



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Prepared by the National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
2024



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Foreword from the Minister for Education

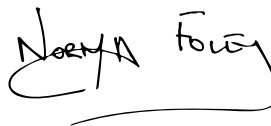
The publication of the updated *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* is an important milestone for the Early Learning and Care sector, given the many developments since its groundbreaking publication in 2009 as the first early childhood curriculum framework. The significance of the formative early childhood phase of learning and development is emphasised in both international and national research. We understand that nurturing young children's interest and love for learning is vitally important for their wellbeing, development and for their lifelong learning experiences.

The timely updating of *Aistear* reflects societal changes, an increasingly qualified and professional workforce in the early childhood sector, shifts in policy and developments in research alongside the changes in the lived experiences of babies, toddlers and young children. The updating was led by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), in close collaboration with the Early Learning and Care sector. An innovative part of the updating process was consultation with babies, toddlers and young children.

Greater emphasis has been placed on experiences that support children's creativity and their engagement with the arts, emergent literacy and numeracy, and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education and continued recognition of the crucial role of play-based learning. A core objective of the updated *Aistear* is to promote the use of Gaeilge in the everyday language of educators as they interact with babies, toddlers and young children and I warmly welcome this inclusion and its acknowledgement of our rich, cultural and linguistic history.

Aistear can be used by all those who support babies, toddlers and young children's learning and particularly those who work in professional roles as early years' educators. Whilst the updated Framework, is no longer designed specifically for use in junior and senior infant classes, it does have relevance in terms of the pedagogical approaches used. I'm especially pleased that *Aistear* has been aligned with the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DoE, 2023) as this promotes important continuity in children's learning and experiences as they move between educational settings.

Finally, I wish to thank the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and his officials for the collaborative engagement with my Department and the NCCA in this important development. I look forward to continued work together as we support the early learning and care sector with its ongoing implementation.



Norma Foley TD

Minister for Education



Foreword from the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

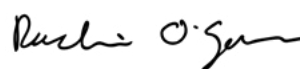
During early childhood babies, toddlers and young children are learning and developing at a pace that exceeds any other stage in their lives. This is a period of great opportunity for laying important foundations for future learning and wellbeing. In early childhood, babies, toddlers and young children learn through play, fun, exploration and conversation within loving, trusting and respectful relationships. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* promotes a view of babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident learners within loving and respectful relationships. The Framework celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from early experiences, as they unfold.

Since *Aistear* was first published much has changed both in the early learning and care sector and in society more broadly. The Framework can continue to be used by anyone who supports babies', toddlers' and young children's learning and development such as parents, childminders and early years educators. I want to acknowledge the commitment of educators and childminders in implementing *Aistear* to date; they play a significant role in promoting high quality early learning experiences for young children in different learning environments.

I warmly welcome the strong emphasis within the Framework on the voice of babies, toddlers and young children, and I welcome the key role they played in shaping the updates to *Aistear*. Mirroring the development of the original Framework, a collaborative process has ensured the updated Framework is in line with commitments in *First 5, the Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028*, and that *Aistear* will continue to reflect and support the lives of children and their families for many years to come.

I am also very pleased that the Framework strengthens the focus on children's rights, slow relational pedagogy, diversity and inclusion, outdoor learning, wellbeing, and sustainability. The inclusion of words, phrases and proverbs *as Gaeilge* through the Framework acknowledges that our language, identity and belonging are closely intertwined.

I would like to thank the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) for its leadership in this work and the organisations, agencies and researchers who contributed to the updating of *Aistear*. Particular thanks to the many educators, parents and babies, toddlers and young children around the country who offered their views and insights as the work progressed. Finally, thank you to the Minister for Education and her officials for our collaborative working. The continued partnership between the Department of Children, the Department of Education, the NCCA and the early learning and care sector will be important as all work together to ensure that the ongoing implementation of the Framework continues to support high-quality early learning and care experiences for all babies, toddlers and young children.



Roderic O'Gorman TD

Minister for Children,
Equality, Disability,
Integration and Youth







Introduction

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was first published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009.

Aistear was the first curriculum framework for early childhood education in Ireland. It celebrates early childhood as a time of being, a time for enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold, and laying important foundations for later learning and for life. 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.

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. The update was also undertaken to reflect the pace of educational research since the late 2000s and the new learning this gave rise to about how babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop and how educators can enrich and encourage this appropriately. It is envisaged that this updated Framework will continue to support and enrich babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. The updated Framework is supported by the *Guidance for Good Practice*. The Guidance builds on the original *Guidelines for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2009) and supports educators to understand and engage with new concepts introduced in the updated Framework. The use of digital technologies to support babies, toddlers and young children's learning will be promoted in line with Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Department of Education and wider policy.

During early childhood, babies, toddlers and young children are learning and developing at a pace that exceeds that of any other stage in their lives. This period, especially the first three years, sets the foundation for learning, *sláinte* (health), and the formation of important connections in the brain. It is during this time that babies, toddlers and young children can also develop positive dispositions towards learning. *Aistear* acknowledges that these early experiences have a formative impact that can last throughout their whole lives and provides information to enhance the early learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children.

In early childhood, babies, toddlers and young children learn through loving, trusting and respectful relationships, and through *súgradh* (play), *spraoi* (fun), exploration and *comhrá* (conversation) in multimodal ways. *Aistear* emphasises the centrality of family, languages, *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together) and cultures in babies, toddlers and young children's lives.

The Framework can be used by anyone who supports babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. In *Aistear* those using the Framework, including parents, childminders and early years educators are referred to as 'educators'. Each educator comes to *Aistear* informed by their relationship with the baby, toddler and young child, the family, their knowledge and experience, as well as knowing the features of the different learning environments (Figure 1).

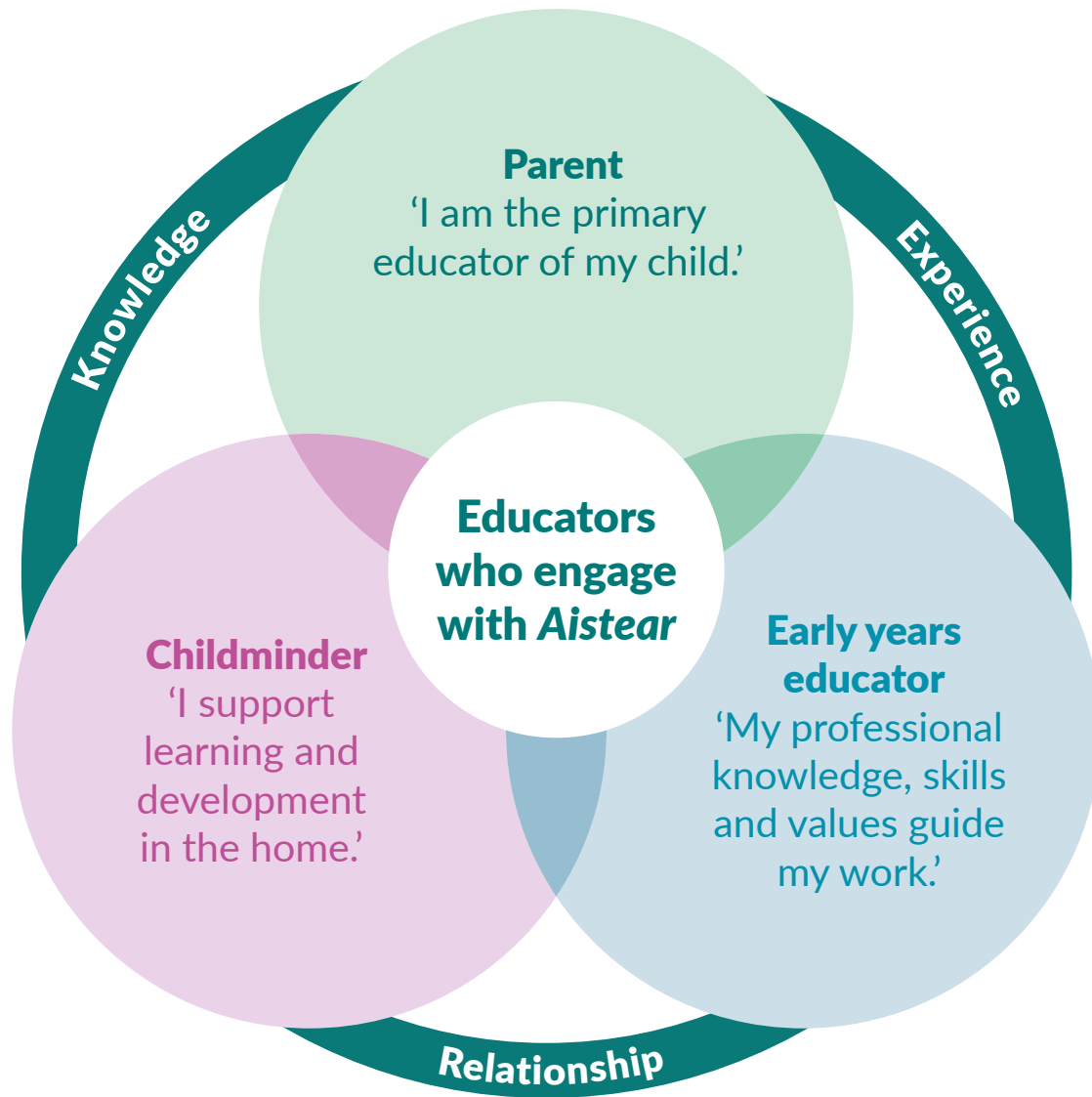


Figure 1: Educators who engage with Aistear

Aistear is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in all settings other than primary and special schools. It aligns with the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (Department of Education [DoE], 2023) which is for all children in primary and special schools.

Aistear presents early childhood through three overlapping age ranges. These reflect the differences in how babies, toddlers and young children progress as their learning and development is unique, complex and holistic. The three overlapping age groupings

represent the distinct stages of development in early childhood while acknowledging the individuality of each baby, toddler and young child. Aistear recognises the importance of each distinct stage in its own right.

The overlapping age groupings are:

Babies
(aged from birth to 18 months)

Toddlers
(12 months to 3 years)

Young children
(2.5 – 6 years)

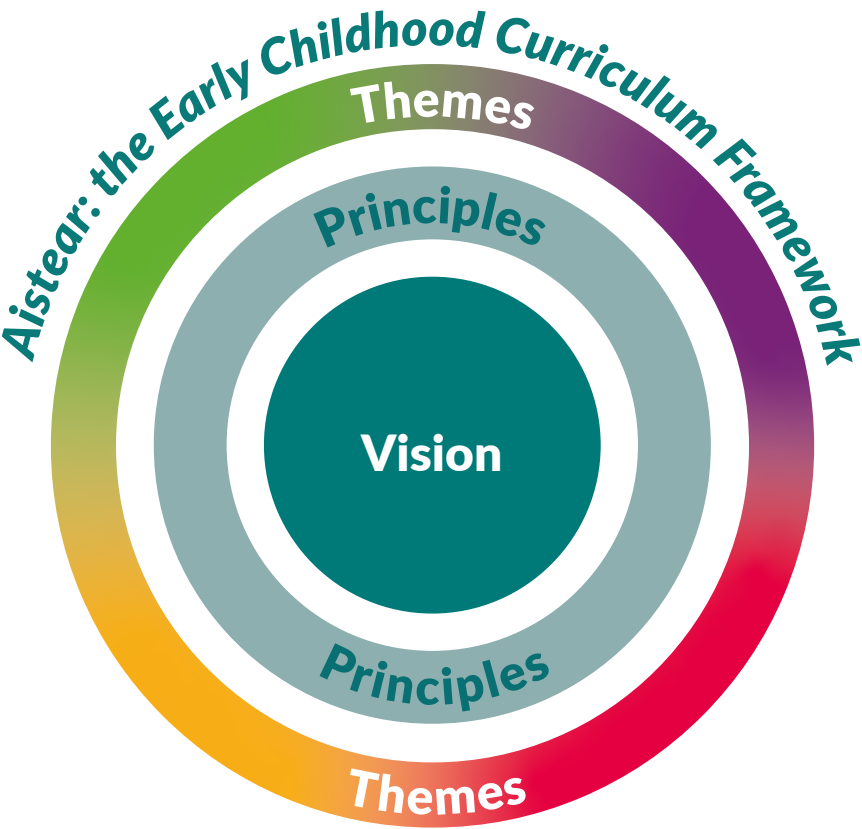


Figure 2: Aistear's Structure

Vision

Aistear empowers educators to develop a curriculum to support the learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children in their care. It promotes *meas* (respect) for babies, toddlers and young children. It guides the development of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum in which *súgradh* (play) and relationships are foundational. *Aistear* presents a view of babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident. It highlights how the educator's view of the baby, toddler and young child is central in helping them reach their individual potential.

Aistear highlights the importance of partnerships and collaborations between educators, babies, toddlers, young children, families and communities. This helps ensure that every baby, toddler and young child can thrive and flourish and contribute to a more sustainable world by caring for themselves, others and the environment. The Vision supports creative and independent learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children facilitated and supported by educators who respect their diversity and care about them.



Image of the baby, toddler and young child

Aistear presents babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident. Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning. Their agency is evident in the way they practically and emotionally transform the lives of those around them. They influence relationships, decisions and the workings of their social worlds.



Babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop within loving relationships where their individual life stories are acknowledged with kindness and consideration. Each individual baby, toddler and young child learns and develops in their own time and in their own unique way. Aistear takes a strengths-based approach and sees the potential in every baby, toddler and young child.

Image of the educator

Aistear presents the educator as agentic, competent, confident and reflective. Being agentic means that the educator has the freedom to use their knowledge and skills to interpret *Aistear* to support learning and development.



Educators hold a genuine belief in the competencies of babies, toddlers and young children and hold them in a respectful and protective space. They know the value of their role as advocates for the rights of babies, toddlers and young children. In doing so they also demonstrate and celebrate the importance of early childhood education and care.



Purpose

The purpose of *Aistear* 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.



Principles of Early Learning and Development

Aistear is based on nine Principles of early learning and development. These are the foundation of the Framework and bring the curriculum vision to life (Figure 3). They are also embedded throughout the Framework’s Theme descriptors, Aims and Learning Goals, and in the *Guidance for Good Practice*.

Each Principle is presented using a short paragraph. This is followed by an interpretation of the Principle from the perspective of babies, toddlers and young children. This interpretation highlights the educator’s role in facilitating voice and influence in early learning and development as well as advocating for and enacting the Principles in practice.

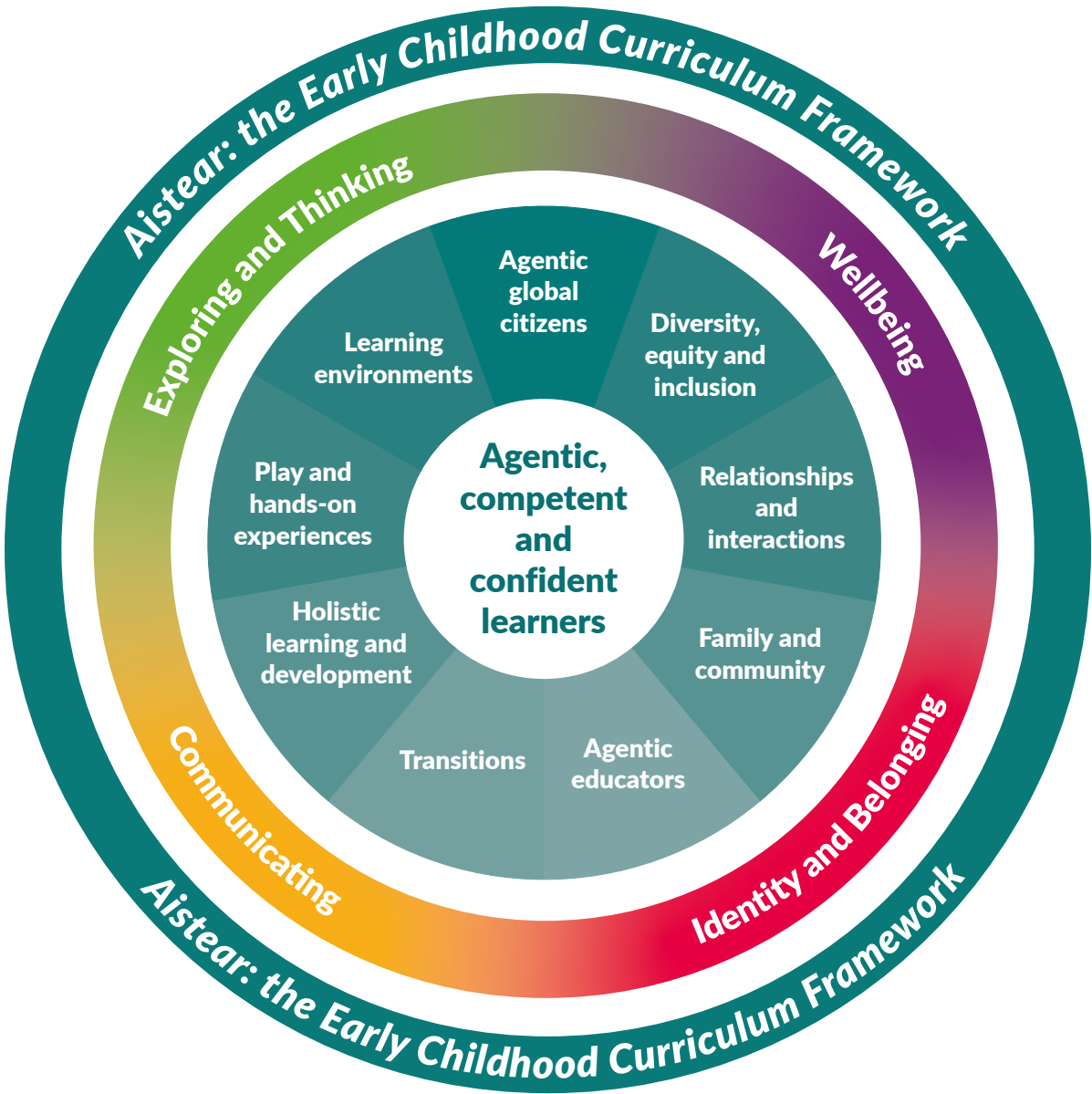


Figure 3: Aistear’s Content

Agentic Global Citizens

Babies, toddlers and young children are competent, confident and agentic global citizens. Being agentic means they have voice and influence and that they can make choices about and in their learning. Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be cared for, nurtured and supported to grow and develop. They can experience democracy by having their voice heard and respected by educators who support active participation. Listening to and learning to respect others and their views is a key part of this. As citizens of the world, babies, toddlers and young children have deep connections with people and the environment, valuing justice and human rights.

“ I am an agentic global citizen and use my ‘voice’ to show you what is important to me – notice, nurture and respectfully respond to me so I can be independent and make choices. ”

“ I have the right to be protected from physical and emotional harm and to know that you will help me when I need it. ”

“ I have emerging responsibilities to care for myself, others and for the environment. Provide meaningful opportunities for me to live sustainably. ”

“ Support me to understand and respect my home languages and to value the views, opinions, cultures, languages, religions and experiences that are different from mine. Empower me to learn about and value the languages, histories, stories, folklore and culture of Ireland, including those of the Traveller community. ”

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

All babies, toddlers and young children have the right to equality of opportunity, to be treated fairly and without discrimination. They have the right to access and participate meaningfully in experiences to fulfil their potential as unique individuals. Equity in early childhood is about fairness in addressing any challenges that a baby, toddler or young child might experience because of their background or ability. Diversity of self, family, *baile* (home) and community are respected and celebrated while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness. Inclusion means each baby, toddler and young child is supported, empowered and enabled to participate and progress in meaningful early childhood experiences.

“ Recognise my abilities, identities, needs and individual potential and respect my right to belong in the learning environment. Put supports in place so that I am empowered to participate and contribute in a meaningful way. ”

“ Notice, nurture and celebrate me as I grow and develop. ”

“ My family, culture(s), home-language(s) and ethnicity are what make me who I am. Acknowledge and respect me. Celebrate appropriately and value me, my family and my community. ”

“ Help me to learn to recognise and challenge injustice and to stand up for myself and others in our local, national and global communities. ”

Relationships and Interactions

Babies, toddlers and young children's fundamental need to be with others is embedded in caring connections within loving and responsive relationships. A slow relational pedagogy affords time and space to be with the baby, toddler and young child to build a secure attachment. Reciprocal relationships can have a profound impact on learning and development and the key person approach is central to this. Early friendships with other babies, toddlers and young children are noticed, nurtured and celebrated. Great care and time are taken to foster and support connections within and between the baby, toddler and young child's social worlds. The importance of sustained one-to-one interactions, especially for babies, through daily rituals and care-giving moments are valued and nurtured.

“ I need time, *meas* (respect), freedom and space to be by myself and with others – family, *cairde* (friends), peers and educators. It is also good for me to know others in my local community. ”

“ I have strong, secure attachments with the important people in my life who take time to know me and be with me. They and I recognise the value of a slow, relational and respectful pedagogy. ”

“ Help me to co-regulate and self-regulate my emotions and help me to learn to be with others, to handle conflict and to solve problems. ”

“ I enjoy it when my friendships are noticed, nurtured and celebrated. ”

Family and Community

The lives of babies, toddlers and young children are enriched by those who nurture and care for them. This includes parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians, carers, extended family, educators and community members. In turn, babies, toddlers and young children bring joy, *dóchas* (hope) and *sonas* (happiness) to enrich the lives of others. Babies, toddlers and young children's funds of knowledge from *baile* (home), family and community connections impact on and inform their learning experiences. Sharing their funds of knowledge supports their identity and sense of belonging in the setting. These connections influence understandings of diversity of place, routines, family, culture(s) and language(s).

“ My family are the most important people in my life. ”

“ It helps me to reach my individual potential when my key person works in partnership with my family, respecting and valuing their opinions and expertise. They want the best for me and know about me and what I like and don't like. ”

“ I want to share my funds of knowledge about me, my family, culture(s), experiences and celebrations with you and my *cairde* (friends). We can share our languages, cultural skills, song, music, dance and *scéal* (story) with each other. ”

“ My extended family and my community are really important to me. Recognise these connections as part of my identity and belonging. ”

Agentic Educators

Agentic educators support and facilitate learning through a respectful regard for each baby, toddler and young child's uniqueness and rights, guided by a slow relational pedagogy. This respectful relationship between the baby, toddler, young child, their key person and other important people in their lives creates a circle of security and trust within and between learning environments. Being agentic means that the educator has the freedom to use their knowledge and skills to interpret *Aistear* to support learning and development. By creating time and space, educators notice, nurture, respond and reflect on babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development.

“ I know you respect me as a unique global citizen with my own life story. I feel *sona* (happy) and secure in your company and I want you to feel *sona* (happy) and to enjoy my company too. ”

“ I thrive when you recognise and build on my identity, abilities, interests and experiences. You know the different ways I learn and develop and provide relevant, culturally appropriate and meaningful experiences to help me reach my individual potential. ”

“ I trust that you will notice what I need and support me and my family to have equality of access to professional support and services when I need it. ”

“ It helps me when you are aware of your biases and those of others and that you protect me and my family if I am being hurt or discriminated against. ”

Transitions

Babies, toddlers and young children participate in transitions within and between the daily routines, from one room to another and from one educational setting to another. They also move between *baile* (home) and other places where they spend time. All transitions are important and are recognised as a process that takes time rather than a once-off event. During transitions ensuring progression in learning and development and continuity of experiences requires consistent relationships. This includes a particular emphasis on the role of the key person and on slow relational pedagogy. Supporting transitions also requires shared responsibility between families, childminders, educators, settings and schools in the best interests of the baby, toddler and young child. Free play and playful pedagogies ensure that relevant and meaningful experiences make transitions and progression of learning more enjoyable, positive and effective.

“ I experience lots of transitions: from *baile* (home) to the early childhood setting; moving within and between the routines of the day; progressing from room-to-room; moving from one setting to another, and starting primary or special school. Change is easier when I feel safe and have people around who care about and know me. ”

“ Learn about me and know what I need to make my transitions as positive, enjoyable and effective as they can be. Talk with me and my family who care for me – they know me best. ”

“ I am an agentic, competent and confident learner – notice and respond to how I am developing dispositions, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge and understanding. ”

“ Help me to reach my individual potential by noticing, nurturing and responding to my learning and development. Share information about me to support progression in my learning and development. ”

Holistic Learning and Development

Early learning and development is holistic as babies, toddlers and young children learn many different things at the same time. What they learn is connected to where, how and with whom they learn. On-going assessment of what babies, toddlers and young children do, make and communicate helps educators plan for a rich variety of relevant, meaningful and hands-on learning experiences. Educators develop an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum through a blend of free-play, guided play and educator-led playful experiences and provocations. This provides choice, opportunity and progression of learning and development. Through such experiences, babies, toddlers and young children develop a strong sense of wellbeing, of *bród* (pride) in self, family and community. They become competent and confident communicators and develop as curious and resilient explorers and thinkers.

“ When supporting my learning and development, remember that what and how I learn is shaped by me and my funds of knowledge, and developed by my previous learning and experiences with my family, my community and wider society. ”

“ It helps me when you notice what I am doing and learning and when we have time to be together. By being with me and understanding my ‘voice’ you can see my individual potential as a learner and identify what I am interested in, what I am good at and things that I might need extra help with. ”

“ I have my own creative thoughts, ideas and imaginings – notice, nurture and respond to these. ”

“ Through *súgradh* (play) and hands-on learning experiences indoors and outdoors, I start to understand and express my feelings and emotions, to develop as an explorer, thinker and communicator, to develop physically, socially and creatively, to be well and to have a strong sense of identity and belonging. ”

Play and Hands-on Experiences

Babies, toddlers and young children have a right to play. Much of their learning and development takes place through *súgradh* (play) and hands-on experiences through which they learn about the world around them. Through free-play, guided play and educator-led playful experiences, babies, toddlers and young children can immerse themselves in deep learning and joyful explorations. Educators notice the learning when they slow things down and create time, freedom and space for *súgradh* (play) and interactions. These playful, hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences help babies, toddlers and young children to co-regulate and self-regulate their emotions. They also help them to have a sense of self, to develop as thinkers and language users, to develop socially and emotionally and to have empathy and compassion. *Súgradh* (Play) helps them to be *sláinte* (healthy) and *sona* (happy), creative and imaginative, and lays the foundations for becoming effective communicators and explorers.

“ I want to play, and I have a right to play. ”

“ It is important for my learning and development to have the time, space, provocations and resources to play. ”

“ I learn by being active and using my senses to explore and learn about the world. I need access to open-ended and natural materials to help me explore, be creative and use my imagination. ”

“ I benefit from enjoyable, meaningful, challenging and adventurous play indoors and outdoors. This helps me to progress in my learning and to assess risk which is a valuable skill for me throughout life. ”

Learning Environments

The inclusive learning environment is understood as the physical space and resources provided indoors and outdoors. It also includes the daily routines, the transitions, and the relationships and interactions. The learning environment has a profound influence on how babies, toddlers and young children feel and learn when it provides for different types of *súgradh* (play) and hands-on experiences and interactions. Through consultation and collaboration, babies, toddlers, young children and educators plan and create aesthetically pleasing, challenging and inclusive spaces. Together they assess the learning environment to ensure equality of access for all, noticing how babies, toddlers and young children communicate their level of comfort and ease in that space. Educators also embrace possibilities in the local environment through a sense of *ómós áite* (value of place) and place-based learning. There is an emphasis on *dúlra* (nature), natural spaces, provocations and resources. There is also a commitment to sustainability and active, adventurous play.

“ I benefit from learning in my locality. Being in and learning about *dúlra* (nature) is important as I have a responsibility to care for myself and others. Help me to care for my environment and to live sustainably. ”

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Themes

Aistear presents babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development using four interconnected Themes, underpinned by the Vision and Principles.

The Themes are:

- **Wellbeing**
- **Identity and Belonging**
- **Communicating**
- **Exploring and Thinking.**

Each Theme describes what babies, toddlers and young children learn. Each Theme description is followed by four Aims which set out broad aspirations for learning and development. Each Aim is underpinned by three Learning Goals.

These are broad yet observable statements that bring important dispositions, attitudes and values along with skills, knowledge and understanding to life. The Themes are there to inform planning for babies, toddlers and young children's learning and to support the documenting and assessing of their progress and achievements. By interpreting the Aims and Learning Goals, educators notice learning and empower babies, toddlers and young children to continue learning and developing. Babies, toddlers and young children are supported to reach their individual potential through participation in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, underpinned by play, in meaningful and enjoyable ways.

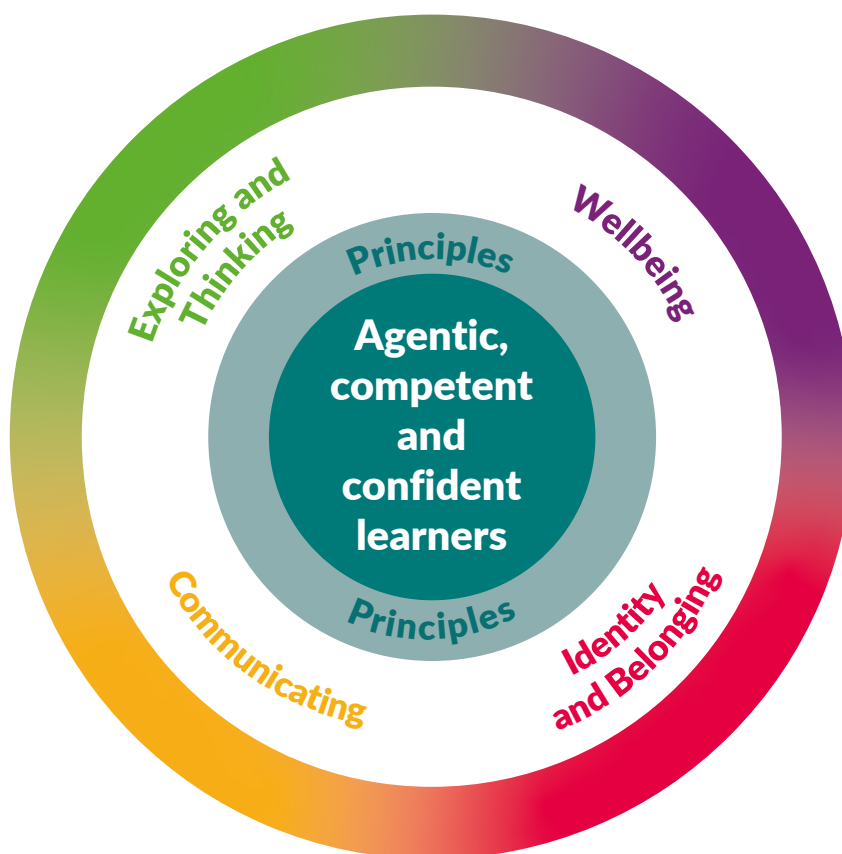


Figure 4: The Themes of Aistear

Wellbeing

The Theme of Wellbeing is about babies, toddlers and young children being confident, *sona* (happy) and healthy.

Wellbeing focuses on developing babies, toddlers and young children's psychological wellbeing (including feeling and thinking) and physical wellbeing.

Positive relationships and interactions contribute significantly to the wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children. Family, educators, the key person, *cairde* (friends) and community members all play a role in enhancing babies, toddlers and young children's sense of wellbeing, *sonas* (happiness), attachment and *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together). Building these relationships through embracing a slow relational pedagogy supports babies, toddlers and young children to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, included and agentic. Having opportunities for play and hands-on experiences, expressing themselves creatively through the arts and experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances babies, toddlers and young children's wellbeing. These provide opportunities for them to enhance their sense of *ionadh* (wonder), awe, stillness, ritual, gratitude and to get enjoyment from life. Educators also support babies, toddlers and young children to understand, express, recognise and co-regulate and self-regulate emotions, to develop empathy and compassion towards self and others. When supported and loved by significant people in their lives, babies, toddlers and young children can be empowered to be resilient and to build a bank of resources to help cope with life's challenges.

Physical *sláinte* (health) is an important aspect of wellbeing and includes learning to make healthy choices about nutrition, routines, rest and sleep, hygiene, exercise, movement, *súgradh* (play) and relationships. It is also about developing an awareness of their bodies as they grow and develop, including bodily autonomy and consent.

Physical wellbeing enables babies, toddlers and young children to explore, to investigate, to be adventurous, be agentic, be creative, to challenge themselves and to risk-assess. It can enhance their strength, co-ordination and development of gross and fine motor skills. Babies, toddlers and young children have a right to experience freedom in their *súgradh* (play) and to make choices about with whom, what and where to play, using assistive technologies where appropriate, to support their meaningful participation. By incorporating assistive technology thoughtfully and intentionally into early childhood education, educators can create inclusive learning environments that empower all to reach their individual potential. Outdoor experiences, contact with *dúlra* (nature) along with active physical play and movement supports wellbeing. All babies, toddlers and young children are empowered to pursue challenging play experiences in ways that acknowledge and build on their current abilities and strengths.

Table 1: Aims and Learning Goals for Wellbeing

Wellbeing

Learning Goals	
Aims	Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, babies, toddlers and young children will:
Aim 1 Babies, toddlers and young children will be strong psychologically and socially.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build secure attachments and experience consistent, reciprocal, nurturing relationships that support <i>muinín</i> (confidence) and connectedness with family, <i>cairde</i> (friends), key person, educators and community. • Be confident, independent and develop self-help and self-care skills, particularly in predicting and handling transitions. • Be empowered to communicate their feelings and emotions to make sense of life experiences, to cope with challenges and to learn to co-regulate and self-regulate.
Aim 2 Babies, toddlers and young children will be as healthy and as active as they can be.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and nurture their bodies and promote their <i>sláinte</i> (health) and wellbeing through positive attitudes and choices that value their preferences in relation to nutrition, routines, rest and sleep, hygiene and exercise. • Use their bodies to move, be active, and experience, explore, and extend their physicality through inclusive environments, indoors and outdoors, through <i>súgradh</i> (play) and <i>spraoi</i> (fun) experiences that encourage practice, challenge, adventure and mastery, using assistive technology where appropriate. • Evaluate, experience and manage risk and adventure, including being <i>misniúil</i> (brave) and learning about body safety, through participation and engagement in the indoor and outdoor learning environment.
Aim 3 Babies, toddlers and young children will be creative, spiritual and compassionate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be <i>cineálta</i> (kind) and <i>fiosrach</i> (curious), deep thinkers and reflective learners. • Be creative and take the initiative to explore, respond to and express themselves through art, drama, dance and music, experiencing the power, joy, excitement, beauty, potential and relevance of the arts. • Enhance their spirituality through nurturing their sense of <i>ionadh</i> (wonder), awe, stillness and gratitude and through respecting ethnicity, culture, traditions, festivals, rituals and <i>dúlra</i> (nature).
Aim 4 Babies, toddlers and young children will be agentic global citizens and have positive outlooks on learning and on life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate agency and express choices, preferences and make decisions for themselves and their communities whilst respecting diversity, equity and inclusion. • Develop holistically and show a sense of mastery and belief in their own abilities, take learning risks, and display learning dispositions such as determination, perseverance, independence, resilience, empathy, compassion and resourcefulness. • Explore and identify their place in the world, and be empowered to live sustainably as agentic, respectful, caring and compassionate global citizens with rights and emerging responsibilities.

Identity and Belonging

The Theme of Identity and Belonging is about babies, toddlers and young children having a positive sense of who they are. It involves knowing they are valued and respected as part of their family and community, and feeling supported by a sense of *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together).

From birth babies, toddlers and young children develop a sense of who they are. Relationships with family members, key person, other educators, *cairde* (friends), peers and members of their community play an important role in building their identities. Babies, toddlers and young children have multiple identities. Their sense of who they are is shaped by their experiences and their environments, as well as their understanding of themselves, their family and others in their local and global communities. Belonging is about babies, toddlers and young children having a secure relationship, a feeling of *aoibhneas croí* (gladness of heart) with people in their life. When babies, toddlers and young children feel a sense of belonging and a sense of *bród* (pride) in their families, *cairde* (friends), peers, and in communities, they can be emotionally strong, self-assured, resilient and able to deal with challenges and difficulties. A sense of identity and belonging creates an important foundation for early learning and development.

Aistear supports giving babies, toddlers and young children messages of *meas* (respect), *grá* (love) and encouragement. This gives them a positive sense of who they are and *muinín* (confidence) in knowing that their voice is listened to, heard and responded to. These messages also give them *muinín* (confidence) to express their views and opinions, to make choices, and to help shape their own learning. Aistear embraces diversity and encourages educators to reflect on their practices to ensure all babies, toddlers and young children have equitable experiences and can participate meaningfully. This includes babies, toddlers and young children with language diversity, neurodiversity, and any additional needs related to their ability or background. Reflection supports educators in developing insights, self-awareness and skills to empower babies, toddlers and young children to develop a strong sense of identity and belonging. This helps ensure all babies, toddlers and young children are respected and valued and that they can recognise and be empowered to respond proactively to stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination.

Table 2: Aims and Learning Goals for Identity and Belonging

Identity and Belonging

	Learning Goals
Aims	Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, babies, toddlers and young children will:
<p>Aim 1</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will have strong self-identities and will be respected and celebrated as unique individuals with their own life stories.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build respectful and caring relationships with others and appreciate the uniqueness and diversity of self and others. • Feel <i>bród</i> (pride) and <i>muinín</i> (confidence) in coming to know their own <i>scéal</i> (story), history, culture(s), identities and home language(s). • Feel valued and see themselves and their interests and identities reflected in the environment, knowing that their ideas, preferences, needs and rights, as well as those of their <i>cairde</i> (friends) and peers, are noticed and responded to with <i>meas</i> (respect), empathy and consistency.
<p>Aim 2</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will have a sense of group identity with <i>cairde</i> (friends), peers, educators, their family and community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know that they have a place and a right to be part of the group, instinctively recognising that they, and the important people in their lives, are welcomed, included and celebrated. • Be able to share personal experiences about their own families, backgrounds and culture(s), and come to know, understand and celebrate the diversity of family structure, ways of living, customs, traditions and festivals. • See themselves as part of the community by coming to know the features and people of the locality, to know their responsibility to care for and look after the environment and know <i>meitheal</i> (community spirit of coming together) in their lives.
<p>Aim 3</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will express their rights and will be supported to develop an understanding and regard for the identity, rights and views of others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know there is a space where they can be at ease, communicate their views and feel confident that their voice, in their varying forms, are heard and responded to in all matters affecting them. • Begin to understand the rules and boundaries of relationships, learning to interact co-operatively and help others, as well as knowing they are supported to co-regulate and self-regulate their emotions. • Develop a sense of social justice and fairness, be aware of and respect their own and others' needs, rights and feelings while also developing the skills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution.
<p>Aim 4</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will see themselves as agentic, competent and confident learners.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a broad range of abilities and interests, being motivated to achieve by valuing their own unique strengths and ways of learning. • Show increasing <i>muinín</i> (confidence) and self-assurance in directing and assessing their own learning and sharing their funds of knowledge with others. • Demonstrate dispositions like curiosity, persistence, independence and responsibility through engagement with learning experiences inspired by <i>súgradh</i> (play) and <i>spraíúlacht</i> (playfulness).

Communicating

The Theme of Communicating is about babies, toddlers and young children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, feelings, interests, needs and rights with others with growing *muinín* (confidence) and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.

Each baby, toddler and young child communicates, participates, contributes, connects and interacts with others in their own way and in their own time. Communicating is a two-way process in which they learn to share experiences and also to interpret what others are sharing with them. Babies, toddlers and young children use multiple ways of communicating, including but not limited to: talking, silences, facial expressions, gestures, behaviours, body movements, crying, cooing, babbling, language(s) and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). They may communicate through Irish Sign Language (ISL), Lámh or Braille or express themselves through the arts, mark-making, dance, drama, music, poetry, pictures, writing and stories. By being attuned to the multiple ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate, educators can listen to and interpret what they tell us. Educators support language acquisition so babies, toddlers and young children feel validated, understood, respected and included. *Aistear* creates opportunities for babies, toddlers and young children to learn about their own and other languages and cultures within a multicultural society. This includes learning about the importance of *Gaeilge* (Irish) in our cultural and linguistic heritage.

Babies, toddlers and young children broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of their experiences through language(s) and emergent literacies. A strong foundation in oral language(s) is important. Babies, toddlers and young children also quickly learn about the power and meaning of symbols. They start to comprehend and use a wide vocabulary and make and use symbols to express feelings, thoughts and ideas. An inclusive, print rich environment supports emergent literacy and emergent numeracy and nurtures a *grá* (love) of reading. Over time, the skills of reading, writing and numeracy enrich this experience. Early communicating experiences help babies, toddlers and young children develop positive learning dispositions about languages, literacies, numeracy and communicating.

Through *súgradh* (play) and playful experiences, babies, toddlers and young children can enjoy and benefit from expressing themselves creatively and imaginatively. Music, dance, art and drama awaken joy, freedom and *spráíúlacht* (playfulness), not only for the babies, toddlers and young children, but for the educators too. Sharing and nurturing the processes of creativity and artistic interpretation inspires *muinín* (confidence), resilience and *sonas* (happiness). Experiencing an inclusive and rich communicative environment empowers babies, toddlers and young children to be agentic, competent and confident communicators.

Table 3: Aims and Learning Goals for Communicating

Communicating

	Learning Goals
Aims	Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, babies, toddlers and young children will:
<p>Aim 1</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will use multiple ways of communicating.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be agentic communicators who influence and initiate interactions, <i>cómhra</i> (conversations) and decisions. • Share, recognise, understand, interpret and respond to the many ways humans communicate including but not limited to vocalisations, facial expressions, gestures, body language and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). • Combine different communication strategies to express choices, ideas, feelings and opinions, to listen and to learn to respect the choices, ideas, feelings and opinions of others.
<p>Aim 2</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will use language(s).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interact and communicate, including using oral language(s), with <i>muinín</i> (confidence) and competence for a range of purposes including but not limited to silences, crying, babbling, chatting, discussing, playing, experimenting, questioning, thinking, taking risks and exploring sound/pattern/rhythm/rhyme/repetition, using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) where appropriate. • Interact with others for giving and receiving information, listening and taking turns in <i>cómhra</i> (conversations) and storytelling, clarifying thinking, ideas and feelings, asking questions, refusing, negotiating and problem-solving. • Become confident and positive about the national languages of <i>Gaeilge</i> (Irish), English, Irish Sign Language (ISL), their home language(s) and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages.
<p>Aim 3</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of their world through emergent literacy and numeracy experiences.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build awareness of the variety of symbols (pictures, print, numbers, visual supports) used to communicate, and use these in enjoyable and meaningful ways, and realise that these can be understood by others. • Experience an inclusive, print-rich environment to promote emergent literacy and numeracy and learn the value of books and digital technologies, where developmentally appropriate, as a source of information to learn about the world. • Have opportunities for mark-making. Use a variety of media in a multitude of ways, including but not limited to, the arts and different types of <i>súgradh</i> (play) as ways to interpret and share experiences, to solve problems and to clarify thinking, ideas and feelings.
<p>Aim 4</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn to share feelings, thoughts and ideas through different types of <i>súgradh</i> (play) and through playful, inclusive and creative experiences including, but not limited to, the arts, dance, drama, music, song and <i>scéal</i> (story). • Communicate and develop emergent literacy and numeracy skills through creative expression using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), where appropriate, and skills such as mark-making, cutting, drawing, transient art, sticking, painting, building, printing, sculpting, threading, sewing and weaving, emphasising the process over product. • Develop and show <i>muinín</i> (confidence) in trying out new things, taking risks, problem-solving, thinking critically and expressing themselves in a variety of ways.

Exploring and Thinking

The Theme of Exploring and Thinking is about babies, toddlers and young children being *fiosrach* (curious) and making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, thinking, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas.

Babies, toddlers and young children use their senses, their minds and their bodies to find out about and make sense of what they see, feel and experience in the world around them. When they feel safe, secure and supported, they enjoy exploring and finding out about their world. The learning environments, indoors and outdoors, provide relevant, meaningful, play-based and hands-on learning experiences for babies, toddlers and young children. Through provocations, inquiry and investigations they build knowledge and understanding, develop schemas, develop new skills and dispositions, and explore and think.

Babies, toddlers and young children enjoy exploring early STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) concepts and ideas and testing these out. They also learn about the past and the influence of history on them and their communities. They learn about geography, about life on land and life in the sea. Through active exploration of their environment, child-initiated play and intentional pedagogies, babies, toddlers and young children learn about their world and come to an awareness and understanding of their role as global citizens in caring for the earth.

Through interacting with others in *súgradh* (play) and hands-on, inquiry-based learning experiences, babies, toddlers and young children are empowered to be creative, to take risks, and to make discoveries. They learn how to think critically and to be creative. As they play and interact, they are reflecting on

and assessing their own learning. They retest their theories, taking on board new discoveries and experiences, in an inclusive and accessible learning environment. They may use digital technology, where developmentally appropriate, to support their learning. The benefits of digital technology, both plugged and unplugged experiences, and the internet are balanced alongside the rights and the safety of babies, toddlers and young children. By balancing plugged and unplugged experiences, educators can create a learning environment that harnesses the benefits of digital technology while nurturing holistic learning and development.

All babies, toddlers and young children are *fiosrach* (curious) and have an innate drive to get to know the workings of their world. Educators can foster learning by preparing the environment and by planning a blend of free-play, guided play and educator-led playful experiences and provocations for babies, toddlers and young children through which they can experience success as learners. This means planning experiences that are suited to their individual needs and that connect with their experiences and interests. At the same time, babies, toddlers and young children are introduced to new interests and experiences. They are challenged to extend their knowledge, refine their skills, and work together to solve problems so that they are curious and resilient explorers and creative thinkers.

Table 4: Aims and Learning Goals for Exploring and Thinking

Exploring and Thinking

	Learning Goals
Aims	Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, babies, toddlers and young children will:
<p>Aim 1</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will learn about and make sense of the world around them.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage, explore and experiment in their environment through integrated artistic, linguistic, musical, geographical, historical and STEM learning experiences. • Come to understand concepts such as matching, comparing, ordering, sorting, estimating, counting, spatial awareness, size, weight, height, length, capacity and money through <i>súgradh</i> (play) and playful experiences in an enjoyable and meaningful way. • Recognise their connection to and responsibility for the environment and their community and come to know and respect local people, flora and fauna.
<p>Aim 2</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will develop and use skills and strategies for observing, questioning, investigating, understanding, negotiating and problem-solving and come to see themselves as explorers and thinkers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make connections and associations between new learning and what they already know, having the time and space to explore and develop theories about how the world works. • Explore a variety of resources, provocations, open-ended and natural materials, as well as digital technologies where developmentally appropriate, to investigate, to research and to find out about the world around them. • Collaborate and play with others to share interests, to learn about the past, the present and the future, to solve problems, to be creative and to think logically.
<p>Aim 3</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will have opportunities to learn, to connect with <i>dúlra</i> (nature) and to spend meaningful time in the outdoors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feel a connection and sense of <i>ómós áite</i> (value of place), by being present in <i>dúlra</i> (nature) and having stories, folklore and <i>súgradh</i> (play) merging with local heritage in coming to know the environment in a deeper way throughout the seasons. • Develop sensory awareness of colours, shapes, smells, sounds and movement; challenging themselves in adventurous and active play. • Learn about life on land and life in water through experiencing, discovering, questioning, engaging, investigating and using digital technologies, where developmentally appropriate, and use books to research and extend knowledge about our planet.
<p>Aim 4</p> <p>Babies, toddlers and young children will have positive attitudes towards learning and develop dispositions like independence, curiosity, <i>spráúlacht</i> (playfulness), perseverance, resilience, <i>muinín</i> (confidence), resourcefulness and risk-taking.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate growing <i>muinín</i> (confidence) in being able to do things for themselves, seeing themselves as agentic learners who are open to new ideas and experiences. • Develop higher-order thinking skills such as problem-solving, predicting, analysing, questioning and justifying through <i>súgradh</i> (play) and playful explorations. • Think together to build meaning and understanding as well as being <i>fiosrach</i> (curious) about how to use letters, words, sentences, numbers, signs, pictures, colour and shapes to give and record information, to describe and to make sense of their own and others' experiences through play and hands-on experiences.

Glossary

Agency	Agency for babies, toddlers and young children is being able to make choices about and in their learning. Their agency is evident in the way they practically and emotionally transform the lives of those around them. They influence relationships, decisions and the working of their social worlds.
Agentic	<p>Agentic is when a baby, toddler or young child is empowered and makes choices and decisions for themselves. Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning.</p> <p>For the educator, being agentic means that they have the freedom to use their knowledge and skills to interpret <i>Aistear</i> to support learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children in their care.</p>
Assistive Technology	Assistive Technology (AT) is any item that supports babies, toddlers and young children's ability to actively participate in their environment. AT may include items like magnification software, interactive touch screens, adapted equipment or switch-operated toys.
Augmentative and Alternative Communication	Communication devices, systems, strategies and tools that replace or support spoken language are known as Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). They can be used to enhance or substitute speech. It includes any form of communication besides spoken words used with oral speech or instead of oral speech.
Bias	Prejudice for or against one person or group of people, especially in a way that may be considered unfair.
Bodily autonomy	The right of babies, toddlers and young children to govern what happens to their body.
Circle of security	A circle of security is a trusting and respectful relationship between babies, toddlers and young children, their caregivers, and other important people in their lives, fostering a supportive environment for learning and development.
Consent	Consent is when we seek permission for something to happen or make an agreement to do something or having something done to you. It requires respect and communication from both parties and is an important concept for babies, toddlers and young children to learn about from a young age. Consent includes knowledge about, and respect for, their own and others' boundaries.
Co-regulate/ co-regulation	Caring, responsive interactions that provide the support and modelling to babies, toddlers and young children to understand, express and process their thoughts, emotions and behaviours.
Curriculum	All the experiences, formal and informal, planned and unplanned in the indoor and outdoor environment that babies, toddlers and young children experience.
Curriculum framework	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.
Digital technologies	Digital technologies refer to electronic tools and devices. This includes but is not limited to computers, tablets, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools, digital cameras, specialised software, Assistive Technologies, light boxes, microscopes, overhead projectors, microphones, speakers, mobile phones and the internet. Digital technologies may involve plugged and unplugged experiences (see below).

Discrimination	Includes policies, practices or behaviours that lead to unfair treatment of individuals or groups on the basis of their identity or perceived identity. It can be intentional or unintentional and may be direct or indirect.
Dispositions	Dispositions are character traits that babies, toddlers and young children possess from birth and are unique to each individual. Dispositions are influenced, both positively and negatively, by interactions and relationships, and the lived experience of babies, toddlers and young children. A disposition is the tendency to respond to situations in characteristic ways.
Diversity	Diversity is about all the ways in which people differ, and how they live their lives as individuals, within groups, and as part of a wider social group. It is about welcoming and valuing difference as part of life. It is about respecting and celebrating differences while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness.
Emergent and inquiry-based curriculum approach	An approach to learning and development that uses babies, toddlers and young children's interests, curiosity, questions and experiences as starting points of inquiry. This includes the interests of educators and the wider community. Babies, toddlers and young children's engagement with people, materials, ideas and events triggers their curiosity and motivation to learn. It supports them to investigate and research through playing, experimenting, questioning, conversations and thinking.
Emergent literacy	Babies, toddlers and young children develop a growing understanding of language(s) and print as a foundation for communicating, reading and writing. Literacy in early childhood involves the development of communication and language and the exploration and development of literacy skills, concepts, knowledge and understanding. Through play and hands-on experiences, babies, toddlers and young children see and interact with print as they become curious about and build an awareness of its functions and conventions, and learn they can be understood by others.
Emergent numeracy	Babies, toddlers and young children develop a growing understanding of mathematical concepts in the world around them. Numeracy in early childhood involves the exploration and development of mathematical skills, concepts, knowledge and understanding. Through play and hands-on experiences, babies, toddlers and young children see and interact with concepts such as number, shape and space, size, volume, etc. as they become curious about and build an awareness of their functions and purpose.
Equality	Equality refers to the importance of recognising, respecting, and engaging with the diversity of individuals and group needs, and of ensuring equality in terms of access, participation, conditions and benefits for all babies, toddlers and young children and their families.
Equity	Equity is primarily about fairness and being fair to, and with, all babies, toddlers and young children. This means treating babies, toddlers and young children fairly in their interactions and learning experiences in early childhood.
Ethnicity	Ethnicity refers to a social group that shares a common and distinctive culture, religion or language. Ethnicity includes babies, toddlers and young children's identification with a group having some or all of the following shared characteristics: culture, food, language, forms of dress, religion, lifestyle, traditions, customs and nationality. An ethnic group is a group that sees itself or is regarded by others as a distinct community by virtue of certain characteristics that help distinguish it from other groups.

Funds of knowledge	Funds of knowledge refers to the valuable skills, knowledge and interests that babies, toddlers and young children learn from their families and communities. This can include things like cooking, gardening, shopping, farming, storytelling and cultural traditions. Educators use this information to nurture and extend early learning and development through providing meaningful learning experiences and provocations that connect with the everyday lives of babies, toddlers and young children.
Influence	Refers to the views and opinions of babies, toddlers and young children having a meaningful impact on decisions that affect their learning and development.
Inquiry-based learning	Encouraging babies, toddlers and young children to explore, ask questions, think critically, problem-solve, investigate topics of interest, construct and progress their own understanding and knowledge and to be curious and creative.
Intentional pedagogies	The purposeful actions of educators to facilitate, support and extend babies, toddlers and young children's learning experiences, needs, interests, ideas, skills and strengths.
Key person approach	The key person approach ensures each baby, toddler and young child, is assigned a named person, this may be an early years educator and/or childminder, who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with them and their families.
Lámh	A manual sign system used by children and adults in Ireland with intellectual disability and communication needs.
Multicultural	A variety of people or groups from different cultures or ethnicities.
Open-ended materials	Open-ended materials are materials that can be used in numerous ways indoors and outdoors by babies, toddlers and young children. They can be moved, carried, combined and redesigned in any way the baby, toddler or young child decides. These materials can be natural or manufactured and can be sourced in several ways from nature, the home and other recycled materials.
Parent	'Parent' refers to mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians and carers.
Participation	Babies, toddlers and young children are involved in decision-making, their views are listened to, taken seriously and given due weight with the intention of leading to an outcome or change.
Pedagogy	This refers to all the educator's actions or work in supporting babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful and reflective learning experience for all involved.
Plugged experiences	These type of experiences are called 'plugged' as the materials need power to work. Some examples of plugged experiences in early childhood may include the use of digital cameras, digital storytelling, digital microscopes, robotics or light boxes.
Provocations	Provocations are resources that are set out and/or set up to spark curiosity and engagement. They may be open-ended or focused on a specific interest or learning goal. Provocations can be touched, explored, manipulated and inquired about as part of free-play, guided-play or educator-led playful experiences.

Rights-based	An understanding of babies, toddlers and young children as rights-holders who are provided with meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about their lives.
Self-regulate	This is the developing ability of a baby, toddler or young child to begin to understand and manage behaviours, reactions and emotions and continues to develop into adulthood.
Slow relational pedagogy	This involves taking time and being present to nurture supportive, stable, warm relationships that promote secure attachments with caregivers, healthy and safe environments and meaningful learning experiences for babies, toddlers and young children.
Social justice	Social justice is the fair and equitable distribution of resources, opportunities and privileges within a society, ensuring that all individuals have equal access to basic needs and opportunities.
Spirituality	Spirituality is concerned with love for life, others, and a sense of connection with oneself, others, nature, the world and, for some, a larger purpose or higher power. It involves personal beliefs and practices that may or may not be linked to organised religion.
Stillness	Stillness is about being quiet, calm and focused. It is about noticing and being in the wonder of the present moment.
Strengths-based approach	A strengths-based approach focuses on babies, toddlers and young children's personal strengths and capabilities in a holistic way, seeing what they 'can' do, and using these strengths to support progression in their learning and development.
Sustainability	Babies, toddlers and young children learning to care for themselves, others and the environment.
Transient art	A form of creative expression that involves using open-ended materials to create non-permanent artworks.
Traveller	The Irish Traveller Community also known as Travellers, Mincéir or Pavee are an indigenous traditionally nomadic ethnic minority group originating in Ireland. Travellers were formally recognised by the state in 2017 as a distinct ethnic group in the Irish nation. As with all ethnic groups, the Traveller community is diverse and not homogeneous.
Unplugged experiences	These experiences are called 'unplugged' as the materials do not need power to work. These experiences are hands-on and tactile encouraging play, creativity, problem-solving and social interaction. Babies, toddlers and young children use, inquire and experiment with a range of materials to figure out what they do and how they work, for example playing with magnets, blocks or jigsaws. Unplugged also includes experiences with real world digital tools and resources such as calculators and weighing scales to enhance developmentally appropriate learning experiences. These experiences lay the foundation for digital literacy and mathematical skills such as problem-solving, sequencing and spatial reasoning.
Voice	The many ways babies, toddlers and young children express their views, feelings and emotions including but not limited to talking, silences, cries, utterances, facial expressions, actions, reactions, eye-movements, Augmentative and Alternative Communication, song, mark-making, the arts and conversations.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Guidance for Good Practice

Prepared by the National Council for
Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA)
2024



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Introduction

Aistear is the curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in all settings other than primary and special schools. Originally published in 2009, it was updated in 2024. The Framework's Vision presents a view of babies, toddlers and young children as agentic, competent and confident and educators as agentic, competent, confident and reflective. It includes nine Principles of early learning and development. *Aistear* describes babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development through the four interconnected Themes of:

- **Wellbeing**
- **Identity and Belonging**
- **Communicating**
- **Exploring and Thinking.**

The *Guidance for Good Practice* 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 *Guidance* is presented under five areas:

- Supporting learning and development through a rights-based approach
- Supporting learning and development through relationships and interactions
- Supporting learning and development through partnership and connections
- Supporting learning and development through play
- Supporting learning and development through a reflective cycle of planning and assessing.

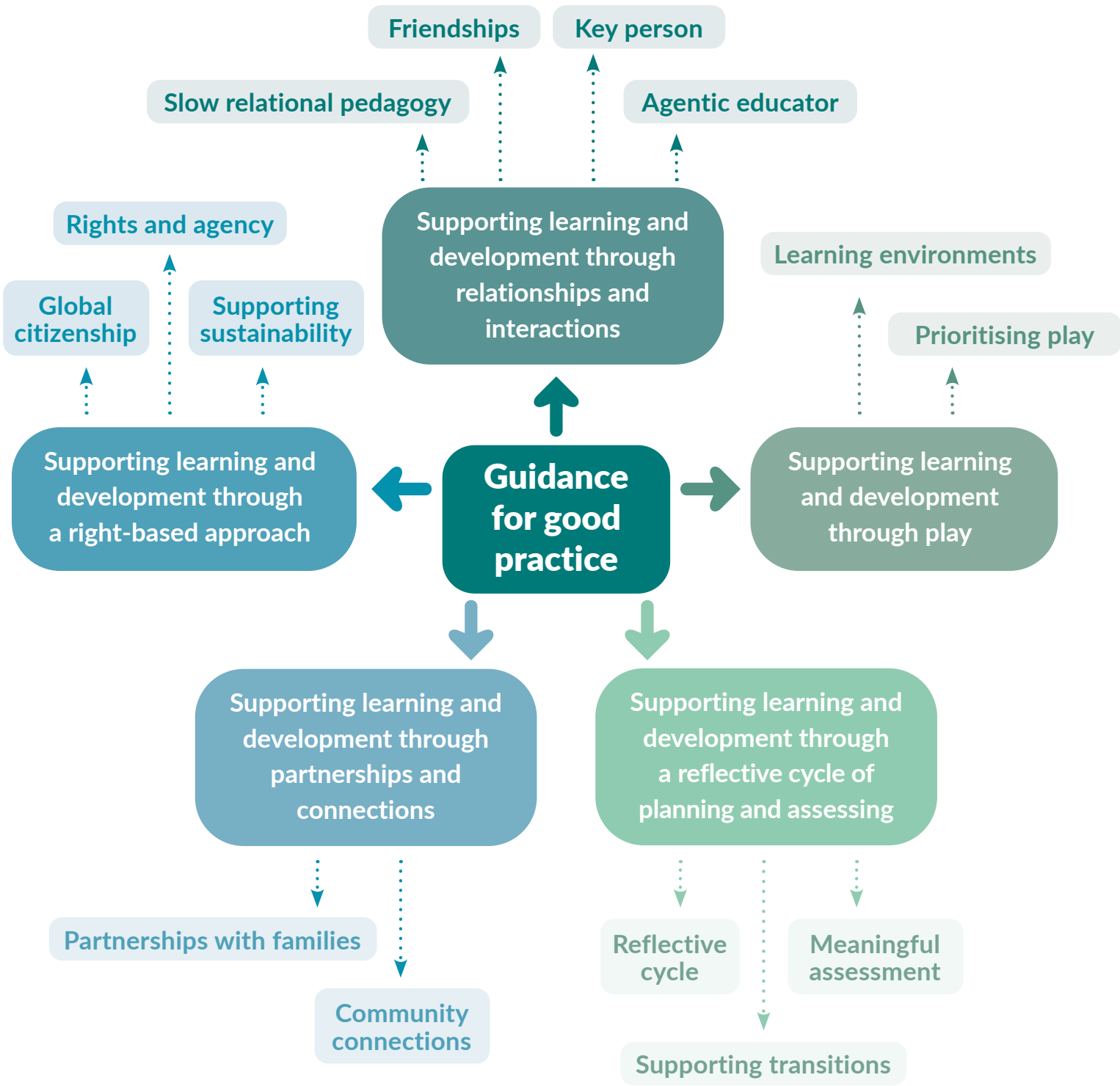


Figure 1: Contents of Guidance for Good Practice

A photograph of a child climbing a tree. The child is wearing a grey hoodie and red shorts. Their hands are gripping a tree branch, and their feet are visible at the bottom. The background is a lush green forest. A teal banner is overlaid on the top left of the image, containing the title text. On the right side of the teal banner, there are three horizontal lines in purple, red, and green, and a vertical dotted line runs down the right edge of the page.

Supporting Learning and Development through a Rights-Based Approach

Ní le hoidhreacht a fhaighimid an talamh, ach ar iasacht ónár gclann

We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children

Rights and agency

Each baby, toddler and young child is a rights-holder. *Aistear* describes how the curriculum can provide meaningful opportunities for babies, toddlers and young children to learn about their rights and to experience how these rights are realised through the early childhood curriculum. Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be cared for, nurtured and supported to grow and develop. They have the right to be treated fairly and without discrimination. Their best interests must always be the centre of early childhood experiences, embedded in respectful relationships and interactions. These rights are unconditional and form the foundation of early childhood education and care.

Aistear presents babies, toddlers and young children as active participants and agents of change in their own lives. This means respecting their views in matters affecting them and providing choice so they are involved in decision-making. Agency is embedded in respectful relationships where the rights of babies, toddlers and young children are nurtured and realised. Agentic has a slightly different meaning to agency. Being agentic is when a baby, toddler or young child is empowered and makes choices and decisions for themselves. Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning (Figure 2). In early childhood, 'voice' can refer to the many ways that babies, toddlers and young children communicate their views, feelings and emotions.

'Voice' can be, but is not limited to, talking, silences, cries, utterances, facial expressions, actions, reactions, eye-movements, Augmentative and Alternative Communication, song, mark-making, the arts and *comhrá* (conversations).

Agency for babies, toddlers and young children is being able to make choices about and in their learning.



Figure 2: The agentic, baby, toddler and young child

There are times when babies, toddlers and young children will have to depend on educators, family and other people in their lives to facilitate, interpret, understand and respond to their needs, rights and wants. Respecting and being attuned to the voice of the baby, toddler and young child is central to the educator's role. *Aistear* places emphasis on important relationships and emotional attachments with and between educators as well as those they care for and educate in early childhood.

By creating the time and space to respond to the voices of babies, toddlers and young children, educators can ensure that:

- all are treated fairly and respectfully
- they have what they need to thrive and flourish
- their best interests are at the heart of an inclusive and participatory early childhood curriculum.

Aistear emphasises the importance of educators being aware of the significance of reflecting on their views of the babies, toddlers and young children they work with. Such reflection by educators enhances how they understand their responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of babies, toddlers and young children.

Aistear acknowledges that some babies, toddlers and young children may need extra support or resources to ensure equality of opportunity and empower them to participate and be fully included. This means removing barriers for those more vulnerable to exclusion. Equity in early childhood is about fairness in addressing any challenges that a baby, toddler or young child might face because of their background or ability.

Global citizenship in early childhood

Aistear promotes learning and development, guided by a respectful rights-based approach. By acknowledging babies, toddlers and young children's evolving capacities as they grow and mature, there is an emphasis on their emerging responsibilities as global citizens. This means that babies, toddlers and young children are viewed as citizens of the world and come to understand the wider world and their place in it.

Aistear presents an understanding of global citizenship where every baby, toddler and young child, is viewed as an active member of their community having deep connections with people and place, valuing justice, equity and human rights.

Global citizenship is embedded in the Learning Goals of *Aistear*. The Framework supports meaningful opportunities to nurture holistic learning and development by helping babies, toddlers and young children build their knowledge and wisdom about the world and the people who live here. There is a particular emphasis on the use of meaningful *súgradh* (play) and hands-on learning experiences to support babies, toddlers and young children to learn. These experiences help them to develop the dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding to take action now, and in the future, for a more just, peaceful, sustainable and equitable world.

Supporting sustainability as global citizens

Each baby, toddler and young child has emerging responsibilities for living sustainably. Helping babies, toddlers and young children connect with various services, settings, places, people and *dúlra* (nature) beyond their immediate surroundings creates an awareness of their *ómós áite* (value of place) and belonging within the wider community.

Education for sustainable development in Aistear focuses on how babies, toddlers and young children are supported to care for themselves, others and the environment and are collectively treated with *meas* (respect), empathy, *cineáltas* (kindness) and equity.

Learning about sustainability focuses attention on the wonders of our world. Nurturing babies, toddlers and young children's sense of *ionadh* (wonder) and awe in local history, folklore and storytelling, and nurturing an interest in *dúlra* (nature) and native trees, plants and wildlife, establishes a mindful awareness of *ómós áite* (value of place). Educators promote a culture of *meas* (respect) and responsibility in supporting babies, toddlers and young children to come to know about climate action and biodiversity. They are also supported to learn about issues such as inequity, poverty and discrimination. This can include showing compassion for the planet and the people that live on it, supporting collective wellbeing, and developing a sense of social justice and equity.





A woman with blonde hair, wearing a black jacket over a blue top, is blowing bubbles using a white wand with an orange base. She is looking down at a young child with curly hair who is sitting on a red plastic chair. The background is a colorful playground with blue and yellow structures. Several bubbles are floating in the air around them.

Supporting Learning and Development through Relationships and Interactions

Ní neart go cur le chéile
Together we are stronger

Slow relational pedagogy

Early childhood is a time of being, of enjoying and of learning from experiences as they unfold. Slow relational pedagogy is about slowing down, taking time, being present in that moment with the baby, toddler and young child. Each baby, toddler and young child develops at their own pace and in their own way. The educator tailors their interactions and practice to support this special period of human development.

Relationships and interactions are the centre of early childhood education and care where babies, toddlers and young children thrive in the context of stable, caring and positive relationships with educators who provide security, *grá* (love), time and space.

Slow relational pedagogy supports secure attachment by providing a space for babies, toddlers and young children to bond with more than one person outside of their family. This helps ensure they are nestled in nurturing relationships when away from their family. When families face challenges, early years educators and/or childminders play a particularly crucial role in building these attachment bonds. Slow relational pedagogy is good for all as it highlights the importance of respecting each baby, toddler and young child's unique life experiences. It also helps identify who needs additional support at different times and in different circumstances.

Table 1: Features of a slow relational pedagogy

Features of a slow relational pedagogy include:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ensuring babies, toddlers and young children have the time, freedom and space to be and to show they are agentic, competent and confident.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being attuned to feelings, needs and rights. Being able to interpret cues and the many ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate to ensure their voice is heard and responded to.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being emotionally and physically present in the moment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Making time throughout the day for noticing, nurturing, responding and reflecting on each baby, toddler and young child's needs, interests, abilities and wants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Giving feedback (verbal and non-verbal), naming and affirming efforts, celebrating progress and achievements, taking a strengths-based approach, helping babies, toddlers and young children to learn from mistakes, setbacks and challenges, and to plan for, document and assess their learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enabling the development of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, underpinned by play, that is built around each baby, toddler and young child's emerging interests, caring routines, cultural backgrounds, abilities, funds of knowledge and early friendships while also responding to the group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supporting transitions every day, into and out of the learning environment and within their daily routines through individualised support based on the knowledge of and relationship with the baby, toddler and young child.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Building partnerships with families in a mindful, respectful way, with cultural sensitivity to family values and parenting practices, which can then be respected and replicated within the setting, if appropriate.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing and experiencing <i>meitheal</i> (a sense of community), and being aware of rights and emerging responsibilities in that community space.

The key person approach

The key person approach ensures each baby, toddler and young child, is assigned a named person, this may be an early years educator and/or childminder, who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with them. The key person may also be a point of contact for the family and works in partnership with them to support the individual potential of each baby, toddler and young child. In knowing the value and uniqueness of each baby, toddler and young child in their care, the key person also knows the value of their role in facilitating, guiding, scaffolding, leading and

nurturing holistic learning and development. This is achieved through the interconnection of care and education. Importantly, the key person does not work in isolation and has the support of other educators to nurture and care for babies, toddlers and young children in the learning environment.

The role of the key person is central to building relationships and to implementing slow relational pedagogy. When away from their family, babies, toddlers and young children need the stability of a consistent and personal relationship with an educator who knows them well and whom

they trust and can rely on. The key person supports transitions into, within and from the setting and are the link between families and settings. They connect babies, toddlers and young children's social worlds, supporting their rights and holistic learning and development. They work and reflect with colleagues to create an inclusive learning environment and equality of opportunity for all babies, toddlers and young children. This builds communities of practice as well as partnerships with important people in the lives of babies, toddlers and young children.

Friendships

Cairdeas (Friendship) with others enriches the lives of babies, toddlers and young children. Making *cairde* (friends) and being together nurtures a sense of self, being valued and belonging. It builds connections so there is a desire to care for and look out for each other. Friendships are celebrated in *Aistear* by providing opportunities for joyful, shared experiences and togetherness. Unhurried routines create time and space for babies, toddlers and young children to be in the present moment, enjoying each other's company and the wonderful ideas and creations that develop from their *súgradh* (play) and interactions. Relationships with peers and siblings provide babies, toddlers and young children with emotional support and experiences in leading, following, scaffolding, negotiating, conflict resolution, problem-solving, making mistakes, taking turns and taking risks.

Friendships thrive when babies, toddlers and young children have time each day to play, explore, interact and communicate with the same group, and where they are encouraged and supported to seek help from and to offer help to each other. Their *cairdeas* (friendship) might also help families to build connections with each other and to create networks of support. Even as they grow and move on, the nurturing friendships of early childhood can create a foundation for their expanding social worlds.



The agentic educator

Aistear has been developed for all who come to the Framework with the intention of supporting the learning and development of the baby, toddler or young child in their care. Aistear is intended to be flexible and interpreted from various perspectives including parents, guardians, childminders and early years educators and as such can be engaged with by all.

Aistear supports all educators to be agentic, competent and confident. It places value on the centrality of relationships and nurturing care as well as the intentionality of wanting each baby, toddler and young child to thrive and flourish.

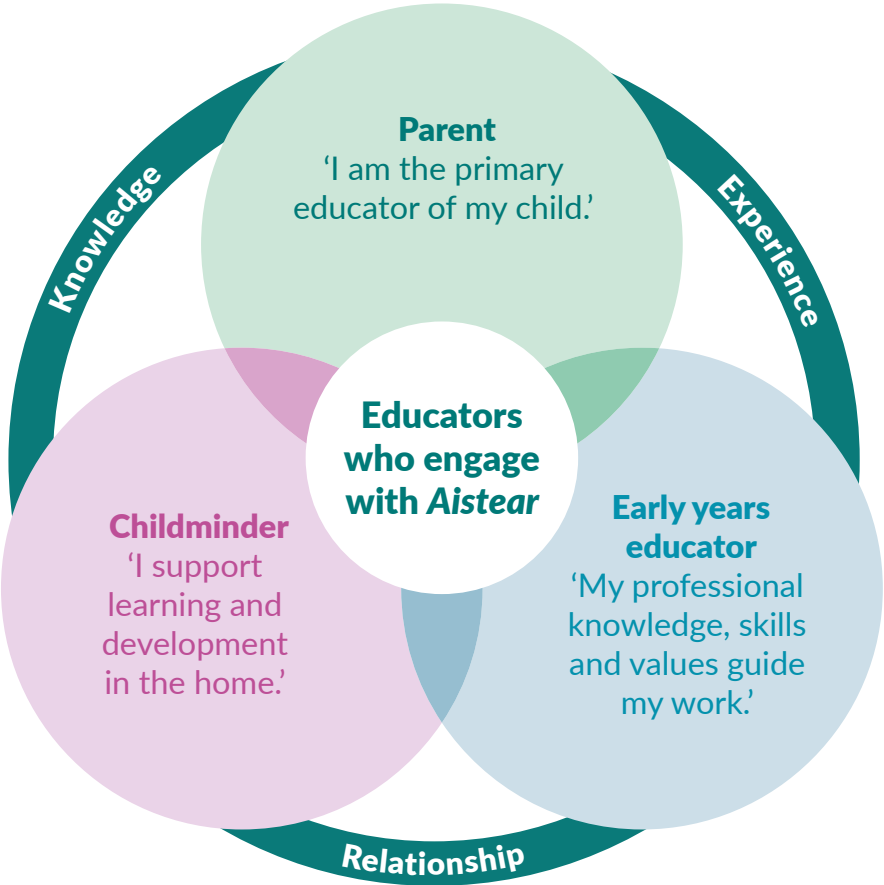


Figure 3: The educator in Aistear

Each educator comes to Aistear informed by their relationship with the baby, toddler, young child, the family, their knowledge and experience, as well as knowing the features of the different learning environments. Being agentic means that the educator has the freedom to use their knowledge and skills to interpret Aistear for the learning and

development of babies, toddlers and young children in their care. The agentic educator recognises the importance of personal-reflection, peer-reflection, building communities of practice and partnership with the important people in the lives of babies, toddlers and young children.

Table 2: Being an agentic educator

Being an agentic educator involves:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpreting <i>Aistear</i> to respond to the learning needs of my group.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using my knowledge and creativity to interpret the Principles and Themes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making informed decisions to support learning and development.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating connections with families and communities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being an agent of change to promote ongoing development.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing what is important for babies, toddlers and young children.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing my role as duty-bearer to promote children's rights.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using my skills to develop a curriculum for my learning environment.

Educators use their knowledge and understanding of *Aistear* to guide, support and facilitate early learning and development. This can be enhanced by being a good role model and modelling positive learning dispositions such as *cineáltas* (kindness), empathy, inclusion, patience, perseverance, *spráúlacht* (playfulness), *fiosracht* (curiosity) and enthusiasm. There is scope for broad and creative interpretation of the Framework to respond to the needs, rights, interests, abilities and wants of babies, toddlers and young children in a holistic, meaningful and respectful way. Within the Framework there is an emphasis on the centrality of the educator in reflecting upon and creating safe, inclusive, aesthetic and challenging spaces, provocations and environments to support holistic learning and development.

Being reflective is about purposefully thinking about what brings joy and fulfilment for each baby, toddler and young child in the inclusive learning environment. The educator considers their practice and what they can do to consolidate and progress babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. The educator also develops plans for their own future learning and development.

For early years educators engaging with the Framework in a professional capacity, *Aistear* can guide and extend existing curriculum approaches. It provides opportunities for creative interpretations to respond to babies, toddlers and young children in their care. *Aistear* emphasises the value of *súgradh* (play) and relationships and the role of the educator in creating time and space for deep engagement, learning and creativity. There is an intention guiding the work of the educator in planning and implementing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum to consolidate and progress the holistic learning and development of each baby, toddler or young child.

Supporting Learning and Development through Partnerships and Connections



Tógann sé meitheal chun leanbh a thógáil
It takes a village to raise a child

Partnerships with families

Building partnerships with families is key to supporting the learning and development of each baby, toddler and young child. Building and maintaining trusting relationships with families is a key responsibility of the educator. It is an ongoing process that takes time and commitment. Just as there is acknowledgment of the slow relational pedagogy guiding interactions with babies, toddlers and young children, there is simultaneously an emphasis on making time and creating space to have meaningful *comhrá* (conversations) and interactions with parents

and families. Through these interactions, early years educators can find out what is important to babies, toddlers and young children and their families to help them feel valued and respected.

Aistear recognises parents as mothers, fathers and those with parental responsibility in different parenting relationships. This may include foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, legal guardians and carers. Working together has many benefits for babies, toddlers, young children and their family as well as for educators.



While *Aistear* can be used in the home learning environment by parents, guardians or childminders engaging with the Framework to support their child's learning and development, this section is for the educator who is liaising and collaborating with the baby, toddler and young child's family.

Partnership involves families and educators working together for the benefit of babies, toddlers and young children. Both families and educators respect and value each other, recognising their mutual responsibilities for supporting the learning and development of the baby, toddler and young child.

Aistear values and promotes the important role of parents and families in supporting learning and development. The potential of intergenerational learning and relationships with older members of families and communities is also acknowledged. *Aistear* values the diversity of each baby, toddler and young child's family structure, culture(s), language(s), as well as the funds of knowledge that they bring from their lived experiences. Collaborating and conversing with families creates opportunities to develop a curriculum that is relevant and meaningful for babies, toddlers and young children. It creates a space for shared learning and co-researching in planning and implementing the curriculum.

There are a variety of ways to involve families so they can be confident, active and involved. Through *Aistear*, the educator is guided to build trusting relationships, particularly with families who may need additional support. To ensure all families are involved, the educator is responsive and uses different approaches based on their knowledge and understanding of the family.

Partnership in action with families can:

- support early learning and development through working together
- involve good communication and sharing information
- involve making decisions together.

Aistear acknowledges the important role of educators in promoting partnership and involving families. They can also provide support and advice to parents and families from their professional perspective.

The Framework highlights the importance of ensuring that the setting is responsive to and reflective of each baby, toddler, young child's and family's individual experience.

Community connections

Babies, toddlers and young children hold a special place in the community and bring joy and *dóchas* (hope) into the lives of people around them. Building and valuing connections creates the potential for bringing the Vision of *Aistear* into the community and creating a sense of *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together). Community connections promote societal awareness of the agentic, competent and confident baby, toddler and young child as well as the importance of early childhood. It also nurtures babies, toddlers and young children's *ómós áite* (value of place) with their community and the wider world.

Aistear also recognises the importance of engaging with others to help babies, toddlers and young children reach their potential by overcoming barriers and by challenging stereotypes, discrimination and prejudice. Communities of practice, peer-reflection and connecting with other professionals and agencies who work in interdisciplinary roles in supporting babies, toddlers and young children and their families is also key. Helping families to access early intervention services and other resources along with collaborating with other professionals who may be involved in the baby, toddler or young child's life is an important role of the educator.



Supporting Learning and Development through Play



An rud a chionn an leanbh, is é a níonn an leanbh
 What the child sees the child does

Prioritising play

Babies, toddlers and young children love to play, and *súgradh* (play) often mirrors what is important in their lives. *Súgradh* (Play) can be quiet or noisy, messy or orderly, funny or serious, strenuous or effortless. It can take place inside or outside, and it develops as babies, toddlers and young children grow and change. *Súgradh* (Play) is central to how babies, toddlers and young children make sense of their world and offers them choices about when, what, where, how, and with whom to play. *Súgradh* (Play) can be a way of building or strengthening a relationship, deepening friendships or starting new ones. Babies, toddlers and young children play for different reasons. Sometimes they are exploring or learning new things. At other times they are consolidating existing learning or practicing a skill.

Súgradh (Play) is valuable and is an enjoyable way of doing things. Each baby, toddler and young child has both a right and a desire to play. They need time and space to develop their *súgradh* (play). Free play is child-initiated and can involve risk, challenge, joy, *dóchas* (hope) and deep engagement. In addition to facilitating and supporting extended periods of uninterrupted child-initiated play, educators can consider shared-play opportunities to engage with babies, toddlers and young children in purposeful and sensitive ways. This can be done through guided-play or by educator-led playful intentional learning experiences. Educators are good play-companions, when attuned to the deep engagement and *súgradh* (play) of babies, toddlers and young children. They are respectful in knowing when to step in and out of *súgradh* (play), trusting the process and sharing the joy. The daily routine flows between free-play, guided-play and educator-led playful experiences providing choice and opportunity for learning and development.

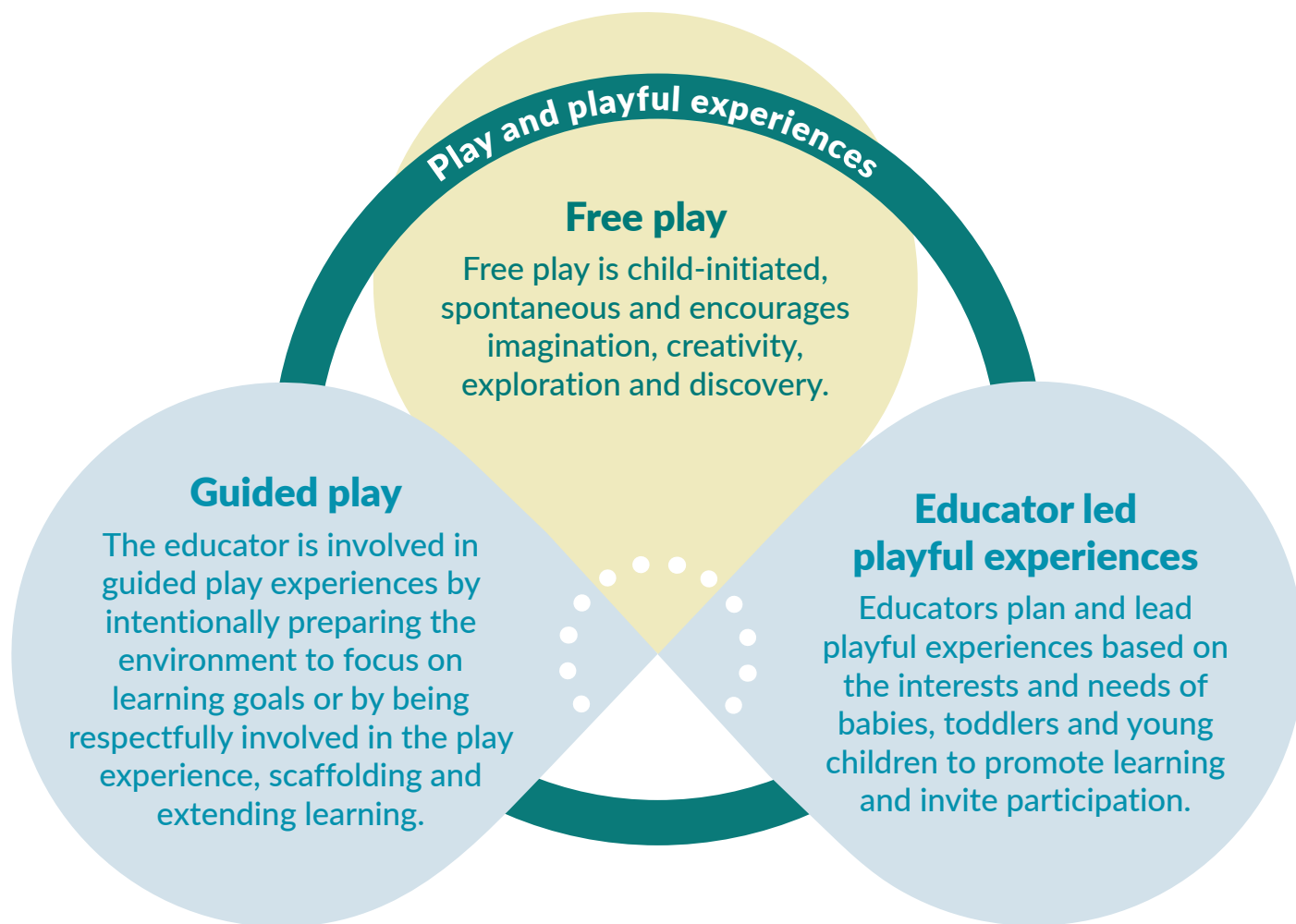



Figure 4: Play and playful experiences

There are different types of *súgradh* (play), including but not limited to sensory play, risky and adventurous play, pretend play, creative play, imaginative/pretend play, messy play, language play, construction and block play, small world play and rough and tumble play.

A photograph of a young child wearing a blue bucket hat and a dark blue jacket, standing at a wooden table outdoors. The child is holding a small piece of food in their hand. On the table, there is a large, brown plastic dinosaur toy with its mouth open. Behind the dinosaur, there is a black bowl filled with various fruits, including red apples and orange slices. The background is a blurred green garden with trees and a wooden fence.

A well-resourced, inclusive environment enables a flow between the different play experiences inside and outside. It also reflects the needs, rights, interests, abilities and wants of babies, toddlers and young children. Provocations for *súgradh* (play) are open-ended, enticing experiences that invoke *fiosracht* (curiosity) and *ionadh* (wonder). They provide opportunities to play bravely, encouraging exploration and investigation which create a space for learning, development, agency, joy and laughter.

Supporting an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum approach which is underpinned by *súgradh* (play) is about noticing and nurturing what is important and relevant in the lives of babies, toddlers, young children and their family, educators and community. It supports them to investigate and research through playing, experimenting, negotiating, problem-solving, questioning, *comhrá* (conversations) and thinking.

Knowing the curiosities of babies, toddlers and young children supports informed intention for the educator in extending learning and creating a world of possibility and *ionadh* (wonder). The routines (including caring, toileting and feeding routines), transitions and flow of the day are embraced in a slow and nurturing way as part of the learning journey.

The inclusive learning environment


Aistear recognises the centrality of an inclusive and responsive environment in creating a space and an atmosphere that fosters enthusiasm for learning for all babies, toddlers and young children.

The inclusive learning environment is understood as the physical space and resources, both indoors and outdoors, the daily routines and transitions, and the relationships and interactions in the setting.

Reflection, observation and consultation with babies, toddlers, young children, families and other relevant stakeholders guide the planning of inclusive learning environments and inform the provocations set out and set up for meaningful engagement and exploration. Educators create inclusive learning environments when they know important information about how they can support babies, toddlers and young children's physical, linguistic, sensory, emotional or additional needs. Enhancing the environment's inclusivity involves providing appropriate materials and provocations and considering the layout and content of the space indoors and outdoors. Resources reflect the needs, interests and abilities of babies, toddlers and young children in guiding their holistic learning and development with an emphasis on open-ended materials. This includes an intentional focus on promoting wellbeing, a sense of identity and belonging, the arts, emergent literacy, emergent numeracy and STEM concepts within a play-based curriculum.

A renewed emphasis on the outdoors, *dúlra* (nature) and the wider world, and a commitment to education for sustainable development, creates further scope for developing babies, toddlers and young children's dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding. Babies, toddlers and young children need access to the outdoors where they can feel connected with and part of the natural world – the sky above, the land below, the flora and fauna of the earth.

Provocations are resources that are set out and/or set up to spark *fiosracht* (curiosity) and engagement. They may be open-ended or focused on a specific interest or learning goal. Provocations can be touched, explored, manipulated and inquired about as part of free-play, guided-play or educator-led playful experiences.



The centrality of communicative spaces where babies, toddlers, young children and educators can be together to interact, listen, notice, observe, share experiences (including enjoying meals together) and be present, supports this reflective and participatory process in the inclusive learning environment. *Aistear* can be interpreted in innovative and creative ways to inspire babies, toddlers and young children's meaningful participation and representation in an inclusive learning environment.

The inclusive environment is responsive to each unique baby, toddler and young child and their particular needs, interests and abilities. It flows and changes through the seasons as babies, toddlers and young children grow, learn new things, and develop new interests. It includes both active and calm spaces, with an ease of access between the indoors and outdoors and freedom to make choices. Everyone is empowered to participate in an inclusive environment.



Supporting Learning and Development through a Reflective Cycle of Planning and Assessing



Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí
Praise the youth and they will succeed

Reflective cycle of planning and assessing

Aistear promotes planning for and developing the curriculum in practice through a continuous cycle of Noticing, Nurturing, Responding and Reflecting (Figure 5). The reflective cycle of planning and assessing supports learning and development through an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum underpinned by *súgradh* (play). It is founded on an understanding of slow relational pedagogy.

This cycle is designed to support meaningful assessment of and for learning and development through opportunities for documenting the curriculum at the different stages of Noticing, Nurturing, Responding and Reflecting. In this way,

ongoing documentation illustrates the importance of the processes of everyday rhythms and routines to babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development. There is an interconnected flow in the processes of Noticing, Nurturing, Responding and Reflecting which recognises the role of the agentic, reflective educator in supporting and facilitating the needs, rights, interests, abilities and wants of the baby, toddler and young child.

The Themes and Learning Goals of Aistear provide the basis for planning and assessing, and for developing an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum to support learning and development in early childhood.

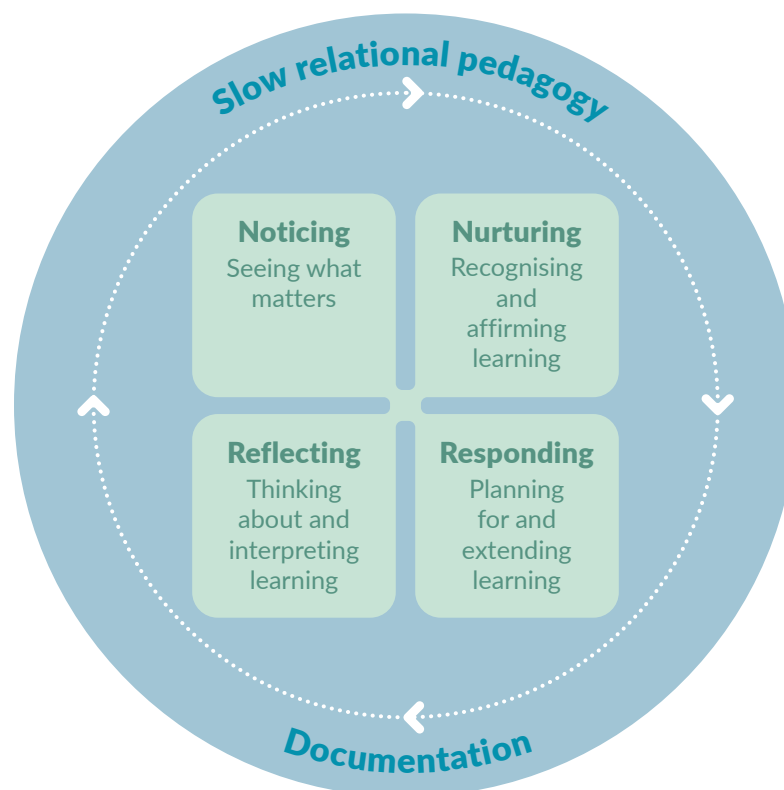


Figure 5: The reflective cycle of planning and assessing

Noticing

When babies, toddlers and young children first come to the early childhood setting or home learning environment, educators begin the process of getting to know them. Through interactions, educators begin to notice important things about the lives of the babies, toddlers and young children in their care. This understanding deepens over time.

Noticing is seeing what matters.

I notice how Molly falls asleep easily in my arms when I sing to her – her favourite song is the same as mine!

Noticing in the home learning environment

I notice how Filip loves the story ‘Brown Bear’, bringing it to the cushion with Ellie to ‘read’ together in the Baby room. He imitates our story routines.

Noticing in the early childhood setting

This act of purposeful noticing is anchored in respectful relationships where the educator is attuned to babies, toddlers and young children, coming to recognise moments that help to build a unique profile of their life stories. Documenting babies, toddlers and young children’s learning is an example of noticing which can be used to get to know the baby, toddler or young child.

In order to notice babies, toddlers and young children’s learning and development, there is an awareness of the importance of a safe, secure, inclusive and *sona* (happy) environment where they can be immersed in their *súgradh* (play). Noticing is about respecting the voice of each baby, toddler and young child and valuing the importance of what they are telling us (Table 3).

Table 3: Noticing what matters to babies, toddlers and young children

Noticing:	
• Their interests	'I love tractors.'
• Their uniqueness	'I like to sit in the quiet area before having breakfast.'
• What matters to them	'Grandad is coming to visit.'
• Moments of joy	'I can crawl all the way to the door.'
• Their achievements	'I climbed all the way to the top of the slide.'
• Their worries	'I don't want to sleep in a cot here.'
• Their progress	'I can build a tower six storeys high.'
• Their intentions	'I wanted to help feed him.'

Nurturing

When educators have the time and space to get to know babies, toddlers and young children, they can see what is important to them and for them. Nurturing involves the educator engaging and interacting with the baby, toddler or young child to nourish and educate through their practice. It focuses attention on the moment. The educator trusts the baby, toddler and young child to take the lead in explorations and inquiries, nurturing their evolving capacities in the process of *súgradh* (play).

Nurturing is recognising, naming and affirming learning in the moment.

- Molly is calm and relaxed in my arms. Today I am going to take the time to share her rest time and listen to music together. This supports our wellbeing and connection.

Nurturing in the home learning environment

- I bring Filip and Ellie a cushion and blanket and leave the basket of books close by. I see how they are communicating with each other and recreating the story in their own way. They point at pictures and I sit nearby to support when they gesture for me to join in.

Nurturing in the early childhood setting

Nurturing is about recognising, naming and affirming what babies, toddlers and young children can do, what learning is happening as well as seeing their individual potential. It places attention on the centrality of relationships, interactions and communicating. Nurturing encourages active participation of babies, toddlers and young children’s in everyday experiences and opportunities,

recognising their dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding. It may involve nurturing dispositions of *cineáltas* (kindness) when they share with *cairde* (friends). It may be nurturing their understanding of the needs of others. It may also be about nurturing their interest in music by singing along with them.

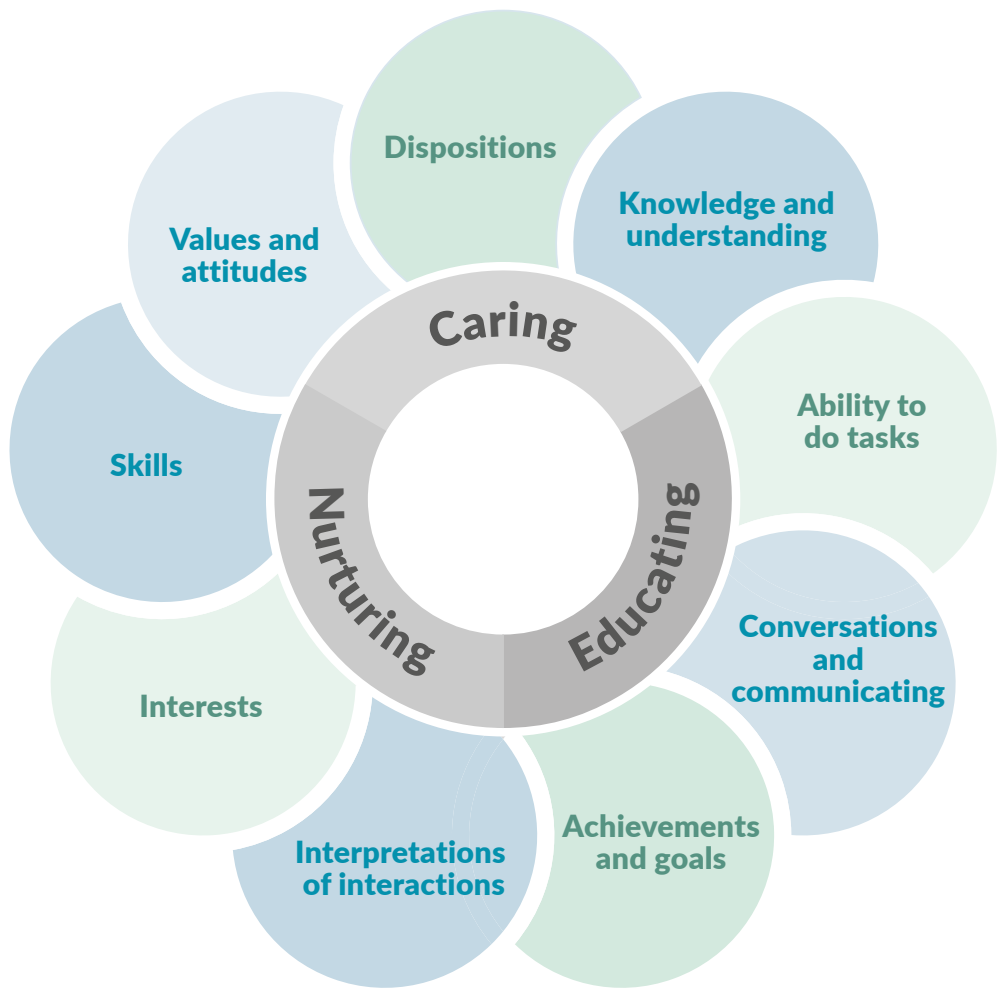


Figure 6: Nurturing babies, toddlers and young children

Educators make learning potential visible when they recognise, name and affirm what babies, toddlers and young children bring to different situations as agentic, competent and confident learners. Being

attuned to the experiences of babies, toddlers and young children, educators can use the Learning Goals of *Aistear*’s Themes to recognise and nurture the different forms of knowledge and learning (Figure 6).

Responding

Responding is about how the educator uses their understanding to build on, consolidate and extend the learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children.

Responding is planning for and extending learning.

There is an intention in how the educator responds to the baby, toddler or young child, informed by their knowledge as well as their relationship with the baby, toddler and young child. Responding may happen in the nurturing space with a smile, a hug, a nod or thumbs up or it might be words of recognition or encouragement. It is also about extending the learning experience so that babies, toddlers and young children progress.

I'm going to talk when she needs her nappy changed. If I sing and interact with her, then she may not find these routines upsetting. I will tell her what I am doing and put language to her experiences.

Responding in the home learning environment

Creating a story basket with props for Filip's favourite story – added different animals as well as colour tablets. Broadening his understanding of the world by naming animals and also introducing new concepts and vocabulary relating to colour, counting and matching. Mindful of creating space where he and Ellie can share the learning experience.

Responding in the early childhood setting

Responding can happen in a variety of ways. It might involve asking open-ended questions to encourage babies, toddlers and young children to think further about something. Responding might involve adding different resources or provocations, or it might involve planning an activity to follow a new line of inquiry. It could also be about doing research with or for the babies, toddlers or young children about a topic or a strategy for learning.

Planning happens on an on-going basis and can be spontaneous, short, medium or longer term depending on the interests, abilities and inquiries of the babies, toddlers and young children at a particular point in time. Planning and implementing the emergent and inquiry-based curriculum responds to this process of noticing and nurturing what is important and relevant in the lives of babies, toddlers, young children, their family and community. The curriculum might be planned around some, or all of the sources noted in Figure 7.

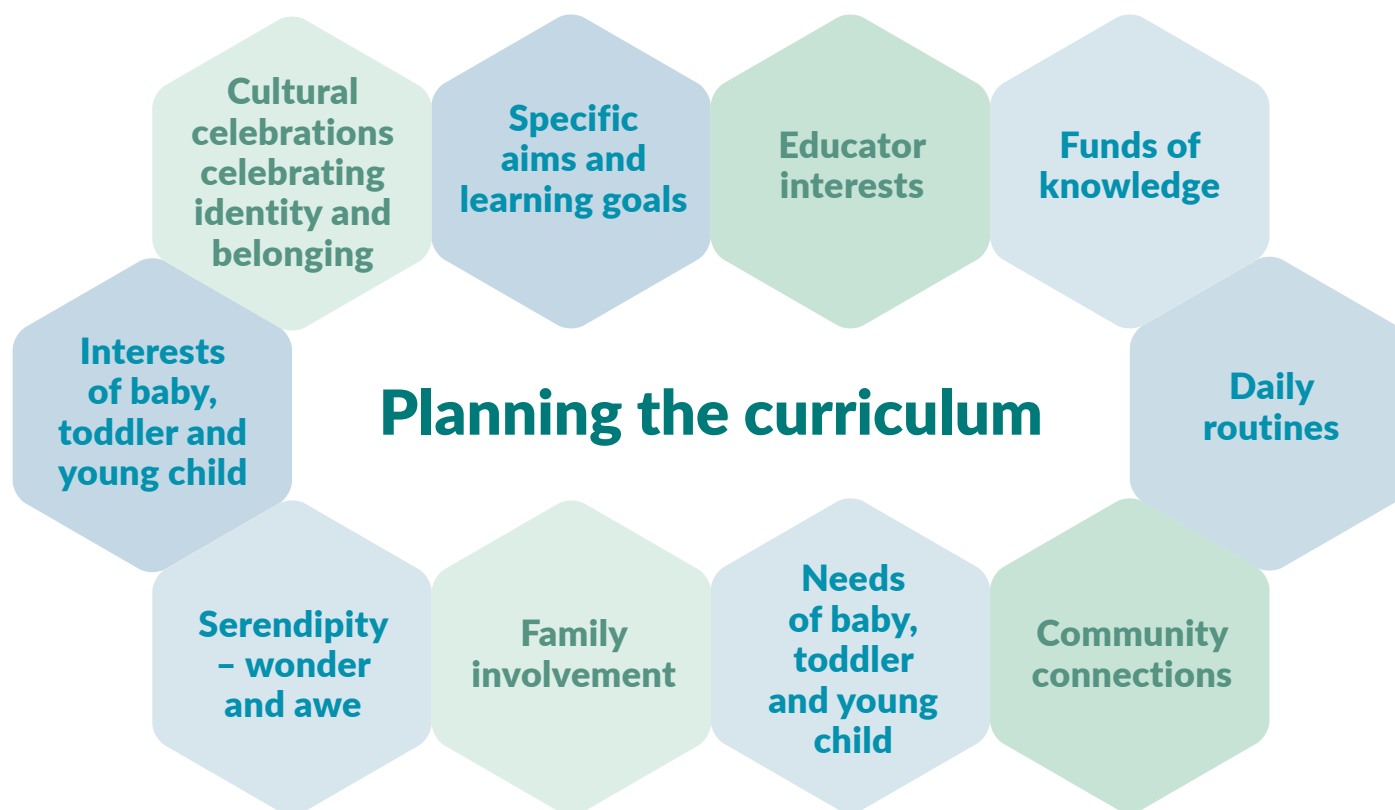


Figure 7: Planning the emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

The Themes of *Aistear* provide a flexible scaffold for developing a responsive, inclusive and equitable curriculum, underpinned by the Vision and Principles of early learning and development. All the while, the inclusive, learning environment responds to the needs, rights, interests and abilities of the unique individuals within the group creating an ease and flow to the day where babies, toddlers and young children are purposefully engaged in enjoyable learning experiences alone or with *cairde* (friends).

Reflecting

The reflective educator uses information about babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development to think about their practice on an ongoing basis. In this cycle, reflection is about planning and implementing the curriculum to support consolidation and progression of early learning and development. Educators may reflect in partnership with other educators and/or professionals, or through *comhrá* (conversation) and interactions with babies, toddlers and young children and their families.

Reflecting is thinking about and interpreting learning.

Being reflective involves thinking about different experiences and incidents and considering these from the perspectives of others as well. Reflective practice is about being able to interpret, understand and describe experiences, what worked well and why it

worked and how it might be extended. It is also about creating space to acknowledge feelings and emotions of self and of others – to pause, listen and understand and to plan for progression for babies, toddlers and young children.

I can see the value of talking and singing to Molly to make daily routines more enjoyable. I can see how she is 'talking' back to me and is soothed by my voice. I know I need to rest with her too – we all feel better with sleep!

Reflecting in the home learning environment

Thinking about how I can create a quieter space in the Baby room where small group or individual play is not interrupted by others. This can cause upset. Considering use of space to divide into interest areas or to make use of outdoor shelter areas for these activities. Discuss with manager and maybe self-evaluation tool for the learning environment.

Reflecting in the early childhood setting

Reflection completes the cycle of noticing, nurturing, responding and reflecting and begins the process of noticing again in coming to know what matters for babies, toddlers, young children and their families.

It inspires motivation to continually develop as an educator in supporting learning and development.

Meaningful assessment and documentation

Documenting is an ongoing process, which creates a *scéal* (story) of each baby, toddler and young child's development and illustrates how they are growing, learning and changing. Documenting learning and development can happen at all stages of the reflective cycle and has a direct influence on the planning and implementation of the curriculum. The emergent and inquiry-based curriculum is informed by meaningful documentation of babies, toddlers and young children's interests, dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding. *Aistear's* Principles and Themes bring it to life and make the learning visible for the baby, toddler, young child, and their family.

Documentation also serves as a platform for communication with other educational professionals to support continuity of experiences and progression of learning. It illustrates each baby, toddler and young child's learning journey by capturing significant moments in their lives. In the home learning environment, these moments might be held in family photo albums, videos or journals. In the early childhood setting, learning and developing may be documented in learning journals or e-portfolios, linking to the Principles and Themes of *Aistear*.

Co-documentation and co-assessment with babies, toddlers and young children as well as with colleagues can provide space for reflection, feedback and new learning through different perspectives. It can provide opportunities to re-visit and re-launch learning and investigations with babies, toddlers and young children.

Babies, toddlers and young children can make judgements and self-assess:

- what they are good at
- what they enjoy doing
- what they want to find out more about
- what they can do now with a little help
- what they would like to be able to do in the future.

Documenting learning and development is meaningful when created using a variety of methods to develop a comprehensive, strengths-based portrait of the baby, toddler and young child to assess their learning.

Assessment is the ongoing and intentional process of collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using information to develop rich portraits of babies, toddlers and young children as learners to support and enhance their learning.

Meaningful documentation might include but is not limited to:

- Learning stories
- Anecdotal notes
- Observations
- *Comhrá* (Conversations)
- Stories
- Reports
- Photos
- Videos
- Art
- Samples of children's work
- Daily care diaries
- Checklists
- Information from *baile* (home).

Meaningful assessment involves translating these many forms of documentation into theories about how babies, toddlers and young children are learning and developing. In knowing and understanding the baby, toddler and young child, the educator can assess learning through their knowledge of early learning and development and of *Aistear's* Principles and Themes. Educators plan, set out and set up relevant, meaningful and engaging provocations for *súgradh* (play) and learning. These experiences enable and empower babies, toddlers and young children to display their dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understanding and to be agentic, competent and confident.

Transitions

Babies, toddlers and young children move between *baile* (home) and the other places where they spend time every day.

A transition is the process of moving from one situation to another and taking time to adjust.

Transitions include big changes such as settling into a new childminder, starting an early childhood setting, moving rooms or making the move to primary or special school. Transitions are also about more frequent activities such as the transition from one activity to another, from indoors to outdoors, within and between the daily routines of nappy changing, meals and rest times.

Educators must be mindful of creating a flow through the daily routines by keeping a relaxed pace and helping babies, toddlers and young children to predict and cope with change. Educators can do this by providing reliable and stable relationships, continuity of care, familiar routines and a secure base. It is important that educators help babies, toddlers and young children to understand routines and to explain and show what is going to happen next in a consistent, calm manner.

All transitions are important whether they occur daily in the one location or whether they involve a bigger move. Each is seen as a process that takes time and some babies, toddlers and young children may take longer than others to adjust and may need extra support and nurturance. Sensitive management of transitions is important and a key part of supporting transitions is ensuring continuity of experience along with progression in learning and development. Educators can support the baby, toddler or young child to predict, understand and manage the transition. They also know the value of working collaboratively with families and other educational professionals who are all vital sources of information, help and guidance in the transitions process.

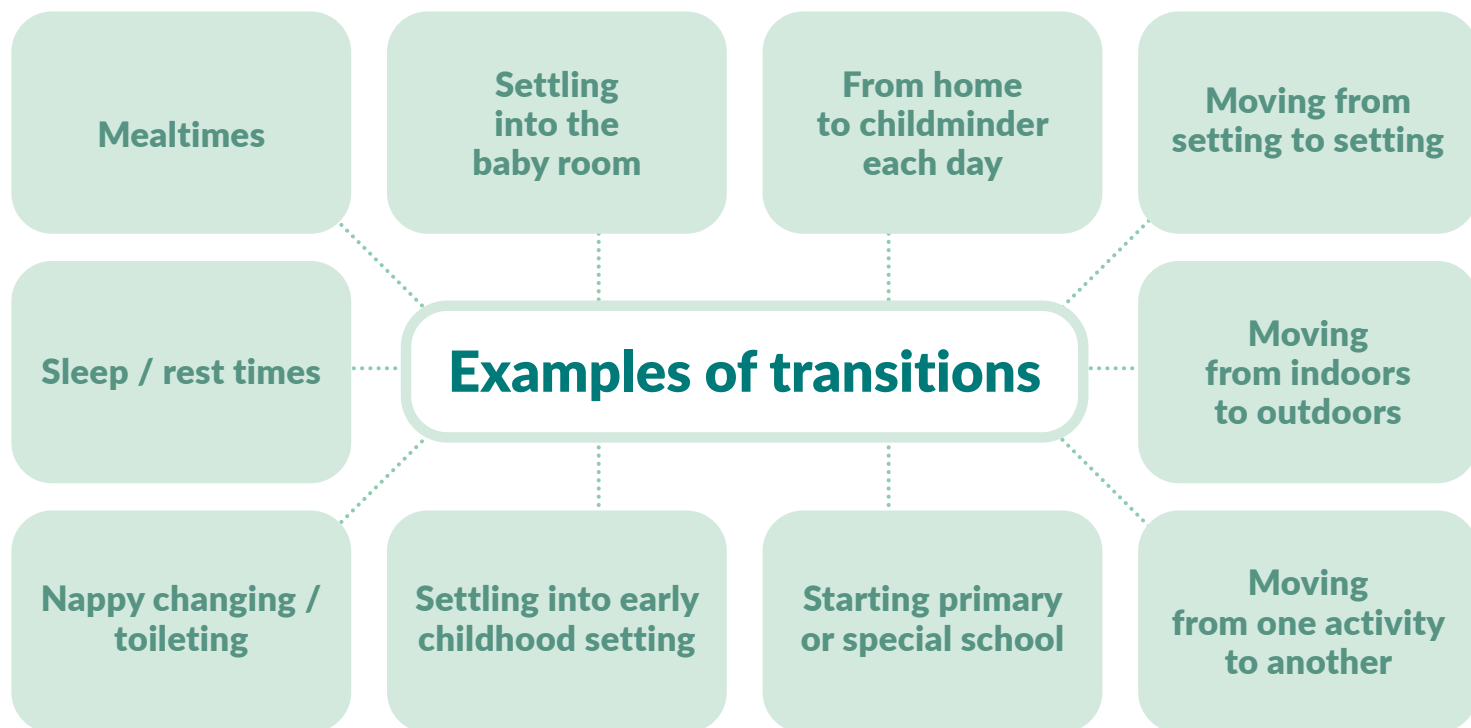


Figure 8: Examples of transitions

Positive relationships between families, childminders, early years educators, settings and schools are vital in supporting transitions as these have a shared responsibility in helping each baby, toddler and young child to flourish and achieve their individual potential. Change is easier when babies, toddlers and young children feel safe and have people around who care about and know them well. This is where the role of the key person and a slow relational pedagogy is critical. Another vital component is a partnership approach to working with families. When everyone communicates with the baby, toddler and young child and with each other, change is more manageable. This includes sharing information between all those involved, including where appropriate, relevant professionals. Educators should be proactive in communicating and connecting with families so that everyone can work together to support transitions, both big and small, as all are important to the baby, toddler and young child.

Moving to primary or special school is a significant transition in young children's lives, and continuity of experience and progression of learning are very important in this context. Relationship building between preschools and primary and special schools can support children and their families during this significant aspect of their educational journey. Sharing information about learning and development is especially important at this time of transition, so teachers can learn about the young child and plan experiences that enable them to continue to progress in their learning across the curriculum. While *Aistear* and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* (DoE, 2023) are for different sectors, they are aligned to support clear continuity of experiences, and progression of learning for all children as they move 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* (Figure 9).



Figure 9: Alignment between Principles of Aistear and the Primary Curriculum Framework

The alignment is further evident in the focus on a pedagogy of play in both frameworks. The focus on alignment could have positive implications for

children's relationships and engagement at the time of transition as well as longer-term learning and wellbeing outcomes.

References

Department of Education (2023). *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Department of Education.
Available at <https://curriculumonline.ie/primary/the-primary-curriculum-framework>

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009). *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA. Available at: <https://curriculumonline.ie/Early-Childhood>



