



NCCA

An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
Curaclaim agus Measúnachta
National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment

Frequently asked questions about *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

Introduction

This Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document has been developed in response to initial queries and questions received by the NCCA in relation to *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2024). The FAQ document will be reviewed and updated regularly to respond to further questions received.

Who are the NCCA?

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body that advises the Minister for Education on matters relating to the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools, and the assessment procedures employed in schools and examinations on subjects which are part of the curriculum.

You can find out more about the work of NCCA by visiting our 'About Us' webpage here:

<https://ncca.ie/en/about-ncca/about-us/>

What is *Aistear* and what is its purpose?

NCCA originally published *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009. It was the first curriculum framework for early childhood education in Ireland. It provided information to support early learning and development. Because early childhood marks the beginning of babies, toddlers and young children's lifelong learning journeys, the Framework is called *Aistear*, the Irish word for journey.

NCCA updated *Aistear* in 2024. The update was completed through a process of research, consultation, networking and deliberation. The updated Framework was published in December 2024.

The purpose of the updated Framework is to support babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. In doing this, *Aistear*:

- identifies what and how babies, toddlers and young children should learn through the development of a rights-based, emergent and inquiry-based curriculum
- promotes partnerships, collaborations and connections with babies, toddlers and young children's families and communities
- makes connections and supports continuity of experiences and progression in babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development
- guides, enhances and extends existing curriculum approaches
- promotes the cultural and linguistic identity of all babies, toddlers and young children by affirming and supporting diversity, including Irish cultural and linguistic history and *scéal* (story)
- informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work and dialogue through a shared image of the baby, toddler and young child.

Who is Aistear for?

Aistear is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in all settings other than primary and special schools. It can be used by all those interested in engaging with the Framework to support early learning and development. This includes but is not limited to parents and families, childminders and early years educators.

What is a curriculum framework?

A curriculum framework is a scaffold to curriculum development to help educators plan and develop an emergent, inquiry-based, child-led curriculum underpinned by play and relationships and specific to their own context.

What is a curriculum?

A curriculum is all the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment that babies, toddlers and young children experience.

Why was Aistear (2009) updated?

An update of the Framework was undertaken to recognise and reflect societal and policy changes that have taken place since the publication of the original Framework in 2009. The update also reflects educational research and new learning about how babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop and how educators can enrich and encourage this appropriately. The update was undertaken by NCCA to ensure *Aistear* continues to support and enrich babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development in Ireland now and in the future.

What was the process for updating Aistear?

NCCA updates curriculum through a consultative process.

The process for updating *Aistear* (2024) was carried out over two phases:

- Phase 1 began in May 2021 and concluded in April 2022. It focused on asking stakeholders, including babies, toddlers, young children, parents and educators, what was working well with *Aistear* and what suggestions they had as to how it might be enhanced and updated.
- Phase 2 began in September 2023 when NCCA published [proposals](#) for an updated *Aistear*. A consultation to gather feedback on the proposals followed and concluded in November 2023.

The update was informed by a [literature review](#) (French and McKenna, 2022) on the Themes of *Aistear* which are Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. It was also guided by the [Phase 1 Consultation Report](#) (NCCA, 2022) and [Phase 2 Consultation Report](#) (NCCA, 2024). And very importantly, it reflected findings from the consultations with babies, toddlers and young children during [Phase 1](#) (O'Toole, Walsh, Kerrins, Doherty, Forde, Kelleher, McCartney, Stafford, Stokes, Matson and Mooney 2023) and [Phase 2](#) (O'Toole, Ward, Walsh, Stokes, McCartney, Forde, Doherty, and Winter, 2024).

Did babies, toddlers and young children take part in the consultation?

Yes, as with *Aistear* (2009) the views of babies, toddlers and young children were included in the consultation. The findings from the consultations with babies, toddlers and young children during [Phase 1](#) (O'Toole et al., 2023) were included in the Proposals. The findings from [Phase 2](#) (O'Toole et al., 2024) on the changes proposed were included in the update. The key messages from these important stakeholders that were included focused on the importance of relationships and interactions especially with friends and between the adults in their social worlds. They also emphasised the importance of play and hands-on experiences and in particular outdoor experiences and contact with and care for the natural world.

Where can I read the *Aistear* Framework?

You can read *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* [here](#)

When will the updated *Aistear* Framework (2024) be implemented?

Following the launch in 2024 there will be a period of one year for stakeholders to become familiar with the updates to *Aistear*. It is expected that *Aistear* (2024) will begin to be implemented formally in settings like preschools and full day care settings from September 2025. It is important to note that the updates to *Aistear* are built on the original Framework which is a strong foundation on which to enhance knowledge of the learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children.

What are the main updates in *Aistear* (2024)?

The main updates include:

- a renewed emphasis on the rights of babies, toddlers and young children, respecting them as agentic, competent, confident. Agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning
- an understanding of sustainability in nurturing babies, toddlers and young children to care for themselves, for others and for the environment
- a celebration of the diversity of contemporary Irish society and support for the meaningful inclusion and participation of all babies, toddlers and young children
- a renewed emphasis on relationships being at the heart of learning and development, friendships are valued, and interactions are nurtured between babies, toddlers, young children, educators, families, communities and learning environments
- embedding Irish culture and history in *Aistear* through the use of Irish words and phrases helping to connect babies, toddlers, young children, their families and educators to the language and heritage of Ireland.

Has the structure of *Aistear* significantly changed in the update?

The structure of *Aistear* remains similar to the original which included Principles and Themes along with *Guidelines for Good Practice*. The update includes a similar structure which includes the

Vision, Purpose, Principles and Themes as well as *Guidance for Good Practice*. The table below illustrates the structure and content of the original *Aistear* Framework and the updated Framework.

<i>Aistear</i> (2009)	<i>Aistear</i> (2024)
Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Purpose 	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision • Purpose
12 Principles of early learning and development presented in three groups: <p>Children and their lives in early childhood:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The child’s uniqueness • Equality and Diversity • Children as Citizens <p>Children’s connections with others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Parents, Family and Community • The Adult’s Role <p>How children learn and develop:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holistic Learning and Development • Active Learning • Play and Hands-on Experiences • Relevant and Meaningful Experiences • Communication and Language • The Learning Environment 	Nine Principles of early learning and development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agentic Global Citizens • Diversity, Equity and Inclusion • Relationships and Interactions • Family and Community • Agentic Educators • Transitions • Holistic Learning and Development • Play and Hands-on Experiences • Learning Environments
Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-being • Identity and Belonging • Communicating • Exploring and Thinking 	Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wellbeing • Identity and Belonging • Communicating • Exploring and Thinking

What is the purpose of the *Guidance for Good Practice*?

The updated Framework is supported by *Guidance for Good Practice*. The guidance supports educators to understand and engage with the Vision, Principles and Themes in the updated Framework. Like the *Guidelines for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2009), the *Guidance* describes good practice and expands on some of the important ideas introduced in the updated Framework. The table below illustrates the structure and content of the original *Guidelines* (2009) and the updated *Guidance* (2024)

<i>Guidelines for Good Practice</i> (2009)	<i>Guidance for Good Practice</i> (2024)
Building partnerships between parents and practitioners	Supporting learning and development through partnership and connections
Learning and developing through interactions	Supporting learning and development through relationships and interactions
Learning and developing through play	Supporting learning and development through play

Supporting learning and development through assessment	Supporting learning and development through a reflective cycle of planning and assessing
	Supporting learning and development through a rights-based approach

What supports will NCCA make available to educators to support them to understand the updated *Aistear*?

Support material will be available, together with the updated Framework and the Guidance, [here](#). The purpose of the material will be to support capacity building, understanding and knowledge of *Aistear* (2024) amongst system stakeholders. It will contain the research underpinning *Aistear* (2024) along with information explaining the content in *Aistear* (2024).

The following resources are currently available and further materials will be added.

- A walkthrough video on *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*
- A video on the Principles of early learning and development in *Aistear*

Will the updated *Aistear* have an impact on the alignment with *Síolta*?

The relationship between *Aistear* and *Síolta*, as the two national frameworks for early childhood provision was an important consideration in the updating process, and a focus on continued alignment and synergy between the two frameworks remains. The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide will guide educators in this regard.

Will the updated *Aistear* have an impact on the *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide?

The *Aistear Síolta* Practice Guide is an online tool to support the implementation of *Aistear* and *Síolta* in practice. It is currently being updated to reflect the updates in *Aistear* (2024). The Framework and the Research underpinning it will inform the development of new resources on the Practice Guide.

What is the relationship between *Aistear* (2024) and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DoE, 2023)?

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, along with *Síolta* and *Aistear*, have led to changes in what children experience before beginning primary school. These changes set a new context for the experiences of children in junior and senior infant classrooms. While *Aistear* (2024) will be for the early childhood sector and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DoE, 2023) for Primary and Special schools, the two are aligned to support continuity and progression for all children as they make the transition from preschool to primary and special schools. This alignment is particularly evident in the Principles of Early Learning and Development in *Aistear* and the Principles of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (2023). Alignment is further evident in the focus in both frameworks on a pedagogy of play.

What about *Aistear* (2009, 2024) and Department of Education inspections?

The Early Years Education Inspection (EYEI) is based on a quality framework informed by the principles of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2009).

Area 2: Quality of processes to support children's learning and development requires that provision is informed by *Aistear*. One of the signposts signals the need for a broad-based curriculum, informed by the Framework to be documented and used to support babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. It is envisaged that this will also happen with the updated Framework.



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