions about our own abilities, our own achievements and the expectations others have of us as learners. In this way, early experiences contribute significantly to later well-being, and influence the quality of a person’s life. These experiences should nurture all areas of learning and development appropriately, and should promote a child’s image of himself/herself as a capable and competent learner in a positive way.

The recognition of the importance of early learning and its link with the future is stated again and again in a range of guidance issued for, and by practitioners in Ireland.

A time of tremendous opportunity

Neuroscience is revealing that learning is profound in the first six/seven years of life but especially in the first three years. The development and learning that occur in these three years are crucial for laying the foundations for competence and coping skills that will affect children’s overall capacity to learn and to behave, and their ability to manage emotions (The Supporting Parents Strategy, 2002). During this time, the brain is particularly receptive to appropriate stimulation and nurturing:

Experiences may alter the behaviour of an adult, but experience literally forms the mind of a young child.

(Winkly, 1999)

We also know that there are so-called sensitive periods, during which children can benefit enormously from particular types of experiences. For example, Sproule, Murray, Spratt, Rafferty, Trew, Sheehy and McGuinness (2001) write that while the sensitive periods for early language learning may vary for individual children, they are always over by the age of four or younger. This is relevant for the development of a child’s first language, as well as his/her bilingual development, for example, an English-speaking child learning Irish in a naíonra or other setting. During this time, children may also begin to learn other languages and develop their own plurilingual identity. At the same time, however,
SECTION 1 RATIONALE AND PURPOSE

1.4 The Framework for Early Learning – vision and aims

The vision

The Framework for Early Learning promotes an early childhood for all children in Ireland where they can develop as learners within the context of trusting and loving relationships with others, and with an understanding of one’s own ability and worth. Central to all this are high quality adult-child interactions.

Early childhood is not a time for solely maximising children’s learning for the sake of their future. While the young brain is very ready for experiences which can have a positive impact on subsequent learning, this does not mean that learning has to be unduly accelerated or rushed. We should not impose knowledge and skills more appropriate to later learning on these young and highly sensitive minds. Children are vulnerable to the absence of appropriate early stimulation, but are equally sensitive to the presence of inappropriate learning experiences. Attempts to accelerate learning beyond their developmental capacities may actually inhibit learning and damage their self-esteem and confidence as learners, possibly undoing much of the potential good of early experiences (Elkind and Sigel, 1987). Premature formality in early learning is also considered unwise (Kraeting, Fabian, Joran, Mavers and Roberts, 2000; Marcon, 1999; Bredikamp and Coppie, 1997). Similarly, it is stated in the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens (children aged 1-6 years).

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Do you share this vision for the Framework for Early Learning?

What change(s), if any, would you make to it?

The aims

Premised on this vision, the Framework for Early Learning will have a number of aims. The framework will:

1. support the development of all children from birth to six years as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with adults and peers, recognising the diversity of ability, culture, language, faith, social group, and ethnicity which influences children’s learning and development.

2. emphasise the important and influential role of parents/guardians as their children’s primary educators during early childhood.

3. guide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, recognising the range of their learning strengths and the areas of learning in which they require extra and/or specialised support.

4. support existing good practices in early learning. The framework will help practitioners to reflect upon and to evaluate their own practices, and in doing so to continue to strive to create and provide learning opportunities which have a positive, beneficial, and lasting influence on all children’s learning.

It is hoped that these aims reflect the many and varied experiences of childhood lived by children in Ireland at this time. The aims emphasise the importance of the relationships between children and adults, and in particular the centrality of parent/guardian-child interactions. With this importance come responsibilities. Children need experiences which help them to realise their potential in all areas of learning and development, irrespective of individual difference in potential. An important process in facilitating this is reflective practice. Here, adults have a responsibility to reflect critically on their own practices in an effort to continually improve the quality of the learning opportunities they create for children. This relentless search for quality can enrich the lives of both the children and the adults who work with them.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Do you think these aims are appropriate for a national framework?

Are there additional aims which you believe should be included?
Expressed through aims, goals and learning experiences, these themes will set out the dispositions, skills, attitudes and knowledge children should learn. The framework will also describe in broad terms, the types of environments that best support early learning and development. In this way, adults will be assisted in tailoring learning to the individual child so that he/she has a positive, enjoyable and motivating experience as a young learner. Section five presents a more detailed discussion of the proposed model for the framework.

**Who is the framework for?**
The Framework for Early Learning will address learning across the whole early childhood period. In this way, the framework will be relevant to all those responsible for the development and learning of children from birth to six years of age. This includes parents/guardians, childminders and all practitioners in the various disciplines working in the range of settings outside the home. These settings include creches, nurseries, parent-and-toddler groups, playschools, pre-schools, national, infant classes in mainstream and special schools, after-school clubs, and hospital settings. They also include similar settings in the Gaeltacht. This range of settings encompasses the private, public and voluntary sectors.

How can one framework cater for the diversity that exists?
The vision for the Framework for Early Learning captures the importance of all children being supported appropriately in their learning. While children have many similarities in how they learn and what they learn, they also present many differences in terms of the learning opportunities and the supports they need.

These differences emerge from diversity in stage of development, ability, learning dispositions, and diversity in social, cultural, language and ethnic backgrounds. The Framework for Early Learning, in realising its vision, will need to provide sufficient guidance to enable adults to respond to children’s individual strengths and needs in planning for and providing them with a positive and enjoyable start in life.

It is important that the framework reflects this diversity including:
- setting/learning environment
- philosophy
- length of day (i.e., whether sessional or full-day)
- age of the children
- language
- culture.

As a national framework, the Framework for Early Learning will complement existing curriculum guidance and try to create more coherence and connectedness across learning throughout early childhood. It will offer advice and guidance to adults in planning and providing appropriate learning experiences for the individual child. However, the specifics of these experiences will differ in each setting/learning environment.

**Figure 1.1: Three overlapping phases**

This approach may be an over-simplification in some respects. For example, behaviour typical of babies does not cease to exist when the baby reaches eighteen months. In this way, the framework can reflect the rich diversity of philosophies, traditions, and approaches in early childhood care and education.

To have these characteristics, the Framework for Early Learning will be informed by the latest research and thinking about early learning. Drawing on this, it will articulate broad pedagogical principles to guide adults in supporting children as they learn and develop. The framework will also present the key areas of development and learning through themes.
need to be decided locally between the adult and the child. This endorses the personal nature of learning and the child’s role in partnership with the adult in shaping and directing that learning. It acknowledges the intimate knowledge the adult has of the child as a learner – how he/she learns, his/her learning needs, interests, and strengths. It also ensures the preservation of the different philosophical approaches, traditions, and structures characteristic of early childhood practices and settings in this country.

The Framework for Early Learning will have both implicit and explicit links with the Primary School Curriculum (1999a). Sharing many of the principles of early learning, which emerge through this document, this curriculum is used to guide and shape the learning experiences of most children from five years onwards. As such, it is essential that the framework and the Primary School Curriculum collectively ensure continuity and progression in children’s learning. The NCCA has begun a rolling monitoring and review of the Primary School Curriculum, with the chief aim being to gather information on teachers’ and children’s experiences of its implementation, with a view to informing future developments. This will include a focus on the infant curriculum, and should yield rich insights into children’s initial experiences in the early classes. In this way, the development of the framework and the ongoing review of the Primary School Curriculum can be mutually beneficial.

**Why is a single framework being proposed?**

Recent years have seen an emerging trend of developing frameworks which overarch the whole of early childhood, a practice endorsed by the OECD (2001a). Such an approach would have a number of advantages in the Irish context.

- A single framework, which traverses age boundaries, can reflect the continuum of early learning more successfully by promoting the care and educational needs of children from birth to six years. This will help to give the earliest learning the recognition and status it deserves. In the past, the needs of children from birth to three have tended to be understood from a care perspective, while education was seen more as the priority for those from three onwards. This may have resulted in fragmentation and an undervaluing of early learning.
- A single framework is more conducive to planning for, and supporting children’s learning along a continuum of ability. For children whose development is impaired or delayed through disability and/or disadvantage, an overarching framework can provide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners with appropriate starting points, which reflect the relevant developmental stage.
- A single framework can reflect the diversity of children’s lives in Ireland in terms of culture, language and socio-economic background.
- An overarching framework can be used to inform practices across a range of settings and disciplines or professions. This will promote multi-disciplinary practices through greater communication and sharing of understandings between practitioners from different professional communities, for example, education, health, speech and language, occupational therapy.
- Early childhood can be a time of wonder, joy, and discovery. It is these experiences that produce keen and confident learners and which should be encouraged and promoted in a national framework. This can be achieved more effectively if learning is considered across the whole of early childhood. Thus the development of one framework should help to address early learning in a more coherent and inclusive manner. It should also help to promote the importance of the everyday activities and tasks children share with adults.
- A single framework can highlight the importance of adult-child interactions (relationships) as a central focus for quality learning experiences throughout childhood. These relationships are an important context for early learning as outlined in section three of this document.
- Much guidance in supporting early learning is already currently in use in this country. It is envisaged that the Framework for Early Learning will create more coherence across this guidance. The framework will help to affirm and support parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in their everyday routines and practices. It will also encourage reflective practice as a tool for improving the quality of provision for children’s learning.

**1.6 Conclusion**

Early childhood is a time of incredible learning. This learning has a fundamental impact on all later learning and on the individual’s life itself and should therefore be supported and encouraged appropriately. One step to achieving this is through the development of a national framework. Ireland has a strong policy base for such an initiative. This together with the experience, expertise, commitment and participation of the early childhood sector in partnership with the NCCA creates an ideal opportunity to develop a framework which will support adults in helping all children to learn to their full potential.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS**

1. Do you agree with the idea of a national framework for learning in early childhood?
2. Do you think this framework might be of help to you in your setting?
The cultivation of learner dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness has positive life-long implications.

The child as a learner
2.1 Introduction to section two

This section provides an overview of the child as a young learner, focusing on the capacities and competencies he/she brings to the learning process. It explores the many influences on the child’s learning. In particular, it notes the importance of early learning opportunities which are responsive to the individual needs of each child.

The section presents early learning in the context of four interconnected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. For each of these themes, the section refers to the learning and development of babies, toddlers, and young children.

2.2 Early learning and development

The global view of the young learner

From the moment of birth—and indeed before—most children display a tremendous capacity and desire to learn (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999). Forming early secure attachments with significant caregivers facilitates exploration of the environment and thus assists learning. The innate drive to learn is evident in children’s desire to become aware of and to understand their world, and everything in it. It is reflected in their need to feel wanted and loved, which are important foundations of healthy and positive early learning experiences. It is also displayed in the child’s curiosity and wonder about his/her environment, in the excitement he/she feels in engaging with that environment, and in achieving and developing growing independence.

At birth, the learning environment consists of the key adult(s) who care(s) for the young baby. Later, the physical environment becomes more relevant, and the child begins to engage with more adults and peers. Occurring in a playful context, these interactions can support much learning which is self-initiated, fun, positive, and motivating with appropriate support or involvement from others.

This image of the active learner presents learning and development as a dynamic process, which can vary in any given situation according to the level of self-direction by the child, and support from others. This support should take full account of how the child naturally interacts with and develops an understanding of his/her environment, as well as the child’s individual abilities and capacity for learning.

The uniqueness of each child

There are many different experiences of early childhood in Ireland today. Each child’s ‘path of learning’ is shaped by individual potential and the range of experiences he/she has in everyday life (Hayes, 1999). This diversity results in different experiences of early childhood. These different experiences in turn determine the level and type of adult support needed by individual children in nurturing and extending their learning and development.

Children are born with a unique repertoire of abilities and strengths, which should be supported and nurtured appropriately. Some children have significant learning disabilities and need particular help in learning. Individual personality traits, health, additional sensory or physical needs, behavioural difficulties, and individual life experiences also need to be considered.

Children develop and learn within particular social, cultural, and language environments. Irish society has undergone unprecedented social and economic change in recent years. Some of the greatest changes have occurred in terms of family structures and the composition of Irish society. A growing percentage of children in early childhood are now growing up in diverse family arrangements.

Poverty continues to affect significant numbers of children. This poverty can significantly impact on parents’/guardians’ means to support and to foster early learning appropriately. Unable to exploit these early opportunities, these children can face many difficulties in later learning.

Recent years have brought increased cultural and linguistic diversity to Ireland. It is vital that children from these communities, as well as children whose native language is Irish or English, develop a healthy sense of identity and belonging in this new cultural context.

An additional factor influencing the type of early childhood experienced by children in this country is the increasing number of children spending time in out-of-home settings. Many people are also living increasing distances from their extended families. Therefore some children are spending an increasing percentage of their first few years of life in the company of adults other than their parents/guardians, grandparents or extended family.

Differing experiences of childhood necessitate different types and levels of adult support in nurturing early learning and development. The nature and intensity of this support should always be dependent on the strengths and needs of the individual child. Matching opportunities to children helps to ensure that they are all supported in realising their own potential, and in working towards becoming independent, participating, and responsible citizens.

As suggested in section one, the Framework for Early Learning will reflect the many and diverse experiences children have of early childhood. Through information and advice, it will guide those working with children to plan for and to provide the types of learning environments and supports children should have to realise their potential, and to give them a positive, enjoyable and motivating start in life.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Does this image of the child as a learner convey the role played by most children in their early learning?

Do you think this image reflects the diversity of children’s experiences of childhood in Ireland?

2.3 Holistic view of early learning and development

All aspects of early learning are interconnected. At no other stage in life is this more obvious and more relevant. While it is possible to identify different dimensions to this learning, for example, social, emotional, personal, physical (sensory and motor development), cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral and spiritual, these are intrinsically interwoven, influencing each other in highly complex and sophisticated ways.

Adopting a holistic view of the child as a learner in the Framework for Early Learning is important for many reasons. Firstly, it foregrounds the child’s own capacities and strengths as a learner. This focus sees our youngest children as contributing citizens with entitlements to opportunities and supports for their learning and development, as expressed in the National Children’s Strategy (2000).

Secondly, the holistic approach emphasises the interconnectedness of all learning. Naturally different experiences will nurture learning and development in some dimensions more than in others. For example, conversations and story-time will be of most relevance in linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional development. However, focusing on the whole child as a learner rather than on discrete areas of development reflects more accurately the complexity and multi-faceted nature of early learning.

Thirdly, the holistic view better facilitates the identification and organisation of all the supports children should have to help them to realise their full learning potential. All children need nourishment, secure, happy and trusting relationships, and appropriate access to health and education services. These services need to be supplemented for some children. For example, a young baby with a physical disability may need access to physiotherapy and/or occupational therapy. The structure and intensity of these additional services can vary with time, and their provision in a holistic context ensures that the child receives broad and balanced learning experiences while having his/her specific needs met appropriately. This holistic approach also places the child in the context of his/her family
2.4 Aspects of early learning and development

The National Children’s Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives (2000) highlights the importance of a variety of experiences to give each child opportunities to learn and develop in all areas.

The Framework for Early Learning will support and nurture all aspects of early learning and development in a way which reflects the interconnectedness and integration of learning. A review of national and international frameworks shows that there are two typical approaches to presenting such a framework:

- domains of development
- learning themes.

Domains of development

In this type of approach, early learning is presented in a series of domains of development. The domains commonly used include cognitive (including language) development, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development. Some countries have adopted this approach, for example, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (2001) presents learning using the titles ‘the thinking and communicating self, the physical self, and the psychosocial self.’

These principal domains of learning are generally further sub-divided into a greater number of categories for later phases in early childhood, for example, for children aged three to six years. In reflecting international practice, the Primary School Curriculum (1999a) presents the learning for children aged 4-6 years in the form of broad curriculum areas:

- Language
- Mathematics
- Social, environmental and scientific education
- Arts education
- Physical education
- Social, personal and health education*

*Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups.

The Primary School Curriculum recommends that learning is presented to children of this age in a highly integrated manner through the use of topics and themes. The use of a subject-oriented strategy to present learning as the curriculum does is quite typical at the upper stages of early childhood, to coincide with formal schooling. Similar domains are used by many early childhood organisations in Ireland in their curriculum guidance. The focus of the Primary School Curriculum is the critical role played by the adult in supporting and guiding children’s learning across all the curriculum areas.

Learning themes

An alternative approach to presenting learning is the use of a cross-curricular or thematic model. One of the most celebrated examples of this is the New Zealand curriculum framework To Whariki (1996) for children from birth to school age (typically five/six years of age). This presents early learning using five interlocking strands or themes. These comprise:

- Well-being
- Belonging
- Growth
- Communication
- Exploration.

This approach is also used in the curriculum framework, Quality in Diversity, which was developed by the Early Childhood Education Forum (1998) in England. Here, the foundations for early learning are

- Belonging and Connecting
- Being and Becoming
- Contributing and Participating
- Being active and Expressing
- Thinking, Imagining and Understanding.

The thematic approach conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner, and the totality of his/her learning needs. This approach has much to offer the design of the Framework for Early Learning, and is explored in detail below and later in section five.

2.5 A thematic framework

This consultative document proposes that the Framework for Early Learning will present learning through four broad and complementary themes:

- Well-being
- Identity and belonging
- Communication
- Exploring and thinking.

Each theme embodies particular areas of learning and development. In outlining learning through each of the four themes, the following subsections draw attention to the full spectrum of children’s abilities. Children follow different developmental pathways with some children having developmental disabilities and/or delays. These children may learn at different rates and achieve different levels of understanding. This means that no two children will benefit fully from the same learning opportunities in the same sequence, at the same rate, and with the same level and type of adult support. These differences are critical in providing each learner with experiences and opportunities reflective of his/her uniqueness as a learner. The Framework for Early Learning will celebrate and support this diversity.

Theme: Well-being

Well-being can be defined as the condition of being content, healthy, and well adapted to the environment. A child’s well-being is an essential foundation for early learning, and all subsequent learning. It is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others, and relates to many different aspects of development such as physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual.

Early childhood is a time of tremendous physical growth and change for all children:

The passage from the limited motor repertoire of the newborn to the complex locomotor and manipulatory skills of the toddler stands among the most visible and dramatic transformations in the human life-cycle.

(Thelen, Kato and Fogel, 1987, p.39)

Initially, babies will attend to sensations. Many will then begin to respond to these with movement, and this movement will, in the case of most children, later develop from being reflexive to being increasingly complex and purposeful. During this time, children also develop an intense consciousness of what they can do. This physical development has been explained in terms of maturation, which takes place within the context of a challenging and supportive environment. This environment is provided through relationships with responsive and caring adults, who also satisfy basic needs such as healthcare, for example immunisations and sanitation. An appropriate environment also necessitates appropriate nutrition, which apart from being essential for physical well-being, impacts on other aspects of the child’s life such as behavioural development as discussed by Vachs (2000). The needs of children who are unwell must also be considered. These children’s ability to concentrate can be affected by ongoing pain and discomfort, the effects of medication, the need for sleep periods, the effects of travel, and intensive therapy sessions.

As emphasised in the National Children’s Strategy (2000), physical well-being is closely related to other domains such as cognitive and emotional. For example, through movement, children’s physical abilities can contribute significantly to developing their thinking processes. It also provides them with an alternative expressive medium. In discussing physical development for pre-school children, Project Early Years Education (Project E.Y.E., 2000) emphasises the value of physical activity for healthy living and for all-round development.

Whatever its effect, there is obviously a need for children to engage in strenuous physical activity in enjoyable and purposeful ways. The most striking purpose is that through movement a child identifies an important means of self-discovery. Movement also offers opportunities for developing language and imagination as well as the more social skills of discipline, co-operation and awareness of each other...

(Thilen, Kato and Fogel, p. 8)

Children’s physical exploration of their environment also helps them become more confident and self-assured, thereby supporting the development of their sense of self, self-esteem and self-confidence. There is tremendous variety in children’s physical size and appearance. This can impact on their interactions with others (Bise, 1992). It is important that children are affirmed and receive positive messages about their physical presentation throughout early childhood, so that they are content with their physical presence and so that they experience fulfillment in their changing abilities and competencies. This contributes positively to their self-image and self-worth.
The child’s emotional well-being is directly related to the quality of early attachments. According to Bowlby (1979), attachment provides the baby with a sense of security, and encourages communication and the expression of feelings. The quality of the first attachment prepares the ground for all later relationships. Warm and trusting relationships, where children feel loved and where they are encouraged to express themselves fully, enables the child to develop emotions such as enthusiasm, interest and a positive disposition to learn. This helps the child to become more independent, so that as he/she grows and develops, he/she can adapt to change, and demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness. Some children will need intensive support in this interaction in order to help them engage with their environment. However, all children can work towards a level of independence which reflects their specific abilities, strengths, and interests. Given that disabled children may encounter many challenges in life, positive thinking, encouragement and support on the part of those who work with these children as they develop a sense of self is crucial. Children’s sense of well-being is also dependent on the acceptance of their culture. It is important that they see their culture as being respected and valued.

A sense of well-being encourages the child to actively explore and challenge himself/herself as appropriate in the environment. Playful interaction with the environment in a way that is sufficiently challenging to match cognitive capacities is essential for intellectual well-being. It is also important to ensure that the child benefits from sufficient rest periods.

Another aspect of health is the child’s spiritual and moral well-being. The National Children’s Strategy identifies this well-being as including ‘feelings, experiences and beliefs that stimulate self-awareness, wonder, reverence, moral and aesthetic sensibility, and questions about the meaning and nature of life and death’ (2000, p. 27). Early learning experiences should nurture this dimension of well-being. For many children development and learning in this area will be based on religious beliefs and practices in particular faiths.

**Babies**

It is within the context of the baby’s early attachment(s) that his/her emotional and physical well-being is promoted. Apart from basic healthcare and nutrition, babies benefit from having opportunities to engage in various activities involving both gross and fine motor skills. These include lifting their heads up, sitting up, reaching, grasping, standing up, and walking. This should occur in a safe and supportive environment in which the babies gain a sense of satisfaction from their efforts. Most can be encouraged to develop a certain level of independence, such as holding their own bottle/ cup when drinking, while some will continue being very dependent on adult support for their early physical well-being.

Babies’ intellectual well-being can be promoted in an environment where consistent routines enable them to make sense of their experience. For example, they begin to react to their own name being called and they begin to repeat actions which make other people laugh.

**Toddlers**

Toddlers’ early relationships continue to provide the context for their developing sense of well-being. Feelings of frustration can often emerge in these relationships as toddlers learn to reconcile their own need for autonomy and their need to stay close to their caregivers and to feel protected by them.

In terms of physical development, most toddlers will develop an increasing awareness of their own bodies and their abilities, as well as their limitations. They show great enthusiasm for being active. They may express themselves with the aid of specific equipment such as slides, swings, balls, tricycles, and bean-bags, as well as responding to particular stimuli such as music, or in the context of a game. This can also stimulate learning in the creative and expressive dimensions.

Other toddlers will have special needs, which require sensitive support from adults. For example, visual cues (rather than audio) could be used with a deaf child in eliciting appropriate responses within a game. For some toddlers, activities for promoting physical well-being will involve attending to stimuli, and learning from the accompanying sensations.

Toddlers’ emotional well-being is fostered by having opportunities to be independent, and by being encouraged to express themselves. Most will show an increasing ability to concentrate, and to make their own choices. However, some will need special support in carrying out routines, and in overcoming challenges. Their curiosity and sense of wonder, which is an important part of spiritual development, can be fostered in simple ways through observing and experiencing the natural world such as rainbows, newborn animals, sand and water.

**Young children**

The range of physical activity which young children may use becomes increasingly diverse. Physical activity such as climbing, swinging, balancing, cycling, rolling, and running not only develops gross motor skills, but also extends the children’s sense of bodily and spatial awareness, enabling them to explore the world from new and different perspectives. Different children will need to be supported in their physical activity in different ways.

Physical activity also relates to the mastery of simple tasks and routines, such as toileting, washing, dressing and feeding. Young children can be encouraged to become responsible for their own well-being and for these particular routines/tasks. They can also be encouraged to become more responsible for their own actions, for example, tidying up their own toys/books. Such responsibility enhances their self-esteem and sense of independence.

Young children’s emotional well-being is promoted by enabling them to express a range of emotions, so that they can identify both their own emotional responses and those of others. This is an important part in the development of the ability to empathise, as they develop an increasing sense of responsibility for their own well-being and for that of others.
Young children’s intellectual well-being is promoted through opportunities to use and extend their developing intellectual competencies. Young children will enjoy activities such as sorting, matching and ordering. They will also derive satisfaction from activities such as constructing, making marks, solving problems and puzzles, predicting, making connections, and developing an awareness of print.

### Theme: Identity and belonging

Identity is a complex combination of characteristics, traits, and behaviours. These contribute to a child’s uniqueness, as well as to their sense of belonging or affinity with particular groups in society in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, gender and social group. Identity is dynamic, and will develop during the child’s life. Aspects of identity can also change in their significance for the child throughout his/her life. The National Children’s Strategy (2000) highlights the importance of children developing a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society. Positive messages about children’s family, their beliefs and traditions, and their culture and language help children to develop a confidence about their worth and the worth of their communities in society.

The young child’s sense of identity and belonging is bound up with his/her relationships with others. In their interactions, children develop an awareness of themselves as human beings distinct from others. Self-image and self-esteem are shaped by the worth the child attaches to himself/herself. It is therefore important that messages of respect, love, praise and encouragement are communicated to children. Such messages should highlight to the child the importance of himself/herself as an individual rather than what he/she can do. In this way, the adult(s) with whom children engage and interact play an important and responsible role in the development of a positive sense of identity and belonging. As Griffin writes:

> From the moment of birth we are all engaged in a process of becoming ‘ourselves’. It no doubt takes a lifetime to complete the picture. However, those early foundations laid by our primary caregivers (and those caregivers they trust to continue the work) are crucial to the picture we paint of ourselves.

(1997, p.43)

These foundations have their roots in the initial relationships a child develops with his/her primary caregiver(s). The quality of these relationships establishes a pattern that influences the child’s subsequent development. The child’s identity is also dependent on the role he/she plays within particular groups and on the sense of belonging which emerges from this. In early childhood these groups will include the primary caregivers, the immediate family, the extended family, friends, childcare providers and practitioners. Active participation in these groups creates and affirms a sense of belonging. This participation is important in developing much pro-social and moral behaviour, including the ability to empathise, to understand others’ perspectives, to turn-take, to share, and to follow social rules and conventions. This sense of belonging reinforces self-esteem.

A child’s sense of identity and belonging is intricately connected to his/her immediate culture and that of the wider society. Cultural identity is developed by reference to how people live, experience and give meaning to their lives. It finds expression in language, music, dance, games, and in the shared histories and beliefs of people. Aspects of this diversity will have different significance for different children.

Ireland’s native cultural inheritance will be very significant for many children. This includes the Irish language, which is available to many children growing up in Irish-speaking homes in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere from their parents and grandparents. There is also a rich tradition associated with Irish in the country. Children’s identities as citizens of the European Union, as well as the increasing cultural diversity and globalisation in Irish society means that children’s multilingual identities will become more and more important. All of this enriches the cultural and linguistic experiences available to children. It is also important that all children are enabled and encouraged to appreciate and celebrate this diversity.

An emerging sense of identity and belonging includes a spiritual and moral dimension. Children should be encouraged to appreciate the wonder and reverence of their everyday experiences. For many children, this will also be supported by particular traditions of belief and devotion. Evidence for children’s early spiritual lives can be sought among their perception and awareness of, and response to ordinary activities that can act as signals of transcendence.

Children also develop identities as learners, having different learning styles and dispositions. Some may like to actively engage with their environment, while others may be more reflective and thoughtful.
Communication can be defined as the exchange of thoughts, information, or feelings. The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development.

**Young children**
As children progress, they interact with others more purposefully and in more complex and sophisticated ways. They learn to discriminate between different types of relationships by interacting with various adults. These interactions play a significant role in social and other areas of development.

Peer relations also provide a context for developing socially and for understanding fairness, difference of opinion, conflict resolution, and responsibility. As young children progress through the later stages of early childhood, they benefit from having opportunities to socialise with peers on a continuous basis.

Young children develop an increasing awareness of difference, and internalise this within the limits of their cognitive powers. Having opportunities to spend time with diverse groups of peers will help to encourage stereotypical beliefs and attitudes. Children can also explore issues of diversity through play. Through the support of an adult, play can lead to situations which develop young children’s understanding of the unfairness of exclusion, inequalities, and prejudice.

Young children also need support in their spiritual development through opportunities for wonder, reverence and aesthetic appreciation. The natural world provides many opportunities for this.

**Theme: Communication**
Communication can be defined as the exchange of thoughts, information, or feelings. The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Most children are naturally disposed to communicate. This enables them to establish and maintain social relationships with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them.

Communication is also intricately connected to and contributes to children’s cognitive development, as well as their sense of identity and belonging.

Communication embraces many different means of giving and receiving information. These include non-verbal, pre-verbal, verbal, and symbolic. The different communicative forms generally reflect different developmental stages during early childhood. While most children will use all forms, eventually developing increasingly sophisticated verbal communication skills, some children will rely more heavily on other forms. Some children may have delayed language development or different patterns of language development and may need to use a range of intentional and non-verbal means of communication, including pictorial, symbolic, or gestural systems. Whatever system is suitable, it is essential that all children are empowered to communicate to the best of their ability from the earliest possible age. A facilitating and responsive environment plays an important role in supporting and nurturing this communication.

For most children, language becomes the dominant form of communication. In this document, language embraces oral, written, and manual communication and consists of content (or vocabulary and word meaning), form (syntax or sounds and sentence structure), and social use of language. Like all forms of communication, language provides a means to interact with others, to express feelings, and to share experiences. Language exchanges between adults and children enable the child to become a confident and competent language user.

Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped by two main factors: children’s own abilities and their environment. The adult should aim to provide an environment in which each child’s attempts to communicate are encouraged. Children will imitate the adults around them, who in turn reinforce and sustain their communication by modelling more elaborate forms, whether in one or more languages. Research by Vrijens (1998) shows the impact of early supportive interactions on cognitive abilities and well-being. Reliance on mothers during emotional challenges at six to nine months has been linked with cognitive and language skills at age two years (Robinson and Acredolo, 2001). For children with communication/language delay and difficulties, strategically focused interactions may be needed to develop the child’s vocabulary, sentence structure, and range of language use.

**Babies**
Strong emotional attachments form the basis for the child’s developing sense of identity and belonging. Babies need to form secure, loving relationships in the initial weeks and months of their lives. Babies are made aware of their own existence and of the existence of others, when others talk to them, gaze at them and touch them (Alvarez, 1992). Physical closeness gives young babies physical, psychological, and emotional comfort.

The quality of these attachments is linked to the baby’s developing sense of self. The feedback and recognition which others provide help to ensure that babies feel good about themselves.

**Toddlers**
Toddlers continue to benefit from the security and warmth of loving relationships with significant adults in their lives. Interactions within these attachments continue to provide the basis for the development of a positive self-concept. They also enable toddlers to establish relationships with peers and other adults, and encourage them to learn more about the world around them using their own initiative and in partnership with others.

Toddlers will benefit from being given certain levels of responsibility and independence within safe, clearly communicated and understood limits. Toddlers need sufficient time to complete tasks to their own satisfaction, and will need praise and encouragement to develop positive learning dispositions such as perseverance and risk-taking. Adults can be responsive to toddlers’ frustrations in their attempts to complete certain tasks by providing ongoing encouragement and support.

Communication can be defined as the exchange of thoughts, information, or feelings. The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Babies are made aware of their own existence and of the existence of others, when others talk to them, gaze at them and touch them (Alvarez, 1992). Physical closeness gives young babies physical, psychological, and emotional comfort.

These attachments can be with mothers, fathers, guardians, grandparents, siblings and key adults in early childhood settings. The quality of these attachments is linked to the baby’s developing sense of self. The feedback and recognition which others provide help to ensure that babies feel good about themselves.
Communication and language are interlinked with the development of literacy (reading and writing) for most children. This begins to occur from an early age.

Literacy is rooted in a general symbolising capacity that develops in the first year of life and this ability is so distinctive of human thinking and behaviour that it can be thought of as the distinguishing feature of human development.

(Whitehead, 1997, p.160)

The Primary School Curriculum highlights the central role of oral language and emphasises the integration of oral language, reading, and writing:

The child’s ability with oral language can be a determining factor in the speed and effectiveness with which (s)he makes progress in reading, just as reading will extend vocabulary and enhance control of sentence structure.

(1999a, p.2)

Wall also identifies the importance of enriching the child’s oral language, and the creation of an environment where literacy is valued and enjoyed:

Of the many types of home activities which can foster language development, the quality of the verbal exchanges between parent and child are of paramount importance in creating a rich language experience for the child. Additionally, children are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards reading and writing if they are immersed from a young age in a ‘print-rich environment’ where they have positive role models and where they regularly experience the enjoyment of written language and perceive its relevance and usefulness.

(1999, p.14)

Children’s literacy development begins in the world around them, in the signs and symbols of everyday life, and in print in the environment, such as on packaging for food and toys. Early childhood setting displays can develop this print awareness. This emergent literacy is further developed through story picture books and opportunities of having stories told/read to them. These experiences are also important in extending vocabulary, and in increasing awareness of the different uses and functions of language. A wealth of opportunities to read and to share stories helps children in the creation of their own stories, and in their retelling of familiar stories. Children who are familiar with rhymes generally have a strong basis from which phonological awareness can develop. Play, and in particular role play, fantasy, and socio-dramatic play are important in giving children early literacy and numeracy opportunities, as outlined in more detail in section three. Through their efforts at mark-making and through the support of an adult or older child, they gradually develop standard writing skills. These are important foundations for reading and writing. Early experiences with books, when shared with caring adults, are also associated with emotional security and pleasure, and help nurture children’s sense of identity and belonging.

In terms of languages, most children learn to speak English in the home, and learn Irish when they start school. Other children learn Irish first, and learn English later. Some children may learn both languages simultaneously developing bilingually at an early age. Young children who speak Irish as part of their daily routine may live in the Gaeltacht, or may live in Irish-speaking homes throughout the country. An increasing number of children experience much of their early learning through the medium of Irish in national and in junior classes in Gaeltseanna. Adults can support their learning of Irish or English as an additional language by talking about objects and events in the immediate context using simple sentences. Other languages used by children in contemporary Ireland include Irish Sign Language, Irish Traveller Cant, and languages brought by newcomers such as refugees, asylum seekers and other persons. Children who speak these languages have access to a rich linguistic heritage, and can develop skills and awareness in more than one language.

The benefits to children of being bilingual at an early age include self-esteem, positive identity, and attitudes towards language learning, cognitive flexibility, increased problem-solving, and a greater metalinguistic awareness (Singh, Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). This makes it easier to learn other languages. These researchers also note that where children are sequentially bilingual (learning their second language later, for example, in school), it is important that they are supported in continuing to develop their home language because their second language development is dependent on this.

Children who are deaf and hard of hearing have enormous potential, both independently and with adult support, to communicate effectively and to overcome challenges. Babies born with a severe hearing loss will use the part of their brain which is used for language in hearing babies and adults, to extend the part generally used for vision (Karnsloff-Smith, 1994). Dockey and Mercer (1999) acknowledge there is increasing recognition that children who are deaf and hard of hearing need to develop their skills and competencies in the modalities of both sign and speech. There needs to be an awareness that these children also rely on other sources of information, for example visual and tactile sources. Whatever means of communication children develop, appropriate supports need to be provided by informed adults at the earliest opportunity.

Babies

Most babies are enthusiastic and highly motivated communicators. They engage in interactive communications through facial expressions, eye contact, vocalisations such as cooing and babbling, and physical gestures such as pointing. These provide the basis for more sophisticated communication later on. Adults can actively encourage socially referenced communication by talking and listening, by making eye contact, and by using facial expressions and other gestures. A sense of playfulness is important in these early communicative exchanges to encourage babies and to use communication in a fun and enjoyable manner. It also provides a context for developing social skills such as turn-taking.

As the communication system develops, babies’ early language reflects the “here and now” in terms of the significant people, experiences and objects in the baby’s environment. Adults can use books, pictures, posters, songs and nursery rhymes to further enhance this environment. Such an environment is important in extending babies’ language awareness and use. These opportunities have the additional purpose of initiating babies into particular social and cultural systems. This initiation is central to developing their sense of identity and belonging.

Other forms of communication and creative
SECTION 2 THE CHILD AS A LEARNER

Thematic Exploring and thinking

Exploring and thinking involves cognitive thinking, communication, sensory-motor skills, and physical development in order to investigate and make sense of the environment. Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for active exploration, and for interpreting this experience. In so doing, the child uses his/her intelligence and imagination to think in convergent and divergent ways. The attachments children have with significant adults in their lives act as a secure base for this exploration and thinking. When the child feels securely attached and/or in close proximity to his/her attachment figure(s), he/she feels safe and can engage in ‘exploratory behaviour’ (Holmes, 1993, p.432).

Building on earlier work by Piaget and others, Hutt (1979) suggested that children explore to find out what things do, and when they have discovered some of their properties, they play to find out what they themselves can do with these things. The curiosity of the child, as well as his/her ability to take risks in discovery, provides a firm basis on which creativity can be developed. The child may use various parts of the body such as fingers, hands, mouth, and so on to feel, touch, and explore items of interest. This exploration is carried out through play, and is related to the developing sense of self. It also leads to mark-making which serves as a signifier of his/her existence. The child will represent his/her world, and his/her interpretation of experience, with toys and other objects, as well as with more conventional mark-making tools such as crayons.

Young children can also benefit from hearing a second language spoken at regular predictable times of the day. Snack-time or a particular activity can be conducted through the second language so that children may gradually build up understanding and production of the associated language. Young children should also be encouraged to engage with and to respond to other forms of expression, for example music, dance, visual arts, and drama. This contributes significantly to the children’s understanding and ability to use language expressively. They also learn to express their own ideas, feelings, and understandings in symbolic form. Through drawing, painting, and making written marks, they become familiar with the dynamics of print, which helps them when learning to write later on. These experiences also enhance the children’s perception and knowledge of the world and their interactions with others. This helps in gaining multiple perspectives and a higher level of understanding.

Language increasingly becomes a way of learning for young children. They demonstrate an increasing capacity and desire to enter into conversations with both peers and adults. Alongside this, they show a growing ability to represent their thoughts and ideas symbolically in the form of pictures, numbers, and written words.

Conversations with young children naturally evolve to include more complex thought and language. They can be encouraged to question, discuss, describe, give reasons, and recount stories of their own experiences, or to retell stories. Young children should also experience language in an increasingly diverse range of forms, and will enjoy listening and responding to stories, poems, rhymes, action songs, and playing with words. At school this will involve both Irish and English. They will also benefit from a print-rich environment and from other aspects of an emergent literacy programme.

As the child develops physically, there are greater opportunities for active exploration. This exploration helps him/her to become increasingly aware of himself/herself as separate from others, while at the same time recognising how he/she is similar and different to others. Senses and movement enable the child to understand how things work in the environment, to engage with it in a playful and inquiring way, and to make connections. This in turn extends the child intellectually. Children also need to experience freedom of choice in exploratory play. This is an important foundation for the development of inner discipline, as well as a source of decision-making.
**FOCUS QUESTIONS**

How useful do you think it is to present learning through themes in the framework? Why/Why not?

Given children’s different abilities and needs, do you think presenting learning through themes has the potential to support all children in all areas of their learning?

Would you suggest alternative themes? If so, what themes?

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**2.6 Connections across curriculum guidance**

The child is the starting point for the adult in planning for and supporting his/her learning. Early childhood practitioners in Ireland have a long tradition of supporting this learning and development in the cognitive, creative, emotional, language, moral, personal, physical, social, and spiritual areas. The Framework for Early Learning will continue to support all these areas and in this way complement existing curriculum guidance and practices. The four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) are proposed for this purpose. They are based on understanding early learning as being holistic and integrated. They link naturally and coherently to the curriculum areas of the Primary School Curriculum (1999a), which is used to support most children’s learning as they progress through the education system.
The progression in early learning, as currently supported by the different curriculum guidance used in this country, is represented graphically in Figure 2.1. This outlines how the framework can embrace and complement current curriculum work, and provide coherent links with the later stages in children’s learning, primarily that supported by the Primary School Curriculum. The principles underpinning this curriculum, for example the uniqueness of the child, the integrated nature of the curriculum, the child as an active agent in his/her own learning, and the importance of learning being conceived and presented in a holistic way through themes and topics, correspond to many of those which emerge in this and in succeeding sections of this consultative document. These principles underpin how early learning should be supported. Continuity and progression in learning across early childhood is essential in supporting children to learn to their true potential.

2.7 Conclusion

This section focuses on the child as a learner and what he/she brings to the learning process. It proposes a thematic approach as a means of articulating learning in the framework. Four themes, which encompass all the developmental domains, are suggested and described. Section five gives more detail on the framework by elaborating on each theme through aims, goals, suggested learning experiences, and exemplars of learning.

Box 2.1: The child as a learner – emerging key principles in this section

- The child is an active learner, making sense of his/her environment through the senses, movement and language.
- The child learns within the context of warm and supportive attachments and relationships which encourage interaction, exploration and communication.
- Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning should be meaningful and relevant and linked to the child’s interests, strengths, and life experiences.
- Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive life-long implications.
- All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are equally important and are interwoven.

Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups.

The principles underpinning this curriculum, for example the uniqueness of the child, the integrated nature of the curriculum, the child as an active agent in his/her own learning, and the importance of learning being conceived and presented in a holistic way through themes and topics, correspond to many of those which emerge in this and in succeeding sections of this consultative document.
Play is a powerful context for learning.
3.1 Introduction to section three

Learning is a continuous process, which occurs within all the environments experienced by the young learner. During early childhood, children learn through their senses, and through active engagement with the people, the objects, events and experiences in these environments. This section explores relationships and play, as the key contexts for learning and demonstrates how they can support all children in their early learning. Through this exploration, the section elucidates the centrality of language as a tool for learning in both relationships and play. It also illustrates how learning through the four proposed themes for the framework—well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking—can be supported through relationships and play.

3.2 The child

Children have a fundamental need to be with familiar, loving adults and other children during early childhood. It is through these relationships that their basic needs for food, warmth, protection, and companionship are most often met. This inclination for social contact is instrumental in supporting and encouraging children as learners.

The importance of warm and trusting relationships in early childhood is immediately evident from birth. A newborn baby can be comforted by many, but he/she soon differentiates between people, and shows preference for primary caregivers. As discussed in section two, 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 to develop a sense of self and an identity, making learning more enjoyable, rewarding and successful. The security provided by these attachments also helps the child to develop a sense of self-confidence and assurance to explore and to express himself/herself. The child is also better equipped to cope with change, which may often involve frustration and uncertainty. This self-assured child is more resilient in adverse situations, both throughout early childhood, as well as in later childhood and adulthood.

Other relationships are also important for the child’s development. These include relationships with other adults as well as with peers. It is through all of these that early learning occurs. This supports the image of children as ‘social actors’ in the learning process since learning occurs when

…the child is interacting with people in his environment and in co-operation with peers.

(Vygotsky, 1978)

The young learner develops an understanding of the world through actions and by interpreting what he/she sees, hears, touches, tastes, and smells. The adult supports him/her in this interpretation of experiences and in using these interpretations to formulate and test hypotheses and arrive at new understandings. In this way understanding emerges and develops through the child’s own actions and interpretations, and through his/her interactions and partnerships with adults, and other children.

…we have begun to think again of the child as a social being – one who plays and talks with others, learns through interactions with parents and teachers – …because we have come once more to appreciate that through social life, the child acquires a framework for integrating experience, and learning how to negotiate meaning…”Making sense” is a social process…

(Bruner and Haste, 1987, p.1)

3.3 The child with the adult

Adults have the power to make a major difference to children’s lives and their development by what they offer to children and how they behave towards them...

(Lindon, 1993, p.75)

This statement captures the centrality of the adult in facilitating and extending a child’s learning. Farquhar (1995) argues that simply watching children grow and providing them with activities and objects does not qualify as supporting learning. The adult must play a proactive role. And it is the quality of his/her interactions with the child in this role which determines the actual impact on learning (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001).

Bruner (1978, 1996) describes the adult ‘scaffolding’ the child’s learning:

As a teacher, you do not wait for readiness; it happens; you foster or “scaffold” it by deepening the child’s powers at the stage where you find him or her now.

(Bruner, 1996, p.120)

The adult achieves this ‘scaffolding’ using many strategies as outlined in subsection 3.6. These usually involve talk and discussion with the child in contexts of mutual interest and enjoyment to support him/her in developing new ideas, discovering new information, modifying his/her thinking in light of this new information (Clay and Caedent, 1990), and in articulating his/her thinking. Such talk and discussion helps to reinforce and extend the child’s development in his/her first language, which is crucial for the child’s development in all other areas, especially emotionally and cognitively.

The adult carefully provides the degree of support required by the child, increasing or lessening it in accordance with the child’s growing confidence and achievement. Early learning is therefore enabled and enriched through a partnership based on the notion of interaction as tutoring (Bruner and Borstein, 1989; Wood, 1989). The adult plays a crucial role in this tutorial relationship by planning for the child’s learning, monitoring the child’s level of engagement with the task, and providing the support which ensures maximum challenge and enables new learning to occur (McGough, 2002). Reciprocity is pivotal in this relationship, whereby sometimes the child leads the learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and sometimes the adult leads...
through planned and guided activities. In this way, the child is pro-active and purposefully engaged in the learning process supported and guided by the adult.

Laevers (1995) identifies three central elements of quality in adult-child interactions. He proposes that autonomy is crucial, promoting independence, self-initiative and purposeful engagement in the learning process supported and guided by the adult.

The Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) provide additional insights into the nature of the interactions adults should have with children. The guidelines state that in their relationships, children need to:
- Experience sensitivity from adults
- Experience adult support to help them think, make choices, and negotiate conflict in developmentally appropriate ways
- Mix meaningfully with others
- Experience a sense of self-worth and self-importance
- Be enabled to understand, respect and celebrate difference
- Be supported in developing sensitivity to others.

The adult enhances early learning through a respectful understanding of the uniqueness of each child. Using this information, he/she plans for and supports the child’s present learning, and plans for the next stages in an informed manner. This involves the adult in reflective practice, in which he/she continuously observes and strives to understand the child’s learning, evaluates his/her own role and actions, and adapts future interactions to reflect these insights. This reflective practice is detailed in section four, enabling the adult to appropriately support learning for each child.

The practitioner plays an additional important role in the case of children who experience difficulties in learning. Because of his/her expert knowledge and experiences, the practitioner is often the first to become aware of potential learning disabilities and/or developmental delays. If unattended, these can impact negatively on the child’s experiences as a learner and on his/her progression in learning. In collaboration with the parents/guardians, the practitioner can help to arrange the involvement of specialist professionals such as a nurse, paediatrician, psychologist, specialist teacher or therapist to provide the appropriate services to the child and the family. Section four presents a more detailed discussion of supporting children with special educational needs.

The child and his/her parents/guardians

Parents/guardians have enormous influence on their children’s lives, and especially during the early months and years (Ball, 1994). The Primary School Curriculum (1999a) states that parents/guardians are the children’s primary educators, laying the foundations for all learning. Their relationships with their children are qualitatively different from the relationships children develop with other adults. The care and attention children receive from their parents/guardians, and the examples they are given, have a powerful impact on their formation as young learners.

As learning is more pronounced and much faster in the early years of life, parents/guardians play a key role in helping children to learn and to develop in all areas: physical, emotional, social, language, cognition, moral, spiritual, and so on. They achieve this through their relationships, conversations, activities, and their routines with their children. These include listening and talking to their children about what they are doing and experiencing, reading, telling and discussing stories, rhymes and poems, involving children in real-life activities such as setting the table and shopping, and playing with their children in a range of activities. Important opportunities also include parents/guardians partnering their children in singing, playing music and responding to rhythms, and in outdoor adventures such as walks and trips, exploring and interacting with trees, rocks, sounds, textures, buildings, trees, flowers, animals, vehicles, people, and noises in the environment. In this way, parents/guardians support children’s learning in a manner which is fun, appealing, and relevant to their children’s lives.

Given the tremendous influence parents/guardians can have on their children’s early learning, it is imperative that parents/guardians and practitioners communicate and collaborate where children attend out-of-home settings. Communication built on mutual respect can have a positive impact on learning. Research indicates that where parents/guardians are actively encouraged and become involved in their children’s learning in out-of-home settings, there are substantial gains for all. These gains include enhanced parental understanding of appropriate early learning experiences, and positive influences on cognitive and social development that improve children’s later educational success. It is especially true in the case of children who are experiencing educational disadvantages where the provision for their early learning is of a high quality (Fent and Saunders, 1991; Schwenhut and Welsart, 1997; Lesean, 1998). Hayes, O’Flaherty and Kemen (1997) suggest that the quality of early learning is influenced by the extent to which parents/guardians and practitioners communicate. Supportive and trusting relationships enable parents/guardians and practitioners to share information, insights, and assessments which are important in planning learning experiences based on appropriate goals and priorities. This approach better supports and encourages all children.

In the case of children with special educational needs, parents/guardians often need to be supported by other specialists such as therapists, who play a critical role in helping them to establish effective early interactions with their children. It is essential that such information is co-ordinated and presented to parents/guardians in a way that takes cognisance of the wider family needs. The early childhood practitioner is often instrumental in this process. This partnership between parents/guardians, practitioners and other professionals is explored in more detail in section four.
The child and other children

Children learn with and from each other. They play and talk together about what they are seeing, hearing, doing, feeling and thinking as they share ideas and thoughts. This sharing of experiences and information can in turn accelerate each child’s learning, and help him/her towards an understanding of different perspectives and in developing a ‘theory of mind’ (Bruce, 1996), i.e., an understanding of the way others think and feel. In this way, interactions with peers can contribute positively to the child’s sense of self and sense of others as he/she becomes aware of the connections, similarities and differences between his/her world and the world of others. This is particularly important as Ireland’s population becomes increasingly multi-cultural. Building learning partnerships with peers then helps children to establish a sense of identity and belonging, a theme suggested for the Framework for Early Learning. This in turn helps children’s social development as they interact with others (Bee, 1992).

The adult should, where possible, create opportunities for children to interact with, and to learn from each other. Children need opportunities to play and to talk together. Sensitive and carefully timed input by the adult to these peer interactions can extend and enrich learning at appropriate levels for each child.

PLAY AS A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

In viewing early learning through the relationships lens, this document emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of that learning. Play too is considered a critical context and can support all aspects of the child’s learning and development. This section now explores how this is achieved.

3.5 Learning through play

Bruce describes play as the ‘highest form of learning in early childhood’ (2001, p.128). There has been a misleading tendency to present play as the opposite to work, endowing it as trivial and non-serious. A more helpful approach is to view play along a continuum from pure play to non-play (Moyles, 1994). This presents play as a process ‘an approach to action’ (Bruner, 1977, p.4). As a process, we can analyse the different types of play children enjoy and engage in, and how, through adult involvement, these can facilitate learning. This analysis highlights the importance of language in facilitating children’s play, and the role of play in supporting the development and use of language.

A useful typology in analysing the diversity of children’s play is that offered by Hutt (1979). (See Figure 3.1.) This typology presents three main types of play:

- **Epistemic** - This refers to exploratory play in which children handle objects and materials, and gather knowledge through their senses. This play is fuelled by children’s natural curiosity and inquisitiveness as they search for understanding. The knowledge they acquire through their explorations forms the basis for further knowledge and understanding, which is crucial for them in hypothesising, developing and testing ideas, and in problem-solving. Exploratory play also provides purposeful practice of fine and gross motor skills.

- **Ludic** - This refers to children’s imaginative, fantasy and socio-dramatic play in which they use their developing language to move from thinking in concrete terms to thinking in the abstract. This is shown in the possibilities they create for the future through ‘pretend’ scenarios. They practise and rehearse roles, events, situations, and possibilities through this play.

- **Games with rules** - Children design their own simple games with negotiated rules. In time, they partake in more conventional games with ‘external’ rules such as word and number games, matching or board games, and more physical games such as skittles, hopscotch and football.

This diversity in play is important in supporting all aspects of learning and development. Lally (1991, pp.72-74) writes about play offering children opportunities to ‘explore and discover, construct, repeat and consolidate, represent, create, imagine, socialise.’ But play which supports this learning does not just happen. The adult is central in this process, emphasising the link between relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

Drawing on a wealth of literature (Bruner, 1977; Moyles, 1989 and 1994; Pellegrini and Boyd, 1993; Lindon, 1993 and 2001; Bruce, 1996 and 2001; Sayerd and Guerin, 2000), this document now explores the many ways in which play can support learning across the continuum of children’s ability. Many factors have the potential to restrict play in a way which limits its scope in extending learning for some children. Developmental delays and disabilities as well as illnesses can have a profound impact on children’s capabilities to play and on the types of play possible for them. Through careful planning, the adult can reduce the potential impact of these factors, enabling the children to reap increased benefits from play, including the sense of exciting enjoyment so often experienced and displayed by children in their early play. This adult support is also critical in introducing the children to a greater range of play in furthering their development.

While the following pages explore and expand on some of the main ways in which play can support early learning, it is important to remember the holistic and integrated nature of learning. Learning and development in one area such as...
as the physical area, is influenced by and impacts on learning and development in other areas. This is highlighted in section two.

Box 3.1: Learning through play

Play enables children to:
- develop imagination and creativity
- develop an ability to manage emotions
- develop as thinkers
- develop physically
- develop language
- learn to use symbols by laying the foundations for becoming proficient users of various symbolic systems, including literary and numerical systems
- develop social skills, and to develop morally and spiritually.

Children develop imagination and creativity

Play is "a forward feed mechanism into courageous, creative and rigorous thinking in adulthood" (Bruce, 1999, p.40). It enables children to operate at a level beyond their current ability, and to fill roles, exist in situations, environments and even worlds outside their everyday lives (Bruner, 1976; Vygotsky, 1976).

Socio-dramatic play, fantasy, and role-play in particular provide opportunities for children to use their real-life experiences in imaginative and creative ways. Here children can operate beyond their means and shape their own destiny, albeit a pretend destiny. For example, play enables children to 'drive' or to 'build a house' before they are physically and mentally capable of doing so. It enables them to create worlds from their imagination, their interpretation of stories, pictures, programmes, and adventures, and to manage and dictate the happenings in those worlds. This might include children having lunch with the pig, the dog and the cat who refused to assist Little Red Hen in the process of growing grain and baking her cake of bread. It might also involve children in conversing and playing with imaginary characters, determining the actions, thoughts and words of those characters, or in entering the world of dinosaurs, princes and princesses, space aliens, and animals. In contrast, children may become adults in their creative and imaginative play by role-playing shop assistants, post-office personnel, bus/train drivers, fishermen and women, doctors, pop-stars, or personalities well-known to them. Children may also demonstrate their evolving creative and imaginative capacities through "art play" such as painting, drawing, claydough modelling, constructing, and moving to music. These experiences help children to develop perspective or a "theory of mind".

These roles and situations draw on the children's own experiences, but they also frequently reflect a creative and imaginative interpretation of these experiences. This creativity and imagination emerge with the children's growing ability to create and to communicate a past and a future as distinct from a present, and in doing so, to make play more complex and sophisticated. This communication will occur through actions and scripts (words) (Meek, 1991). For example, the child may have a conversation on the 'phone' i.e. the small cardboard box which, for now, symbolises the phone. The child may 'feed' the cuddly bears, enact the construction of the apartment block, or dramatise the story of Cinderella and speculate about the lives of the ugly sisters. Children draw on their personal experiences in developing the scripts they use in their play, highlighting again how language supports play. Children who enjoy very rich language experiences through conversations, stories, rhymes, songs, poems and so on, usually show great variety and richness of language as well as ideas in their scripts. Where children don't have these literary experiences to draw on, the adult needs to provide stimuli for imaginative and creative play through stories, discussions, rhymes, songs, and adult-child dialogue about pictures, objects and events. Supporting children's creativity and imagination in play is also important in encouraging them to be flexible and imaginative thinkers.

Children learn to deal with emotions

Managing emotions is an integral part of daily life. Like the development of physical skills, thinking, and language, children need support and assistance in learning how to deal with their feelings.

Play has important therapeutic qualities. It enables children to escape the realities, the challenges, and the difficulties in their lives, and imaginatively and wishfully create their own destiny. As children draw on their own experiences, feelings and thoughts to 'create' these play scenarios, it is natural for them to express and to enact experiences that may be confusing, upsetting or even distressing for them. They often find play a much easier and less threatening context for articulating their innermost thoughts than through discussion alone. While play itself will not necessarily eliminate difficult feelings, it will help children to manage their emotions and to develop an understanding of others' feelings and associated behaviours. Children with significant behavioural difficulties may need sensitive guidance from an adult to enable them to deal with emotions, both their own and those of other children, that arise during play.
Children develop as thinkers ...

...children move from a state of almost complete helplessness to a stage where they are articulate, reasoning human beings, constructing many complex hypotheses about the way the world works.

(Hall, 1987, p.73)

Children learn about their world through their relentless exploration. This exploration yields information about how things work and the connections between things and people. Through informed collaboration with the child, the adult supports him/her in interpreting this information through talk and discussion, and in using it to solve problems, to reason and to infer as he/she creates "working theories" about the world. These theories evolve and change as more information obtained through play experiences is applied to existing thoughts and ideas, extending them or even radically altering them. This necessitates changes in children's thinking to accommodate new information and new perspectives. The level of this adult support is related to the individual child's capacity for understanding and interpreting, and his/her ability to actively explore the environment, with some children requiring more intensive and sustained input by the adult than others.

Subsection 3.3 emphasises the importance of the quality of the adult's interactions with the child. This reference to quality resonates loudly with regard to the adult's critical role in supporting the child's thinking through play and helping him/her towards higher-order thinking (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1987). Using challenging and motivating play experiences such as sorting shape objects, filling and emptying containers, constructing tall and steady towers, filling food orders in the pretend restaurant, or designing and building a moving vehicle to transport "loads" from one place to another, the adult gently encourages the child to think through and to analyse ideas, and to work with others to solve problems (Moyles, 1989). This level of thinking develops children's logic, perseverance, and concentrated thought. Vygotsky argues that in play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.

(1976, p.552)

Vygotsky's perspective suggests that the child's thinking is more sophisticated and more complex when he/she is engaged in play experiences. Bruner (1976) suggests that this may be as a result of play providing more freedom to explore, to experiment with, and to trial real-life activities and events without the fear of error or embarrassment. These "safe" conditions can motivate and enable the child to organise his/her actions and problem-solving strategies to achieve higher levels of performance (Bruner, 1976).

Play, enriched and supported through an appropriate level of adult input, thus enables children to order and co-ordinate their thinking and learning. This thinking and learning are based on the information available to children from their environment, and their ability both alone and with varying degrees of adult assistance to process this information in constructing new knowledge.

Children develop, practise and refine physical skills and competencies

Early childhood is a critical time for the development, practice and refinement of physical skills and competencies. During this time, all children need support and opportunities to develop a range of gross and fine motor skills, and to develop increasing levels of dexterity, co-ordination, sophistication and control in their movements. Some of the most effective strategies for achieving this development are repetition and challenge in play.

Play naturally accommodates repetitive and challenging behaviour in an enjoyable, familiar and interesting way. Repetitive and practice play supports children across the spectrum of physical ability in developing a sense of mastery and competence, reaching the understanding that they have conquered a particular skill. Early opportunities to reach, to grasp, to lift, to drop, to explore through movement and the senses, and to push/pull objects are critical in using and strengthening muscles, and in developing fine and gross motor movements. These lay the foundations for more sophisticated and co-ordinated movements such as crawling, walking, climbing, jumping, hopping, skipping, cycling, swimming and so on, which children can also develop through play experiences. These experiences might include play scenarios involving "wheelie" toys such as shopping trolleys, prams, and wheelbarrows which require children to push while walking. Other play situations might involve children using climbing frames, tunnels and skipping ropes, balancing on objects, and developing ball skills such as throwing, catching, bouncing, batting and so on. They may also provide opportunities to cut, to use paint brushes, writing implements, blocks, jigsaws and puzzles, as well as ICT games, all of which encourage good hand-eye co-ordination. Adult strategies such as modelling, task analysis (breaking the skill into component parts), and enabling through the provision of physical support are important in providing children with the appropriate encouragement and guidance to develop physically. While all children will require some adult involvement, children with physical disabilities/disabilities benefit from focused and sometimes intensive adult support. This will often necessitate more direct and sustained input in their play.

Children develop language

Section two highlights how most children progress to using language as their dominant form of communication. Language enables them to learn through asking questions, talking about ideas, events, people, and places, devising theories and searching for answers, as well as displaying what they have learned. Play enriched by an adult is a wonderful context for learning language, as well as learning through language.

Children have learned. Play enriched by an adult is a wonderful context for learning language, as well as learning through language.

As children develop, different types of play become important in further supporting their acquisition of language, and their use of language as a means of learning about their environments. For example, in role, socio-dramatic, and fantasy play, children use their language experiences to create the "scripts" for their play. In construction and exploratory play, children articulate and share their ideas and "discoveries", and indicate how their thinking is changing due to new experiences, highlighting the intricate link between language and thinking and play's potential to support both. Through participation in the play and/or support while remaining outside the play scenarios, the adult can extend children's vocabulary and model language usage. This is especially important for children experiencing language delay or disability, who need more focused and intensive support in developing their language in early childhood. It is also critical for children whose first language is neither Irish nor English, so that they develop communicative competence and confidence in Irish and/or English. Play also creates opportunities for children to practise the cultural conventions of language use such as turn-taking, eye contact and the use of tone to express emotions. These opportunities see children using and extending language they have heard and learned from more competent language users in an active, functional, and enjoyable way.

Play is also an opportune context for having fun with language. This can involve children in creating nonsense words and in creating a nonsense language understood by the child alone or in partnership with others. It can also include children experimenting with rhyming patterns, in using and creating rhyming stories, in reciting riddles and tongue twisters, singing songs, and in composing sound-effects to accompany stories.
and songs, as well as playing with voices in puppet play and in socio-dramatic and fantasy play. These activities again draw upon and build on children's everyday language experiences, necessitating some children to be supported more intensely by adults in their play with language.

As outlined, this document uses the term language to refer to oral, written and manual communication. Where children are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or partially sighted, the adult can help ensure that their play supports the development of appropriate communication systems. This is especially important in early childhood given the existence of "sensitive periods" in language development.

**Children learn to use symbols**

Most children become competent at using symbols in early childhood. Using and understanding symbols marks their emerging ability to think beyond the here and now, and to imagine the future. This is understood as representational thought.

Life presents children with many symbol systems to master, for example, literacy and numeracy. Each one is a particular code which children must understand in order to use. As play is children's re-enactment of their life experiences, it offers many natural opportunities to use the codes in contexts which are purposeful and meaningful, and fun. Importantly, play creates situations which help to promote and develop children's literacy skills and strategies, and it serves as a language experience through which children can build connections between oral and written modes of expression (Roskos and Christie, 2001).

Recent years have brought a rethinking about how children develop as symbol-users. The idea of being "ready" for literacy and numeracy has been replaced with the "emergent" perspective. This new focus recognises literacy and numeracy as key constituents of early play experiences, and the importance of these experiences in cementing the knowledge and practices in the two systems for children. Examples of this early play include pretending to read, writing pretend prescriptions and letters through marks, scribbles and patterns, calculating how much items cost in the pretend shop, estimating how high the 'bridge' needs to be to allow toy cars travel over the sand-pit, and calculating how many bags of animal feed the farmer needs to feed his cows during the winter. Social experiences such as being read to, retelling stories, sharing rhymes, and songs also support children's development as symbol-users. Play experiences such as these contribute to developing the thinking processes children need in later reading, writing (Roskos and Christie, 2001) and mathematics.

As with thinking and language, play does not automatically support and promote children's emergent literacy and numeracy. The adult can encourage these play experiences and enhance them through discussion, suggestions and problem-solving. He/she can also ensure the provision of appealing literacy and numeracy play materials such as books, pictures, jigsaw, matching puzzles, a range of writing implements, paper, posters, songs, pretend money, signs for shops, road-signs, measuring tapes, thermometers, weighing scales, clocks, and so on. Children who enjoy rich experiences of literacy and numeracy, will incorporate these experiences into their play, and extend and adapt them. But as always, the adult must be mindful that some children will require more deliberate and structured support in developing this play. This is particularly so for children who have fewer 'natural' literacy and numeracy experiences in their daily lives, and for those who have particular disabilities and/or developmental delays which impact on their use and understanding of literacy and numeracy.

Play then is central in developing children as symbol-users. It enables them to experience and rehearse the relevance of the symbol systems, but more importantly, to enjoy and develop early competence in using them. This enjoyment and sense of accomplishment are crucial in laying foundations for later learning in literacy and numeracy.

Children develop socially, morally and spiritually

Children's play reflects their family life, and the community and society in which they live. Play then helps them to learn about what is socially and morally acceptable. This learning helps children to interact with others in ways which are appropriate to their culture and society. Play also introduces children to and develops their sense of spirituality. This can be seen in play situations such as observing and learning about the small birds feeding on the breadcrumbs, or the leaves whirling fast in the wind, exploring the minibeasts in the soil, and picking flowers, as well as in day-to-day loving and caring relationships with others. These activities and social contexts can help nurture a sense of reverence and respect for living things.

As with children's imaginative and creative development, a 'theory of mind' is central to their socialisation and their moral and spiritual development. Play helps children to recognise and to understand that others can and often do think differently to them. This understanding of perspectives can be greatly facilitated through play where children present and hear different ideas, suggestions, and descriptions of the same situation or person, all of which reflect personal interpretations. Hearing these differences alerts children to the existence of diverse perspectives. It is also important that the play environment, its materials, and its playthings reflect different cultures, so that children grow and develop in an environment which presents difference as being a natural and essential part of life, as outlined later in subsection 3.7. The adult, in his/her interactions with the children, plays a particularly central role in reinforcing difference as a positive characteristic of daily life.

The dynamism and interaction between these different functions of play combine to make play personally meaningful, purposeful, and enjoyable for children. Play of this calibre can be referred to as 'free-flow play' (Bruce, 1991, 1996) in which children 'wallow' in their ideas, emotions, and relationships. This play engages children in learning at a deep level in which they demonstrate and use the skills and competencies they learned previously to achieve new learning. Engaging children in this deep level learning is the ultimate goal in supporting them as young learners.
when trying to support a quiet/shy child who lacks confidence to partake in play such as socio-dramatic or role-play, or who is reluctant to explore an unfamiliar play setting. If it is decided that the child does not learn to play well...

(Bruce, 1996, p.3)

Timely adult involvement is important for all children, and as this document emphasises, some children will require more focused and sustained involvement than others. Children are generally highly receptive to this involvement and indeed will often seek it. This involvement can create opportunities for a sense of shared focus in the play which is important in enhancing early learning (Rogoff, 1990).

The adult's relationship with children in play Heaslop (1994) describes the adult's role in children's play as being pro-active. Play can naturally stagnate as children replay situations and activities with little development in their play (although, as we have already seen, repetition is a valid and important learning strategy for children). The adult has a role in guiding and enriching learning by ensuring that children's play experiences are challenging and show development and increasing sophistication, while remaining enjoyable and purposeful, reflecting an appropriate stage in their development and learning.

Strategies for the adult
Adult involvement in children's play sees the adult alternate between manager, enabler/guide and player. In fulfilling these roles, he/she uses a number of strategies. Common to all these strategies is the idea of the adult 'scaffolding' learning (see subsection 3.3) making it challenging and achievable for each child.

Modelling
The adult is an active participant in the children's play and in their discussions. This might involve him/her modelling how a role might be enacted, how an object might be manipulated or used, or introducing new word/phrases in a meaningful context. This strategy can be particularly helpful when trying to support a quiet/shy child who lacks confidence to partake in play such as socio-dramatic or role-play, or who is reluctant to explore an unfamiliar object/material. It can also be very effective in assisting a child with a learning disability, as the adult encourages the child to imitate a movement or an action, or to repeat a phrase or a word. Through modelling, the adult can encourage the child to enter the play situation at a level which is comfortable and appealing to him/her.

Facilitating
The adult provides materials and props, appropriate nudges, cues, suggestions and so forth without dominating children's play or imposing a passive role upon them. Facilitating and encouraging play also happens through the positive and focused use of conversation. Using children's own ideas as a starting point, the adult provides suggestions and alternatives to develop and extend their play and language. He/she can also provide new word/phrases which can add a new direction or dimension to the play. This richer base opens up more play and language possibilities for the children, and in turn more learning.

Enabling
Play, particularly with peers, does not come naturally to all children. Some children can feel unsure in the play situation, for example, they can have difficulty exploring or manipulating objects and materials, expressing thoughts and ideas or in entering into roles. An observant and sensitive adult adopts the role of enabler to assist these children in playing with others, and in being seen and accepted by peers as a contributing player. This may involve becoming a player and remaining with the child for an extended period of time, eventually reducing his/her involvement as the child gains in confidence and ability to contribute to the play. It may also involve the adult in the process of task analysis where he/she breaks the play activity into simple discrete steps for the child. Alternatively, the adult may need to revert back to a previous play experience to build the child's confidence and to make a concrete link with the new play experience. For example, if a child is experiencing difficulty with the action of jumping, the adult may encourage him/her to bounce on a trampoline to experience the sensation of jumping, and to learn to master the necessary movements.

Playing
The adult, on invitation by the child, or by his/her own initiative, becomes an active participant in the child's play. In this role, he/she may model new actions/movements, introduce new ideas/characters, ask questions, or suggest new directions to encourage the children to take risks, to be adventurous and curious, and to express their ideas and thinking in their learning. This articulation can require children to think through their actions and ideas, to be clear, to sequence their thoughts, and to be analytical, bringing them towards higher-order thinking, when learning is potentially deep. Initiating, encouraging, and extending talk and discussion in this way can be very helpful in extending children's learning. Direct involvement in children's play as a player is a particularly effective strategy for children whose capacity for play is impacted by disability/developmental delay or illness. In this case, the adult is an important partner in the child's play, building his/her confidence and using insights into the child's learning, focusing on critical learning moments in the play.

Observing and listening
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 play scripts and discussions. These strategies help the adult to understand the play - its context, its '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. As an observer and listener, the adult will also be aware of breakdowns in play, and where necessary, intervene to facilitate children in their resolution of conflict.

Structuring
Careful and attentive planning, designing, organising, resourcing, and evaluating are important if the environment is to help all children to learn through play. These tasks involve the adult in structuring the outdoor and indoor environments so that there is challenge, relevance, and progression in learning. This responsibility to provide an appropriate environment is explored in more detail in the next subsection.

SECTION 3 CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING

3.6 Linking the two contexts - relationships and play

Play is a natural and enjoyable way for children to learn, but as this section demonstrates, this learning does not happen automatically...

...play cannot be left to just natural development. If it is decided that children do not learn to play well...

(Bruce, 1996, p.3)

Play is a natural and enjoyable way for children to learn, but as this section demonstrates, this learning does not happen automatically. ...play cannot be left to just natural development. If it is decided that children do not learn to play well...

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(Bruce, 1996, p.3)
No one strategy will help individual children to learn optimally. It is only through a careful mix of the different strategies that each child can be supported in a way which meets his/her individual learning needs.

**Level and intensity of adult involvement**

This document repeatedly emphasises the particular importance of the adult-child relationship in supporting children's learning. It equally highlights the fact that the level of input by the adult to the child's learning varies considerably from one child to another.

As articulated in section one, the Framework for Early Learning will support all children in their learning. Each child is a unique individual requiring levels of support and encouragement dictated by his/her ability, strengths and needs as a learner. Some children require significant adult input for extended periods of time, while others will require less, and for different timeframes. Through continual assessment of the child at play, the sensitive and caring adult makes informed decisions about how best he/she can support the child in a responsible and nurturing manner.

In making these key decisions, the adult focuses on reciprocity, a principle outlined earlier in subsection 3.3. This strategy foregrounds respect for the child's own play and creativity. This is achieved by ensuring that the playthings, equipment, resources, stories, songs, music and games, language, and everyday routines and activities reflect the diversity of children's identities. This is especially important in out-of-home settings which increasingly have children of different cultures, languages and abilities. These children will have different interests, needs and experiences. The learning environment needs to support each child's developing sense of self-worth, as well as nurturing an understanding of and respect for difference. As section two highlights, the evolution of a positive sense of well-being, identity and belonging is critical for each child's success as a learner. In nurturing these feelings, the outdoor and indoor environments develop children's confidence to express themselves, to make choices, to test ideas, to develop and practise skills, to make discoveries, and to persevere in the face of difficulty and uncertainty.

Reflecting the importance of relationships and play as central contexts for learning, both the outdoor and indoor environments should support interactions between children, and between children and adults. As expressed in subsection 3.6, children's ready access to the adult for assistance, assurance and encouragement is critical. In this way, the adult is an integral part of the environment. The environment should also support the range of children's play. One common strategy in out-of-home settings is to organise the environment in 'learning areas/rooms/centres/bays' with each supporting a particular type(s) of play.

Time and space are also important considerations. Children need sufficient time to enter into play, develop and sustain it in order to reach a level of intense concentration and involvement. This is when deep level learning or learning of a high quality occurs. Alongside this, the environment needs to cater for children's resting, toileting and feeding needs, as well as their need to be physically active and to expend energy.

Planning is required to ensure that the environment is inclusive. This may involve making resources and equipment accessible at certain heights. For example, resources should be stored/accessed at an appropriate height suitable for children in wheelchairs. Specific types of resources may be desirable, for example, equipment and playthings with strong visual, kinesthetic or auditory qualities. This is especially important for children with sensory impairments. The size of playthings may be particularly important for children who experience difficulty with co-ordination and manipulative skills. Retaining resources and equipment in the same areas of the learning environment is especially important for children who are blind or who have a sight loss. As before, the adult who is sensitive to children's individual needs is able to shape the environment to meet those needs.

Creating an optimal learning environment for each child requires significant energy and time from the adult. Time for planning, designing, organising, resourcing and evaluating should be an integral part of his/her daily routine. A variety of curriculum guidance used in Ireland provides support and advice for the adult in these tasks.

**3.8 Conclusion**

Relationships and play are two central contexts for all children's early learning. The adult-child relationship, in particular is critical. The adult carefully scaffolds the child's learning so that he/she has exciting, fun and positive experiences through which new ideas and skills are developed, and new thinking emerges. Much of this learning occurs through play. Skilled and thoughtful intervention by the adult can enrich and extend children's play in ways that support all aspects of their learning and development. This is achieved through respectful, loving and caring relationships between the child and the adult. Both relationships and play are ideal contexts for supporting learning organised through the themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking.

**Box 3.2: Contexts for learning – emerging key principles in this section**

- Children learn through actions and interactions with others.
- The adult is central in supporting children to learn through quality interactions.
- Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children's early learning.
- Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners enhances children's learning.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.
Assessment of children’s early learning is integrated into the adult’s daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
4.1 Introduction to section four

This section highlights the valuable educational potential of assessment in supporting and extending early learning. It begins with an outline of the role and functions of assessment, and proceeds by exploring the importance of assessing learning in context. It identifies and discusses some of the primary sources of information on how well children are learning.

4.2 The role of assessment

Assessment in early childhood should primarily be informal, forming a routine part of day-to-day interactions and observations. Drummond’s definition is helpful in capturing the essence of assessment in the early childhood setting. She sees assessment as being the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children’s learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use.

(1993, p.13)

This approach reflects not only how practitioners use assessment information, but also how parents/guardians and childminders naturally and instinctively use it in enhancing children’s learning.

Identifying and monitoring learning forms an integral part of the dynamic process of planning for learning. In early childhood, we are primarily concerned with how the assessment process can lead us to a deeper level of understanding of learning from the perspective of a baby, toddler, and young child. This deeper understanding better enables us to nurture and enhance learning in the early years through responding to children’s changing abilities, interests and needs. Such an approach results in an individually responsive curriculum. Future learning is facilitated and supported while past and present learning is celebrated, affirmed and praised.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

What are the benefits in assessing children’s early learning?

What challenge(s), if any, does this assessment pose?

4.3 Functions of assessment

Assessment can have formative, summative, evaluative, and diagnostic functions. It helps the adult to understand, appreciate and identify what the child is learning, the connections the child is making while interacting with people, places and things, and the ways in which this learning is occurring. Each child’s progress should be seen in terms of his/her previous learning, taking into account all the factors that might influence learning at a particular time.

Formative assessment is a continuous process that informs the next stages in children’s learning, and this has considerable relevance in the early learning context. Summative assessment, or assessment of learning, is concerned with a more formal, cumulative record of the child’s learning at different stages in his/her development. Assessment can also have an evaluative function, enabling practitioners to appraise the effectiveness or appropriateness of their practice. The diagnostic function of assessment is important in the early diagnosis of special educational needs, the identification of necessary resources and the formulation of suitable learning strategies. All of these functions can be accommodated in the context of ‘assessment for learning’. The next subsections explore the functions of assessment in more detail.

4.4 What to assess

In exploring what should be assessed, it is necessary to make the important assessable, rather than making the assessable important. Assessment practices in early childhood have often succumbed to downward pressure from later educational stages, both in the design and purpose of their tools and processes. In this way, practices have often reflected a concentration on checklists and tick-boxes as a means of summarising and understanding a child’s progress and achievement in learning. This approach is undermined by a view that learning is linear and sequential, and fails to appreciate the complexity and dynamism of early learning.

The developmental milestones model is contentious in its presentation of developmental achievements by certain ages in a child’s early life. Nonetheless, it is valuable in assisting the early identification of children with special educational needs. Adults therefore should be familiar with broad developmental milestones as general indicators of a child’s development while exercising caution in the application of these. While close observation and monitoring are important, consideration should always be given to the individuality of each child. This individuality results in children arriving at developmental milestones in their own time and at their own pace. Such personal variations in development are to some extent influenced by individual learning dispositions and environmental factors.

Profiles such as those developed in the Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) can help to focus the adult’s attention on the characteristics that define each child as an individual. Assessment of all of these aspects of learning will create a more accurate picture of each child as a learner.

Learning in context

In assessing children’s early learning, the adult attempts to understand learning from the child’s perspective. In doing this, it is necessary for the adult to remember that each child lives in and learns from a particular social, cultural and physical environment. This environment has a significant impact on what the child learns and understands.

Awareness and consideration of the many different factors that influence what a child learns helps to avoid the risk of over-simplification. Understanding learning as a series of unrelated, isolated incidents does not appreciate the richness and intricacy of learning. This can in turn result in a lack of recognition for the actual learning being achieved by the young learner. It is therefore imperative that assessments are made over time and in the context of a wide range of meaningful learning opportunities.

As play and relationships are key contexts for learning (as detailed in section three), they offer valuable opportunities for the adult in supporting early learning through the process of assessment. Hayes (2003) argues that ‘the child is making sense of the world through play, the adult can use play to make sense of the child’s learning. She argues that this dual role for play allows for positive interactions between child and adult, but also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child’s own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the child as central.

(2003, p. 79)

4.5 Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning is concerned with using the information gained through the various modes of assessment to extend and enhance the child’s learning in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the young learner. The different functions of assessment need to be accommodated in as informal and as natural a way as possible.

Assessment for learning is best carried out in the context of a supportive, trusting, respectful and caring relationship between the adult and the child. This relationship better enables the adult...
to observe the child, to talk meaningfully with the child, and to share purposefully in his/her learning. By interacting with the child in this way, the adult can support, gently challenge and draw out the child’s ideas about activities and concepts, about situations and relationships between objects and people in the child’s environment. Using these approaches the adult becomes adept at observing and noticing critical moments where he/she can extend the child’s learning through sensitive guidance and cooperation. Such shared activities should move towards empowering the child as a learner where ‘the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In reflecting, the adult tries to understand what he/she is seeing and hearing. He/she then uses these insights to affirm the present learning and to plan for its progression in a positive direction that is meaningful to the young learner. In this way, assessment is an essential and natural part of the daily routine of adults working with children.

There are many different sources of information on the child’s learning. It is through an eclectic combination of these that an accurate picture is created of each child’s learning, showing the ways in which learning can be supported appropriately into the future. These sources include:

- assessment by practitioners
- self-assessment (child’s own assessment of learning)
- assessment by parents/guardians
- assessment by other professionals.

**Practitioners**

Carr (2001) suggests that a narrative approach (a story-telling approach) to assessment helps to identify and reflect more accurately the learning as experienced and displayed by the young learner. In her work in developing appropriate assessment strategies for use with children from birth, she looked for a way to ‘find something that was part of enjoying the company of young children’ (2001, p.4). Her narrative approach places learning in a particular social and cultural context, at a particular time and in the presence of particular people and objects. This makes it easier for the observed learning to be understood from the learner’s perspective.

Narrative assessment requires the ‘story of learning’ to be known and understood. This means that learning is seen as a process, evolving and changing over time. Judgements are therefore made over a prolonged period and in collaboration with the child and, where possible, with other adults. To understand the ‘story of learning’ the adult must observe, actively listen and talk with the child. The practitioner’s experience and training assist him/her in structuring and deciding on what to document. This informed judgement, based on an understanding of children’s general and particular learning needs, enables the adult to construct the learning stories and to use these to promote further learning.

A team effort helps to validate interpretations and co-construct the way forward. Where children attend settings outside the home, it is essential that parents/guardians are involved in this assessment. Making judgements in this way helps the adult to arrive at an in-depth understanding of how learning is actualised by the young learner. Assessment therefore should be a continuous, informal process.

**Self-assessment**

As children progress through early childhood, they become increasingly able to assess their own learning, showing the ways in which learning can be supported appropriately into the future. These sources include:

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4.7 Keeping a record

While much assessment is spontaneous and unplanned, and often initiated by the young learner, it is important that key aspects of the information gleaned are documented. Parents/guardians tend to note their child’s achievements such as the first smile, the first step, the first word, the drawing, the tune played on the drum and so forth. This information is very important, especially where developmental delays and/or disabilities are detected. The information details the child’s developmental history which is important in understanding the challenges potentially facing the child and his/her family in the future, and in deciding how these can be addressed most appropriately.

Where children attend out-of-home settings, documenting assessment information is important and fulfils many purposes. Keeping a record can involve the practitioner making notes...
The manual emphasises the developmental nature of self-assessment, so that the process is just as important as the outcomes or end results. Working successfully towards improving the quality of provision is very rewarding for the adult and highly beneficial for the child.

Likewise, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation in its Quality Improvement Programme, strongly advocates evaluation and reflection. It promotes a ‘Quality Cycle’ approach consisting of an ongoing cycle of evaluation, reflection, action planning and implementation. The ongoing, aspiring nature of this cycle becomes a spiral as it progresses, moving gradually forwards and upwards towards continual improvement.

Such reflective practice is to be encouraged and supported in the case of all those working in early childhood settings outside the home.

4.9 Reviewing and planning for learning

One of the challenges for practitioners, childminders and parent/guardians alike is that of knowing how to put the information gathered through assessment to good use. This information is translated into plans to support future learning.

Assessment information serves many purposes, ranging from facilitating informal planning on how best to capture a child’s attention through interesting and motivating experiences to the more formal purpose of diagnosing children with special educational needs. Bamardos (2000) recommends that all adults who work with children should be involved in the planning process, as this helps to develop a sense of ownership and ensures a consistent approach. The following list highlights some of the practical ways that assessment information might be used in reviewing and planning for learning.

- Use information on how a child relates socially with his/her peers to plan adult support for him/her in a group activity if needed, or to plan ways in which that child might help other children in the group.
- Use information to plan learning across all four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking).
- Use information to explore and discuss with parent/guardians how projects/concepts/skills being worked on in the out-of-home setting can be reinforced at home, and vice versa.
- Use information about a child’s strengths to plan for activities that challenge the child generally and in particular areas of learning.
- Use informal information about a child’s possible difficulties in a particular area to plan for more formal observation and recording of that child’s learning.
- Use formal information on a child’s areas/areas of difficulty to plan long-term and short-term goals for meeting identified needs. Use the information to identify the types of support the child will need and how these will be made available to the child: human and material resources, the learning opportunities and experiences, and the intensity and level of adult support.
- Use information from observations of the child’s interactions in the learning environment to review the physical environment and plan improvements in terms of amount of space, positioning and suitability of furniture, type and positioning of materials.
- Use information from a child’s self-assessment to take account of what the child sees as important in his/her learning. Help the child review his/her progress so far and work out what his/her next short-term and long-term goals in a particular area of learning might be. Co-plan activities to help him/her meet those goals.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of how assessment information might, on a practical level, be used to enhance early learning for each child.

4.10 Conclusion

Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate progress, and to plan for and support the child’s learning in the most appropriate manner. Continuous, informal assessment of the child through observing, listening, and talking, better enables the adult to plan experiences and activities which will nurture and encourage learning as an enjoyable process. Planning for learning through assessment should include all dimensions of the child’s learning, and take account of individual interests and learning dispositions.

The context for learning is also an important factor, and information about the child’s social, cultural and physical environment should be taken into consideration. The child himself/herself plays an active part, and parent/guardians have a central role in the whole planning process, as they have intimate information and knowledge about their child. The early identification of special educational needs, in all their diversity, is crucial. Assessment is essential in establishing individual needs, and it plays a central role in determining the supports and resources that are necessary to develop and deliver an appropriate learning programme.
The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.
The framework will recognise early childhood as an important stage in life in its own right, and as a critical period in a person's development. By prioritising the social and cultural nature of early learning, and the crucial role that language plays, it can emphasise the importance of children learning with and from other children and adults. The principles also highlight the important role children themselves play in shaping and directing learning which is personally appealing, motivating and relevant, as well as the need for informed adult support. The principles also represent a commitment to children of all abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

The philosophical and value base of the framework

The emerging key principles, as they are currently articulated in earlier sections of this document, are a start in providing the framework with a philosophical and value base.

Among the principles that have been identified thus far is the belief that each child is unique and is a capable and competent learner. Section two in particular outlines the importance of this uniqueness for determining the types of learning experiences that will best support and extend each child's learning. This includes the nature and level of adult support the child may require to experience learning as a fun, positive and meaningful experience.

The framework will also recognise early childhood as an important stage in life in its own right, and as a critical period in a person’s development. By prioritising the social and cultural nature of early learning, and the crucial role that language plays, it can emphasise the importance of children learning with and from other children and adults. The principles also highlight the important role children themselves play in shaping and directing learning which is personally appealing, motivating and relevant, as well as the need for informed adult support. The principles also represent a commitment to children of all abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

5.4 Components of the framework

A number of suggested components for the framework are outlined. These should elucidate how the framework could be of use and relevance to all those in the early childhood sector.

The framework should
- present the vision of children as early learners upon which it is based
- articulate its philosophical and value base and its aims
- present the principles which underpin how children's early learning should be supported in a manner which respects how they learn, and the importance of that learning
- outline learning through the four themes discussed in section two (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)
- present a set of aims within each of the four themes
- present learning goals within each aim
- identify and describe a range of learning experiences that could be used to achieve these goals, taking account of children's different abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds
- include exemplars (or case studies) of good practices in supporting early learning, which reflect the diversity of Irish early childhood care and education (for example, diversity of setting, age of child, philosophy, and pedagogical approach)
- outline interaction styles/methodologies for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting early learning
- promote the importance of partnerships with parents/guardians in supporting children's learning in out-of-home settings and/or where children are supported by other professionals including therapists
- advise how parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners can support each other in using assessment for the benefit of individual children
- promote reflective practice (by practitioners) which empowers the adult in his/her role as educator, but also as learner
- provide practical advice on planning (by the practitioner) for early learning so that children's strengths as well as their needs shape the experiences they are offered.
It is proposed that the Framework for Early Learning will present learning using the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. In the model which follows, each theme is presented through a set of aims, with each aim having a series of learning goals. Some exemplars (case studies) of good practices in early learning are included. These exemplars are based on the principles articulated in this consultative document, and demonstrate ways in which the adult can support the child’s learning.

It is hoped that the consultation process will generate valuable feedback in relation to the usefulness of the themes being proposed, as well as the way in which each theme is presented in the pages that follow using aims, goals and learning experiences. The consultation may also generate other ideas on improving the proposed model, including other examples of learning experiences and exemplars.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

Do you think the proposed components could help you in providing appropriate learning experiences for all children in your setting?

What additional types of guidance, if any, would you find useful in the framework?

5.5 Exemplifying the model

Frameworks developed in both Ireland and in other jurisdictions show many similarities with the model proposed in this document. For example, Te Whariki (1996), the New Zealand framework mentioned earlier, is grounded in a set of principles, and presents learning through strands, goals and broad learning outcomes for children from birth to school age (generally five years). The Swedish Curriculum for the pre-school (1998) (children aged from one to six years) likewise outlines learning through goals. Guidelines inform practitioners in working towards these goals. The Primary School Curriculum (1999a) presents learning through principles, curriculum areas and enabling objectives. It advises on appropriate approaches and methodologies to be used by the teacher to support children in their learning. It endorses the view that the teacher is central in planning and providing learning experiences which suit each child.

Within the framework of the curriculum schools are afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual schools’ circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children.

(Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum, 1999a, p.11)
Aims
The child's physical, emotional and intellectual well-being is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others. Children should learn in comfortable and safe surroundings where:
- their emotional and intellectual well-being are nurtured
- their physical well-being and health are nurtured
- they feel safe and secure
- their moral and spiritual well-being is nurtured
- they can learn in a positive, and enjoyable way
- they are valued and affirmed as individuals, as learners and as group members.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

**Sample Aim**
Children learn in comfortable and safe surroundings where their physical well-being and health are nurtured.

**Goals**
The adult should support the child to:
- develop an awareness of his/her body, its functions and changing capabilities
- gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements
- explore, discover, and experiment with his/her physical skills
- refine his/her physical skills through challenging and pleasurable experiences
- develop self-help skills in caring for his/her own body with regard to hygiene, nourishment, and routines such as resting, washing and dressing
- make healthy choices and develop positive attitudes about nutrition, hygiene, and routines.

**Babies**
Babies explore objects in a multi-sensorial way – through taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight. Through the careful choice of objects, the baby not only learns sensorially, but also strengthens the muscles of the hand and gains increasing control and co-ordination of body movements.

The baby develops a growing understanding of his/her physical capabilities by being encouraged to imitate adult actions such as clapping hands, nodding, smiling, and waving.

**Toddlers**
The toddler has opportunities to physically interact with objects such as kicking a ball, carrying and throwing toys, gathering fallen leaves, pouring water and building sandcastles.

**Learning Experiences**
Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aims outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Exemplar**
**Age group: Young children**
Liz is a childminder who has a fenced-in play area outside her house. She sets up a slide for the children to have fun and experience in climbing and sliding.

Liz encourages the children to take turns on the slide, supporting them in learning the importance of sharing. She keeps a close watch to ensure that each child is included in the play, and that he/she has opportunities to explore and develop the skills of climbing and sliding. Listening intently, she learns how the younger children justify their immediate re-appearance at the top of the queue for the slide with ‘It’s my turn because I want to…’; To her surprise, this behaviour is tolerated by the older children.

Following many opportunities to climb the steps and slide down the slide, the children begin to introduce new and exciting challenges for themselves. With Liz’s encouragement, and physical support for some children, they climb up on the slide itself, and slide down on their tummies. The steepness of the climb brings a new sense of adventure to the play.

Seán, one of the younger children, experiences difficulty pulling himself up along the slide without the help of the steps. Knowing this from conversations with his dad and observing this first-hand, Liz holds his hand to support him in his climb to the top of the slide. Seán delights in his arrival at the top. He shouts with joy as he lets go and whirls his way to the bottom to begin the adventure once again.

The children continue their play for another while, shouting words such as 'up,' 'down,' ‘faster,’ ‘higher,’ ‘steep,’ and ‘slippy’ as they climb up and slide down. Liz gently introduces new words to the group to help them talk about their actions, and to express their feelings.

**Some principles which are supported by this exemplar:**
- Assessment of children’s early learning is integrated into the adult’s daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
- Parents/guardians have valuable insights and information about their child that are important aspects in the creation of a whole picture of the child’s development.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
**Aims**

Strong feelings of identity and belonging contribute to inner well-being and security.

Children should feel that they have a place within a community where
- they feel accepted and affirmed and where their diverse needs are catered for
- they can make and express choices
- they can plan co-operatively, take turns, and share resources
- they are encouraged to learn with and alongside others
- links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended
- they can identify and feel comfortable with routines, customs, and regular events
- symbols and representations of their own culture are promoted and respected.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

### Sample Aim

Children should feel that they have a place within a community where they can identify and feel comfortable with routines, customs, and regular events.

### Goals

The adult should support the child to
- become confident and self-assured through daily routines within close and trusting relationships
- become aware of and respect the needs and feelings of others in their behaviour, and understand the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour
- develop positive attitudes towards others whose gender, language, faith or culture, for example, is different from his/her own
- become aware that the celebration of cultural and religious festivals is important in people's lives.

### Babies

The learning programme includes familiar rhymes and songs. Babies have a personal place and personal artefacts. They are encouraged to play independently with these artefacts.

Babies enjoy a sense of routine and familiarity with both the people and objects in their environment. It is comforting for them to hear familiar sounds and to have their caregiver near.

### Toddlers

Toddlers have opportunities to listen to and sing along with others, and to make their own contribution to the day’s activities.

Toddlers have opportunities to play with other toddlers whose language and culture are different from their own. They learn to develop positive attitudes to difference, and to appreciate their own distinctive culture.

### Young children

Young children talk about themselves, their home, their family and friends, and other items and events that interest them. They learn to listen to other children expressing their interests.

Young children have opportunities to learn about cultural and religious festivals. This helps them to become aware of the beliefs and traditions of their own family, and the way of life of others in their community.

### Learning experiences

Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

### Exemplar

**Age group: Babies**

Alyssa is fourteen months old. She is babbling contentedly to herself as she explores some cardboard tubes and experiments with dropping her bricks into the tubes. Her mother is nearby labelling some new photographs and placing them in the album. Alyssa, noticing her mother’s actions, crawls towards her mother and expresses an interest in seeing the photographs.

Her mother helps her onto her knee and together they look at the photographs, most of which show Alyssa with her mother and Sam the dog. Her mother points to Alyssa, herself, and Sam, repeating the names as she does so. Alyssa in turn points at the various faces. Watching and interpreting Alyssa’s facial expressions, her body movements, and her attempts at words, her mother questions and talks to Alyssa about the people in the photographs – their faces and what they are doing. Alyssa delights in seeing herself in the photographs and claps her hands to express excitement and joy at seeing her own image. (This excitement is evident in many other instances, including when Alyssa sees herself in a mirror and her reflection in a window). She moves her attention from one photograph to another as she turns the pages of the album, and babbles while pointing to each photo. In seeing Alyssa’s reaction, her mother chooses some photographs and proceeds to make a simple collection of photographs for Alyssa to ‘play with’. These form part of the ‘reading’ material Alyssa shares with her mother in the coming week. Conversations and stories based on the occasions/events in the photos emerge as they look through the photographs, and talk about them during their routines.

### Some principles which are supported by this exemplar.

- The child learns within the context of warm and supportive attachments and relationships which encourage interaction, exploration and communication.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.
- Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children’s early learning.
- Assessment of children’s early learning is integrated into the adult’s daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
Aims
The child's ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Children should be enabled to develop the ability to communicate in comfortable and safe surroundings where:
- they develop and use non-verbal communication skills
- they develop and use language for a variety of purposes
- they make sense of their own experiences through language
- they develop respect for and understanding of communication by others
- they broaden their understanding of the world through language they see and experience, and use language in its symbolic form
- they can express themselves creatively and imaginatively through media such as paint, dance, and music as well as language.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

**Sample Aim**
Children should be enabled to develop the ability to communicate in comfortable and safe surroundings where they develop and use language for a variety of purposes.

**Goals**
The adult should support the child to:
- become a socially competent language user in a range of contexts such as play, and day-to-day routines
- use language with increasing confidence
- develop and extend vocabulary
- develop listening and responding skills
- develop his/her use of language in an increasingly sophisticated manner such as naming, asking, describing, planning, story-telling, predicting, recounting and sequencing
- become a proficient user of at least one language, while developing an increasing awareness and appreciation of other languages
- use language in a fun, creative and playful way through the use of conversation, rhyme, story, song and nonsense words.

**Learning experiences**
Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Babies**
The baby learns to use sounds to convey messages and share meanings, for example, when he/she is hungry, happy, or wants an object. The adult supports this learning by responding appropriately and consistently.

The baby develops his/her use of language by listening, imitating and engaging in meaningful ‘communicative exchanges’ with adults. For example, the adult adds the name to the object that is the baby's point of reference and later extends the vocabulary to enrich the meaning - ‘ball’ becomes ‘big blue ball’. In this way, he/she conveys the power of words to specify meaning.

**Toddlers**
The adult extends the toddler's use of language by responding to his/her words and phrases, by introducing new words in meaningful contexts, and by initiating interesting conversations.

The toddler expands and enriches his/her vocabulary through talking with others, and telling and listening to stories.

**Young children**
The young child learns to use his/her language in increasingly complex ways through opportunities, to narrate, to sequence, to plan, to predict and to reason. He/she gains wider experience of the second language, naming objects of interest and learning some simple phrases and songs.

The young child becomes increasingly aware of language in print. The adult helps the child develop an understanding of the meaning and messages conveyed through print by experiencing and exploring print in books, posters, signs, menus and labels.

Exemplar
**Age group: Young children**
Declan, the infant teacher is reading the story 'The Three Little Pigs' to his group of twenty-three four and five year old children. The group visited a farm the day before and was particularly excited by the pigs. Noting their interest, Declan plans language, music, visual arts, drama and science activities based on the theme of pigs. He chooses the story 'The Three Little Pigs' as the context within which to begin the work.

Declan uses a big story book so that all the children can see the illustrations and the words. As he reads, he asks many open-ended questions encouraging the children to understand the reasons for the pigs/wolf’s actions, to assist them in taking the perspective of the piglet/wolf, and to encourage them to speculate about alternative actions for the piglet/wolf. These questions are both individual and group orientated, supporting the children in developing their thinking and problem-solving skills, and helping them to use language for a variety of purposes.

In the following days, the children retell the story along with Declan, and on their own, using finger puppets as prompts. They also use pictures from the book to help them to sequence the story. A child who is shy to speak out in the group is supported by Declan in taking responsibility for sequencing the story for other children, using the prompts. This helps to build the child’s confidence and to give the child a rich language experience. With each retelling of the story, the children take more and more of the lead until they are able to tell the story without any help from their teacher. Some children create sound effects and compose songs for the story using objects and musical instruments from around the classroom.

Other children make models of the pig’s houses using marla, straw, hegs, and pebbles. They feel, smell, and describe the materials they are using. They devise ways to test these houses for strength and waterproofing (sciences). Throughout all this work, Declan carefully structures conversations with individual children and with small groups about the work in progress and the children’s intentions, in order to extend their thinking, to encourage them to learn from each other, and to develop their expressive language. Through planned and purposeful interactions with the children, he assists them in reasoning and in justifying, in speculating and in hypothesising as they develop their thinking skills. Declan observes them as they do this, noting the social interaction of the children, their use of language and their sequencing skills. He uses this information to plan further learning opportunities for the children. The children are also encouraged to tell the story to their parents/guardians at home, and to describe their related activities. The parents/guardians further familiarise themselves with the children’s work when they visit the classroom.

Some principles which are supported by this exemplar:
- Children are active learners, making sense of their environments through the senses, movement and language.
- Children learn through actions and interactions with others.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- The adult is central in supporting children to learn through quality interactions.
- Assessment celebrates the child’s progress and achievements, and enables the adult to plan for enhanced learning building on the child’s strengths and meeting his/her needs.
Aims:
The child explores and makes sense of his/her environment in a multi-sensorial way. Through active exploration, the child has opportunities to develop in many different ways, including cognitively and physically.

The child should have opportunities to:
- use senses and movement to make connections and recognise patterns
- develop the skill of observation using the senses
- become playfully involved in investigating and finding out about the environment
- develop creative and imaginative skills
- develop an appreciation of the natural beauty and wonder of creation
- develop physically in interacting with the environment
- refine and develop more elaborate ways of thinking, exploring, and understanding
- explore and use symbols and marks to make and represent meaning.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

Sample

**Aim**
The child should have opportunities to use senses and movement to make connections and recognise patterns.

**Goals**
The adult should support the child to:
- recognise objects by sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste
- ask questions, experiment, design, make and solve problems
- recognise patterns, shapes, and colours in the environment
- sort and categorise into groups
- understand some properties of materials, for example, soft/hard
- develop an understanding of measure, and an awareness of words to describe measure (time, capacity, volume, weight, length, money)

**Learning experiences**
Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Babies**
Young babies are adept at making connections and recognising patterns from a very early stage. For example, the shape of the face and the sound of the human voice, and they soon associate one with the other. The baby listens to the human voice and explores his/her own capacity to reproduce sound in response.

The baby’s capacity to learn through the senses and his/her growing strength and mobility lead to pleasurable activities such as using water, textured materials, music and musical instruments, along with messy play opportunities. These experiences lay the foundations for more formal learning with this material at a later stage.

**Toddlers**
Toddlers explore how things work and how things affect each other, for example, rolling a ball to knock skittles.

Toddlers learn by matching, sorting and classifying, for example, sorting and counting fallen leaves into groups by colour and by size.

**Young children**
Young children engage with real objects, and construct working theories about how these objects work and how they can be manipulated. For example, they investigate the effects of water on plastic bottles, stones, kitchen paper, and coke. They discover how heat affects materials such as chocolate, bread, metal, and water.

Young children learn by comparing the length of time certain tasks take, for example, walking to the shop versus going there by car, filling a basin with water using cups, jugs, saucepans, and so on.

Some principles which are supported by this exemplar:

- The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive life-long implications.
- Assessment of children’s early learning is integrated into the adult’s daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
- Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning should be meaningful and relevant and linked to the child’s interests, strengths, and life experiences.
The play environment, whether outdoor or indoor, warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive lifelong implications.

FOCUS QUESTIONS

The proposed model for the framework presents learning through four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking). Each theme has a number of aims, goals, suggested learning experiences and an exemplar of learning.

- How useful do you think this model would be in helping you to support all children’s learning?
- What change(s), if any, would you make to this model?

5.6 Conclusion

The launch of this consultative document represents a unique opportunity to develop a national framework to support and enhance early learning for all children throughout the whole early childhood period in this country.

This section offers a proposed model for the Framework for Early Learning. The model that will eventually be used for the framework will be determined by the consultation process and will inform the subsequent work which will be undertaken under the direction of the NCCA. The proposed model is presented here to help focus discussions during the accompanying consultation process. Rather than using developmental domains or areas of learning, the model presents early learning holistically using four themes. It emphasises the importance of the learning process, and prioritises the role of the adult in ensuring that learning experiences cater for the uniqueness of the child.

The next section outlines plans for the consultation process, which will support the development of the framework itself.
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All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are equally important and interwoven.
Consultation and partnership

Developing the Framework for Early Learning presents opportunities to build a shared understanding of how all children from birth to six years can be supported effectively in their learning. Consultation and partnership lie at the heart of this work.

The NCCA undertakes its work in close partnership with the stakeholders in education. As indicated in the introduction to this document, consultation will be central to the development of the Framework for Early Learning.

The framework will be developed in partnership with the early childhood sector, including:
- parents/guardians
- childminders
- practitioners
- representatives of relevant government departments
- other professionals in early childhood care and education and related disciplines.

This partnership will:
- help ensure that the Framework for Early Learning supports adults in their endeavours to constantly improve their practices for the benefit of all children.
- help create public awareness of the importance of early childhood as a time of tremendous personal development and learning, and of the influence of this on all subsequent learning
- help create a more interactive culture between parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, other relevant professionals and national policy-makers, as well as between theory and practice
- highlight and promote discussion on the key ideas which have been presented in this consultative document
- enable the NCCA to engage with and draw on the range of practices, views and expertise in the early childhood sector, as well as international experiences.

The NCCA will use the following consultative strategies to work with the early childhood sector:

1. The consultative document: Towards a Framework for Early Learning

This current document was developed following much research in the area of early learning, together with an analysis of curriculum guidance used both in Ireland and internationally. It reflects contemporary thinking and draws on practices here in Ireland. The NCCA has significant experience in the area of early childhood curriculum development, having engaged in an extensive review and revision of the infant curriculum during the 1990s. It collaborated closely with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) during the writing of this document. It was also assisted by leading academics in Ireland in the field of early learning, as well as health professionals and practitioners working with children from birth to six years in a range of settings. In this way, the document provides a solid base for the NCCA to work in partnership with the sector in developing the framework.

The document contains a number of focus questions to help readers reflect on some of the key ideas presented. It is hoped that readers will share their thoughts on these ideas with the NCCA. This will be facilitated through a number of strategies including:
- response forms (available at www.ncca.ie, and in hard copy).
- regional seminars organised and hosted by the NCCA. These will include a presentation on the current document, Towards a Framework for Early Learning and provide opportunities to discuss its key ideas.
- briefings. The NCCA, on invitation, will present to organisations, agencies, bodies and networks working in the early childhood sector. As with the regional seminars, these will include a presentation on the document with opportunities for discussion.
- written submissions. The NCCA will invite early childhood organisations, agencies, bodies and networks to present in detail their responses to the key ideas contained in this consultative document.
- portraits. ‘Portraits’ will be created in a small number of early childhood settings. Through observations and discussions, the NCCA will document and interpret the work of childminders and practitioners in supporting children’s learning. This will enable the NCCA to explore how a theme based framework can support existing good practices.

Information gleaned through these strategies will greatly assist the NCCA in progressing the development of the framework.

2. Invitational seminar

The NCCA will organise an invitational seminar to be held in autumn 2004. This will provide an opportunity to inform the early childhood sector of the outcomes of the consultation process. These findings will be presented in a report to be launched at the seminar. This report will note, where necessary, areas for further attention, and outline a revised plan of how the framework might be structured, presented, and developed. The seminar may include inputs from experts in the field of early learning invited to speak on ideas central to the development of the framework.

3. Early Childhood Committee

The NCCA has established an Early Childhood Committee. This committee is representative of the private, public and voluntary early childhood sectors. It will support the NCCA in developing the Framework for Early Learning.

In time, these consultative strategies should build strong partnerships between parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, policy-makers, and other relevant professionals. Such partnerships should facilitate collective decision-making rooted in knowledge, research, and best practices. This approach should better ensure that all children in this country receive the learning supports they need and are entitled to.

The NCCA undertakes its work in close partnership with the stakeholders in education. As indicated in the introduction to this document, consultation will be central to the development of the Framework for Early Learning.

The framework will be developed in partnership with the early childhood sector, including:
- parents/guardians
- childminders
- practitioners
- representatives of relevant government departments
- other professionals in early childhood care and education and related disciplines.

This partnership will:
- help create public awareness of the importance of early childhood as a time of tremendous personal development and learning, and of the influence of this on all subsequent learning
- help create a more interactive culture between parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, other relevant professionals and national policy-makers, as well as between theory and practice
- highlight and promote discussion on the key ideas which have been presented in this consultative document
- enable the NCCA to engage with and draw on the range of practices, views and expertise in the early childhood sector, as well as international experiences.

Work plan

The following table sets out the envisaged timeframe for the consultation process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2004</td>
<td>Launch of the consultative document Towards a Framework for Early Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March – August 2004</td>
<td>Consultation with the early childhood sector (seminars, briefings,...)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autumn 2004</td>
<td>Invitational seminar – final report on the findings from the consultation, revised plan for the framework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The last decade has seen significant developments in policy with regard to children’s rights in Irish society, as well as in early childhood care and education service provision. This has led to a growing appreciation of children as capable and competent learners, and of the benefits of supporting them in their learning through quality provision.

The development of the Framework for Early Learning is an important step in supporting existing early childhood care and education. The model of partnership and consultation, described in this section, should enable the NCCA to draw upon the expertise and commitment within the sector.

By reading and commenting on the ideas presented in this document, the sector can support and input to the development work. In time, this will help to ensure that we create a national framework which can make a positive contribution to all children’s lives as learners. The Framework for Early Learning can also represent the unprecedented coming together of different philosophies, approaches and pedagogies.
The NCCA would like to thank all those who kindly consented to having their photographs taken and used in this document. The NCCA was granted parental/guardian permission in the case of the children in the photographs. This was considered necessary and appropriate with children in the age group from birth to six years.