



**Learning and developing
through interactions**

Introduction

Relationships are at the very heart of early learning and development. Through their early interactions babies learn to feel secure, to communicate, and to enjoy being with people. As they grow and develop, toddlers and young children love to play, to chat, to watch, and to be with others. Children build relationships, communicate, express love and affection, play together, learn, and have their needs met through contact with others.

These guidelines identify a range of interaction strategies and methods which the adult can use to enhance children's learning and development.

How can I have good interactions with children?

Good adult/child interactions are **respectful, playful, enjoyable, enabling, and rewarding**. Through these the adult

- respects all children as individuals with rights
- builds on children's abilities, interests, experiences, cultures, and backgrounds, provides for their needs and facilitates them to initiate activities, to make choices, and to become increasingly independent and responsible
- takes account of additional needs or supports children may require in order to participate as fully as possible
- gives children feedback on what they are doing, names and affirms their efforts, celebrates their progress and achievements, and helps them to learn from mistakes, setbacks and challenges (See the guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment*.)
- establishes and maintains good relationships with children's families (See the guidelines, *Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*).

Many interactions just happen while others come about through careful planning and decision-making. The above factors, the relevant aim(s) and learning goal(s) in *Aistear*, and the activities being undertaken all influence the adult's decisions about when and how to interact with children. His/her expertise, experience and view of his/her role in fostering children's learning and development also influence the types of interactions the adult has with children. In addition, some children require significant support for extended periods of time, while others require less and over shorter timeframes.

As outlined in the guidelines, *Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*, children's learning and development are also shaped by relationships with the important people in their lives. In out-of-home settings parents, practitioners and other professionals, such as social workers and speech therapists, work together for the benefit of children. Positive and respectful interactions between all the adults in their lives influence how children interact with others.

Thinking about my practice

1. *What personal and professional development could I take part in to support my interactions with children (for example learning to use digital recordings to support adult reflection)?*
2. *How do I interact with members of staff, outside agencies, and other professionals?*

What interaction strategies can I use?

These guidelines focus on four strategies as presented in Table 2. Those in the first two columns of the table see children leading learning, with the adult in an enabling role. In this role, the adult organises the environment, observes the children’s experiences, models behaviours and learning, establishes shared understanding and meaning, and reflects on what is happening. Using the strategies in the third and fourth columns of Table 2 the adult directs learning by taking a more proactive role, giving feedback, leading an activity, or joining in as appropriate.

During early childhood it is important that children have opportunities to lead learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and to be involved in decisions about what they do. At other times, the adult leads through planned and guided activities and increases or lessens the amount and type of support as children grow in confidence and competence.

Tables 3 to 6 present short descriptions of some methods in each of the four strategies. The methods are presented alphabetically. Further information is also provided when six methods are discussed in detail on pages 31 to 51. There is some inevitable overlap between strategies and methods.

Table 2: A range of interaction strategies

Building Relationships	Facilitating	Organising	Directing
<p>Children learn by being with others. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to build relationships and to create an environment in which children feel secure and confident enough to take risks, to explore, to take part in challenging experiences, and to direct and co-direct their own learning.</p>	<p>Children learn by being involved in making choices and decisions, and by feeling in control. Learning is enjoyable and rewarding for them when they challenge themselves and when they can use and build on their existing knowledge, understanding and skills. They enjoy learning through child-initiated activities. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to encourage children to take the lead or to share the lead with adults.</p>	<p>Children learn in a well-planned and well-resourced environment. The environment represents all children in the setting and makes learning challenging and fun. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to create and maintain such an environment, including reflecting on the learning that is occurring in the environment and planning ways to enhance it.</p>	<p>Children learn through planned and guided activities which build on their interests and experiences. This strategy includes methods which the adult uses to focus on children’s learning and to develop particular dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding.</p>
<p>Children Lead Learning</p>		<p>The Adult Leads Learning</p>	

Table 3: Building relationships

Sample methods	The adult
Accepting and valuing children, their families and communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ welcomes all children, their families and communities ■ finds out about each child's interests, background, values, and traditions ■ provides props, toys, books, and displays which represent all children in the setting ■ helps children to learn about their communities
Engaging, discussing and communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ joins with children in their play, activities and discussions ■ shares jokes and funny stories, and has playful interactions with children as well as those that are serious ■ helps children develop speaking and listening skills ■ extends children's verbal responses where appropriate ■ listens attentively and tries not to interrupt
Guiding children's behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ maintains a positive and safe learning environment ■ works with children to draw up rules for the room and the playground or yard ■ supports children in building resilience and in coping when things go wrong and when they are upset ■ uses conflicts and awkward moments to discuss feelings ■ works with children to solve problems and conflicts ■ mediates when necessary in a firm and fair way to support children when they are feeling hurt
Naming and affirming actions and behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ names and describes what children are doing ■ encourages children's efforts ■ provides positive feedback (verbal and non-verbal).

Table 4: Facilitating

Sample methods	The adult
Negotiating learning and clarifying learning goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ encourages children to do things for themselves ■ helps children to direct their own learning ■ involves children in decisions about their learning and gives them choices ■ helps children to be clear about learning goals and encourages them to judge how well they have done something
Supporting participation and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ acknowledges and nurtures children's ability to do things themselves through sharing control and empowering them ■ assists children's initiatives, perseverance and decision-making ■ encourages children to help and teach each other (peer mentoring) ■ provides temporary assistance and support to children, through scaffolding, to move from one level of competence to another ■ offers ideas, advice, suggestions, and recommendations when asked or when appropriate
Thinking together to build meaning and understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ plays, talks and works with children to make sense of experiences and learn from them ■ follows children's leads ■ helps, shows and explains when asked or when appropriate ■ explores with children to find things out together rather than providing immediate answers.

Table 5: Organising

Sample methods	The adult
Grouping children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ decides why, when and how to bring children together in groups ■ allocates time for children to negotiate group roles ■ decides on which groups to work with at a given time ■ provides individual, pair and small group experiences
Planning for and reflecting on children's learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ encourages children to plan activities ■ plans, reviews, thinks, and talks about children's experiences with them ■ decides on the next steps in learning and provides tasks, activities and materials based on children's needs and interests
Scheduling and timetabling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ organises learning experiences and monitors the ensuing interactions between children, between adults and children, and between children and the environment ■ plans routines and transitions, involving children where possible
Structuring the learning environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ decides which equipment and materials will be available in the environment ■ plans regularly and reviews the learning environment regularly, based on children's experiences and <i>Aistear's</i> aims and learning goals ■ provides sufficient resources, time and space for all children to benefit from the experiences on offer.

Table 6: Directing

Sample methods	The adult
Assisting children's thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ establishes an atmosphere that encourages talk and discussion ■ listens carefully to understand what children are thinking and feeling ■ builds on children's contributions, ideas and interests to extend conversations ■ helps children to use their full range of thinking skills ■ poses appropriate, challenging questions ■ helps children to recognise their own progress and achievements and to build on these
Leading, labelling, describing, and explaining learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ plans adult-initiated learning experiences ■ explains to children what they will be doing and learning, and outlines how things work and what the 'rules' are ■ reasons and clarifies actions and why things are being done the way they are ■ tells, interprets, hypothesises, and thinks aloud
Modelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ teaches by example ■ shows how to do things ■ is mindful of the language, behaviours, values, and attitudes portrayed as children imitate what they see and hear.



Thinking about my practice

1. *What methods do I use to interact with children? What other method(s) might be useful in my work?*
2. *How can I give children greater control over their learning? How can I ensure a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated learning experiences?*
3. *Who does most of the talking when I interact with the children? How can I encourage them to talk more?*
4. *Am I organised in a way that gives me time with small groups and individual children?*

Sample methods: Further information

Six interaction methods drawn from Tables 3 to 6 are explored below in alphabetical order. Learning experiences are used to show the methods in action. The methods are:

- Assisting children's thinking (Table 6, Directing)
- Modelling (Table 6, Directing)
- Naming and affirming children's actions and behaviours (Table 3, Building relationships)
- Negotiating learning and clarifying learning goals (Table 4, Facilitating)
- Structuring the learning environment (Table 5, Organising)
- Thinking together to build meaning and understanding (Table 4, Facilitating).

Assisting children's thinking (Table 6)

The adult helps children to think about why and how things happen. This helps them to develop their own thinking and learning (meta-cognitive skills). Day-to-day conversations with individuals, pairs or small groups of children provide opportunities for getting children to think and talk about their learning. The adult listens attentively to what the children are saying through their gestures, behaviour or language. The adult displays positive body language and uses words, phrases or gestures to let the children know he/she is listening. He/she encourages children to describe, explain, hypothesise, speculate, empathise, and project. Carefully chosen questions can also capture children's interest and imagination. Closed questions usually have specific, short answers such as yes or no. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, can have many answers and help children to think more deeply. The adult might

- offer his/her own experiences, for example, *When I was young we ...*
- think aloud, for example, *I believe that ...*
- reflect back, for example, *You mentioned that ...*
- make open-ended comments, for example, *I love it when ...*
- speculate, for example, *I wonder why ...*
- tell a joke or a funny story
- ask for and act on children's opinions and ideas
- use conversation 'door openers', for example, *I see, Hmmm, Really, Tell me more, Can you ...?*
- ask open-ended questions, for example, *What might happen if ...? How would you feel if ...? Why do you think that ...? How did you learn that?*



By extending children's conversations and thinking in these ways the adult gathers information about their theories, ideas and feelings, and uses this to plan for future learning.

Below are three examples of adults assisting children's thinking.

Learning experience 14: Feeding the ducks



Theme: *Communicating, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Leah (13 months) and her dad are feeding ducks at the lake. Leah is pointing towards the ducks animatedly. Her Dad points to the ducks and agrees, *Yes they are ducks Leah and now we are going to feed them.* Leah points to the bread. Her Dad gives her some, smiles and comments, *You like feeding them don't you Leah?* Leah nods. She babbles, *kak kak.* Her Dad affirms her contribution, *The ducks say 'quack, quack' don't they Leah?* He recounts a rhyme about ducks and she claps her hands and points excitedly at the ducks while he does this.



Reflection: How can I use everyday experiences to help children understand more about the things around them?

Learning experience 15: Working in the quarry

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1*

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (parent and toddler group)

Azeed, a father at the local parent and toddler group is kneeling beside two children at the sand tray. His own child Zyta (2½ years) is with David (almost 3 years). The children love the sand tray and are concentrating really hard as they move large volumes of sand making noises of mighty machines at work. As Zyta moves off to do something else David looks at Azeed and smiles.

Azeed (smiling back): *I like what you have done. Can you tell me about it?*

David: *I making quarry.*

Azeed: *It is good that you are making a quarry. I really like it. Tell me how you did it.*

David: *I got dones (stones) and put the diggers and tacors (tractors) in (pointing to the sand tray).*

Azeed: *So, you got stones first and then put the diggers and tractors in the sand. Why did you want to make a quarry?*

David: *My daddy wok (work) in quarry.*

Azeed: *I see, so you thought you would make a quarry like the one your daddy works in. Is that right?*

David nods his head in agreement.

Azeed: *You've made a great big quarry here. I'd love to make one like that. So, tell me again David what I do.*

David: *'Ere (here). Make a hole (as he gives Azeed a digger and shows him how to move the sand using its front bucket).*

Azeed: *Wow, this is great. I'm moving the sand and making a quarry just like yours.*

David and Azeed continue with their quarry building and digging making noises for the machines and discussing their actions.



Reflection: To what extent do I observe and listen attentively to children and use my conversations with them to develop their thinking?

Eispéireas foghlama 16a: Téann Ruairí go dtí an t-ospidéal

Téama: Taiscéaladh agus Smaointeoireacht, Aidhm 2 agus Sprioc foghlama 5**Aoisghrúpa:** Leanaí**Suíomh:** Rang naíonán (Gaelscoil)

(Thosaigh an t-eispéireas seo le linn an tseisiúin chomhrá Ghaeilge)

Bhí Múinteoir Seán ag labhairt lena rang de 23 naíonán sóisearach agus sinsearach. Bhí inní ar Ruairí, an puipéad, toisc go raibh air dul go dtí an t-ospidéal chun go mbainfí a chéislíní. D'fhiafraigh Múinteoir Seán de na leanaí conas a bhraithfeadh siad dá mbeadh orthu dul go dtí an t-ospidéal. Fuair sé freagraí éagsúla. Ansin d'fhiafraigh sé de na leanaí conas a d'fhéadfaidís cuidiú le Ruairí brath níos fearr mar gheall ar an gcuart ar an ospidéal. Rinne roinnt mhaith de na leanaí comhbhá le mothúcháin inní agus neirbhíse Ruairí agus faoi bheith ina aonair agus scoite amach ón theaghlach agus a chairde.

Thosaigh Myra (beagnach 6 bliana d'aois), a bhfuil fiobróis chisteach uirthi, ag labhairt ar na sealanna fada a chaith sí san ospidéal. Bhí gach duine ag éisteach léi go cúramach. Thosaigh sí le plé ar an ospidéal agus ar an gcúis a mbíonn ar dhaoine dul ann. Chuir roinnt de na leanaí a scéalta féin in iúl mar gheall orthu féin agus chuir Múinteoir Seán leis an méid a bhí le rá acu. D'eascair sraith comhráite as an bplé thar an gcéad chúpla lá eile maidir le cén fáth a n-éiríonn daoine tinn, conas a thagann biseach orthu, agus cén fáth a bhfaigheann roinnt daoine bás de bharr tinnis.

Níos déanaí i rith na seachtaine, agus tar éis roinnt acmhainní a thabhairt ón mbaile, thiomsaigh Múinteoir Seán agus na leanaí bailiúchán frapaí agus éadaí maiseacha chun ospidéal a dhéanamh. Bhí ceathrar tinn ann —Ruairí, Teidí, Nóra, agus Múinteoir Seán. Roinn sé an grúpa leanaí i gceithre ghrúpa agus d'iarr orthu oibriú le chéile chun freastal ar riachtanais duine amháin de na hothair. Gan mhoill shroich ceithre fhoireann de dhochtúirí agus altraí chomh maith le cuairteoirí an t-ospidéal chun Ruairí, Teidí, Nóra agus Múinteoir Seán a fheiceáil. Thar an gcéad seachtain eile, bhí deis ag na grúpaí cóireáil a chur ar na hothair seo agus ar othair nua, agus fuair gach leanbh an deis a bheith ina dhochtúir, altra, chuairteoir agus othar. Chuir an phleanáil seo ar chumas Múinteoir Seán am a chaitheamh le gach ceann de na ceithre ghrúpa agus thug seo an deis dó teanga nua a thabhairt isteach sa chomhthéacs agus a dtuiscint ar bheith san ospidéal a fhorbairt.

Tá sé beartaithe ag Múinteoir Seán úsáid a bhaint as roinnt suíomhanna ina mbeadh daoine i sáinn chun plé a spreagadh agus foghlaim a chur chun cinn i réimsí éagsúla den churaclam thar na seachtainí le teacht.



Ábhar Machnaimh: Conas is féidir liom cuidiú leis na leanaí iniúchadh a dhéanamh ar shuíomhanna agus ar eispéiris nua trí mheán an phlé agus trí shúgradh samhlaíoch?





Learning experience 16b: Ruairí goes to the hospital

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (Gaelscoil)

(This experience begins during an Irish conversation session.)

Múinteoir Seán is talking to his class of 23 junior and senior infants. Ruairí, the puppet is worried because he has to go to hospital to have his tonsils removed. Múinteoir Seán asks the children how they would feel if they had to go to hospital. He gets a variety of responses. He then asks the children how they could help Ruairí to feel better about the trip to hospital. Many children empathise with Ruairí's feelings of worry and nervousness, and about being alone and away from family and friends.

Myra (almost 6 years), who has cystic fibrosis, starts to talk about her long and frequent stays in hospital. She has a captive audience. Her contribution starts a discussion about hospital and why you go there. Many of the children share their own stories and Múinteoir Seán adds his. The discussion leads to a series of conversations over the next few days when the children explore why people get sick, what makes them better, and why some people die when they're sick.

Later in the week, and after much collecting of resources from home, Múinteoir Seán and the children assemble a collection of props and dressing-up clothes to make a hospital. There are four very sick people—Ruairí, Teddy, Nora the SNA, and Múinteoir Seán. Múinteoir Seán divides the children into four groups and asks each group to work together to attend to the needs of one of the four patients. Within minutes four teams of doctors and nurses appear as do visitors for Ruairí, Teddy, Nora and Múinteoir Seán. Over the next week, the groups have opportunities to treat each of the patients as well as new patients, and all the children get opportunities to be doctors, nurses, visitors, and patients. This planning enables Múinteoir Seán to spend time with each of the four groups introducing new language in context and developing their understanding of being in hospital.

Múinteoir Seán plans to use some of the quandaries and ponderings raised in the discussions and play scenarios to promote learning in different areas of the curriculum over the following few weeks.



Reflection: How can I help children explore new situations and experiences through discussion and pretend play?



Modelling (Table 6)

Children learn a lot by watching the adults around them. This puts the adult in a modelling role. Everything he/she does and says whether planned or unplanned may be copied by children. When adults plan to model something they usually give a clear explanation of how and what is happening. This combination of doing and explaining is helpful to children. Modelling can be especially useful when trying to support a quiet or shy child or when assisting a child with a learning disability. Through modelling, the adult can encourage the child to do things at a level which is comfortable and appealing to him/her.

Modelling often involves the adult using a range of skills. This can include showing children how to play a game, use an object or tool, perform a skill or collaborate with others, role playing, reading a story, or singing a song. The adult can also model environmentally friendly actions, safe practices, language and communication skills, values, attitudes, and thinking and reflection skills.

Below are three examples of adults modelling to support children's learning and development.



Learning experience 17: The big base drum

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Callum (9 months) and his Da are sitting on the floor at home playing together. Callum has been playing with some of his toys but Da senses he is getting bored. His Da gets an empty biscuit tin from the kitchen. He gives it to Callum. Callum lifts it, and moving it notices a sound inside it. He searches for the source of the sound. After a few minutes he looks at Da and screeches, indicating he wants to see inside the tin. Da takes the lid off. Callum reaches in for his set of play keys. They put other nearby things into the tin and take them out. Da talks about what they are doing. After a while Da goes to the kitchen and brings back a wooden spoon. He puts the lid on the tin and starts to bang on it with the wooden spoon as he sings, *I am the music man*. Callum shrieks with laughter. Da gives the spoon to Callum and he bangs loudly on his new drum copying what his Da was doing. Da sings again while Callum drums. Da talks to Callum describing and affirming his actions. Callum shows his delight in his achievements through taking turns in the conversation, laughing, gurgling, and smiling. Callum shows his new skills to his uncle Jimmy later that day.



Reflection: What new skills can I model for children?

Learning experience 18: Apple, jam and mud tarts**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 3 and Learning goal 4****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Childminding**

Margaret looks after two children in her own home while their parents are at work. Today she and the children are baking. They start by washing their hands and putting on aprons. John (2 years and 2 months), Orla (5 years) and Margaret are making apple tarts. Orla helps slice up some apples and John sprinkles on the sugar. When the apple tarts are in the oven John and Orla use leftover pastry to make jam tarts. They have great fun rolling out the pastry just as Margaret did, and put jam in the middle before brushing on milk to seal the edges. John has great fun sprinkling on the flour so the pastry doesn't stick to the table. When they are finished they help Margaret to tidy up. Orla sweeps the floor while John uses the dustpan and brush.

Later Orla and John go outside to play. Outside they make mud tarts and Orla gives John a stone and instructs him, *Roll out the pastry John 'cos we need a tart for dinner. A yummy tart. Here you can do this bit. Good job, that's great baking John.* She asks John to help her to tidy up when they are finished just as Margaret did. He readily agrees. When the mud tart is baked the children share it with teddy and Orla's baby doll, Babs, just as they did earlier in the day with Margaret.



Reflection: What are the children learning through watching and copying my actions?

Learning experience 19: I don't want you to come to my birthday party**Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 3 and Learning goal 4****Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

The junior infant class has children from a range of cultures including Traveller children and children from Nigeria, China and Egypt. Early in the first term the teacher, Mrs O'Reilly, notices that some children are using racist and discriminatory remarks when interacting with certain children in the class. This seems to be happening mainly at playtime in the yard.

One day she overhears a conversation in which one child says to another child, *I don't want you to come to my birthday party 'cos you're brown.* The teacher talks to both children, reassuring Zara (who moved to Ireland from Nigeria two years ago) first and talking to her about how she is feeling. She then focuses on finding out why the other child, Anna, acted in such a way. Mrs O'Reilly is conscious there may be a number of reasons for Anna's behaviour. Did the girls disagree about something? Did Anna hear someone else saying what she said? Did Anna want to hurt Zara and use her skin colour to do this? Mrs O'Reilly talks with Anna about why she used hurtful comments when playing with Zara. She explains the hurt this can cause to Zara and that it is not ok to do that. She tries to help Anna think about how she would feel if it happened to her.

Mrs O'Reilly looks for support as to how she might deal with this situation. She does some reading about young children and prejudice and discrimination. She refers to the school policy on inclusion and uses the document, *Intercultural Education in the Primary School: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2005). She visits www.action.ncca.ie for examples of practice from other teachers in responding to conflict. She also speaks to the principal.

Mrs O'Reilly knows it is important to address this issue immediately in order to support Zara and Anna as well as the other children. She follows up in the classroom through initial work on feelings. She uses storybooks to explore 'being left out' and 'name-calling'. Through this, she and the children think about the actions and thoughts of a perpetrator, a recipient, and an onlooker to a negative situation. She reviews the images of people displayed in the classroom through posters and photographs and changes some of these to reflect a greater variety of cultures. She also sources multicultural dolls (male and female with realistic physical features) for the pretend play area as well as a variety of skin coloured crayons and paints. If a similar incident happens she will talk to the parents of the children involved. For now, she will observe closely the relationship between Zara and Anna, and will work with the whole class on making the school experience positive for everyone.



Reflection: Am I unintentionally making it acceptable for children to hurt each other through words and actions?

Naming and affirming children's actions and behaviours (Table 3)

The adult names, encourages and celebrates children's efforts and actions on a daily basis. In doing this, he/she describes what children are doing, have done or are going to do, and acknowledges how the children appear to be feeling. The adult provides positive, descriptive feedback which can be verbal or non-verbal. He/she also often provides suggestions for what could be done next to progress learning.

Being affirmed helps to motivate children and enables them to persevere with challenging activities and tasks. A little encouragement can make the difference between an enjoyable and satisfying learning experience and a disappointing or frustrating one. However, if children are totally absorbed in an activity it is often better not to comment until they are finished. The adult draws attention to what the children have done, focusing on positive aspects of their behaviour or efforts, or on the features of something the children have created or completed. In doing this, the adult praises children's efforts, progress and achievements. This helps children to 'see' their own accomplishments, to feel proud of these, and to build on them.

Below are three examples of adults naming and affirming children's actions and behaviours.

Learning experience 20: I did it, I stood up!

Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 4 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home, and full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Baby Daniel (10 months) is learning to pull himself up to a standing position. Monica, his Key Worker, is watching closely nearby. Daniel has tried several times to pull himself up by holding on to a roll-along toy but as soon as he grabs it the toy tends to move and Daniel slides back down on the floor. He is starting to get frustrated. Monica describes what Daniel is doing, *You are trying to stand up on your own, aren't you?* She encourages him to persevere by smiling at him and telling him how well he is doing. *I think we could stop these wheels moving*, she suggests as Daniel falls again. She encourages him to try once more by showing him that the toy will not roll because it is now locked. Daniel grabs onto the toy again and slowly pulls himself up. He screeches with delight at Monica once he stands upright. Monica affirms his achievement by clapping her hands, describing what he has done and calling to her colleague to come and see. Her close proximity and keen interest act both as physical and emotional supports. She takes a photograph later in the day of him standing which she shows to him and uses to again describe his great achievement. She also shows it to his dad when he is collecting him that evening. She then puts it on display in the hallway with the date and a short description of the endeavour! Daniel's mam stops to look at it in the morning when she drops him off, and talks to him about what he did. They exchange smiles.



Reflection: How can I encourage children to persevere with difficult tasks?

Learning experience 21: Rover died

**Theme: Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Toddlers****Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)**

Patrick (almost 3 years) is feeling sad because his dog, Rover, died at the weekend. Patrick's mam has informed the staff in the pre-school and they are keeping a close eye on him. Patrick is reluctant to join in activities and Rita, his Key Worker, sits down beside him. She is sympathetic and acknowledges his feelings, *You're feeling sad today Patrick*. Patrick starts to cry and Rita asks him if he would like to go to the quiet corner to read a story and have a cuddle. He nods. They sit on a bean bag together and when Patrick is ready they read his favourite story. Patrick's buddy Liam spots them and comes over and invites Patrick to join him at the construction table. Slowly, Patrick gets up and joins Liam.

Over the coming days, when Patrick is ready, Rita begins to talk about what happened. She invites Patrick to bring in a photo of Rover so he can look at it and talk about Rover whenever he wants. These discussions enable Patrick to express how he feels. Rita listens and gives him new descriptive words. She talks about feeling sad, upset and angry, and how when you are unhappy sometimes you cry on the outside and sometimes it feels like you are crying inside too. Rita asks Patrick if he would like to make a model of Rover and himself using play-dough. She takes a picture of Patrick's creation and promises to give him a copy. Rita encourages him to tell the other children about his model and to share his sad story with them. She helps Patrick to tell his story using some of the new descriptive words.

The staff and children return to the topic of feelings many times over the next few weeks. They read books about different feelings. Some of the children speak about being excited going on holidays, being scared going to the dentist, being happy when it is their birthdays and feeling sad when they lose their favourite teddy. The topic of feelings comes up during day-to-day activities, also, for example in the pretend play area through sharing, taking turns, and when conflicts arise. The staff affirm and support the children, and help build their vocabulary to describe how they are feeling and why.



Reflection: Can I do more to help children identify and express their feelings?

Learning experience 22: Happy St. Patrick's Day

Theme: Communicating, Aim 3 and Learning goal 5**Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

The group of 25 senior infants are making St Patrick's Day cards. They have been working on them for a couple of days sticking, gluing and making pictures. Today they are writing messages to their families on them. The children have lots of opportunities to write each day, for example shopping lists and phone messages in the pretend play area, labels for working in the block corner, names for junk art designs, chalk and mini blackboards in the writing corner to write messages and news, copy-books for writing stories, and letter games on the computer and interactive white board. Alongside these the teacher uses mini lessons to show the children how to form letters.

John (5½ years) doesn't like making mistakes when writing. He asks Ms Fogarty if she will scribe the words for him as she does when the class are telling and creating stories. Trying to build his confidence with writing, Ms Fogarty encourages him to have a go. *No, I will mess it all up*, he responds. Ms Fogarty takes a note from John's portfolio, which he made for the elves in the story, *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. She kneels beside John saying, *Do you remember the day you wrote the note for the elves?*

That was a great note. Look, let's read it together. John smiles as he looks at his note. She also reminds him of the shopping lists they made earlier in the week, and about the books and posters with words around the room. Ms Fogarty suggests, *I'll stay beside you and help if you need me to.* John nods. The teacher asks him what he would like to put on the card. He responds, *Happy St Patrick's Day Mammy and Daddy. Love John.* Suddenly John jumps out of his seat and goes to the wall where there is a poster with 'Happy St Patrick's Day' on it. *I can write this,* he exclaims with delight. John carefully copies it. He asks the teacher to spell mammy and daddy. Ms Fogarty wonders if any of the other children are using those words, and a discussion with the rest of the group results in suggestions. John makes a stab at spelling mammy, M-A-M-Y. Ms Fogarty uses positive body language to support him. She explains that there are two ms in mammy. As each word is completed she affirms his efforts and encourages him: *I think your mammy and daddy will get a lovely surprise when they open your card and read your message that you wrote yourself.* John is delighted with himself when he finishes. At 2 p.m. he rushes out the door to greet his mammy with the card in hand.



Reflection: Do I help children to see the progress they are making and to build on this?

Negotiating learning and clarifying learning goals (Table 3)

Negotiating learning and clarifying learning goals involves the adult in supporting a growing sense of autonomy and responsibility within each child as a young learner. The adult provides children with opportunities and resources to do things for themselves. He/she takes account of children's abilities, backgrounds, interests, and experiences, and builds on these using them as a springboard to promote further learning. Working with children to decide what, when and how to learn helps them to deepen their interest, to develop the skills and motivation to take an active part in their own learning and development, and to become more independent and confident.

The adult uses specialised knowledge and expertise to guide children's learning and development. He/she determines the kinds of experiences and activities that are available to children and provides time and resources for these. The adult encourages children to make choices within reasonable limits, and to take an active role in decisions about their learning based on their age and stage of development. The adult builds fair and respectful relationships with children, shares learning goals with them, and encourages them to make judgements about what they have achieved (what they can do now that they couldn't do beforehand). They do this through reviewing, thinking and talking about what they have been doing.

Below are three examples of adults negotiating learning and clarifying learning goals with children.



Learning experience 23: Wearing shorts in winter!

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 1 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Mommy is at home with baby Aoife (16 months). It is winter-time. She is about to dress Aoife so that they can walk to school with her older daughter Lorraine. Aoife leads Mommy to where she spotted a pair of summer shorts the day before and indicates that she wants to put them on. Mommy tries to explain that the shorts aren't suitable for a cold winter's day. She makes *brrrrr* sounds and rubs her legs to warm up. She points to warmer clothes, smiles and nods, and explains that these will be cosy and warm for Aoife today. Then Mommy offers Aoife the choice of wearing her navy jumper and jeans or her purple tracksuit. Mommy observes Aoife's reaction and as soon as she shows an interest in the tracksuit Mommy responds: *So, you would like to wear your tracksuit today Aoife. Oh, it will keep you nice and warm, I wish I had a fleecy one like this.* Aoife then smiles and nods her head. When outside, Mommy repeats the *brrrr* sounds and describes how cold it is. Aoife's smile tells Mommy that she understands.



Reflection: What opportunities can I use to give children choices within reasonable limits?

Leispéireas foghlama 24a: Is féidir liom é a dhéanamh as mo stuaim féin!

Téama: Folláine agus Leas, Aidhm 4 agus Sprioc foghlama 2

Aoisghrúpa: Mamailínigh

Suíomh: Seisiún naíonra

Tá pairilis cheirbreach ar Christy (beagnach 3 bliana d'aois). Is é an Béarla máthairtheanga a thuismitheoirí. Teastaíonn uathu go bhfaighidh Christy an deis Gaeilge a fhoghlaim mar dhara teanga ionas gur féidir leo socrú a dhéanamh go bhfreastalóidh sé ar naíonra áitiúil.

Sa naíonra bailíonn an fhoireann eolas ar bhonn laethúil faoi gach leanbh agus baineann úsáid as an eolas seo chun pleanáil agus tacú leis/léi. Is cainteoir dúchais í Niamh, Oibrí Bunriachtanach Christy. Baineann sí úsáid as géaitsí aghaidhe, agus as noda neamhbhriathartha eile chun cuidiú leis tuiscint a fháil ar an nGaeilge de réir mar a úsáideann sí an teanga chun cumarsáid a dhéanamh leis. Tá aithne mhaith ag Niamh ar Christy. Tuigeann sí céard is féidir leis a dhéanamh, cad iad na rudaí atá dúshlánach dó, agus tuigeann sí a thuiscint ar fhocail agus ar fhrásaí as Gaeilge. Díríonn Niamh ar chuidiú leis réimse scileanna a fhorbairt - scileanna teanga san áireamh. De réir mar a théann foghlaim Christy chun cinn, bíonn Niamh ann chun tacú leis agus cuireann deiseanna ar fáil dó i leith a bhfuil ar siúl aige. Cuireann sí ceist air i gcónaí sula ndéanann sí rud ar a shon mar go bhfuil sé ag éirí níos neamhspleáiche gach lá. Lá ar leith d'fhiafraigh sí de an raibh cúnaimh uaidh ag bailiú na mbloc ón urlár mar go mbíonn sé deacair air uaireanta greim a bhreith ar rudaí. Dúirt Christy os ard, *No, mise é.* D'aithin Niamh gur theastaigh uaidh a bheith ag obair as a stuaim féin agus rinne aithris air chun cuidiú leis lena fhocláíocht agus lean ghramadach, *Déanfaidh mise é mé féin.* Thug sí an t-am do Christy chun an tasc a dhéanamh agus thacaigh leis, mar go raibh gá tréaniarracht chun na bloc go léir a chur sa bhuicéad. Ghlac Niamh grianghraf de Christy in aice na mbloc, chlóigh amach an grianghraf agus chuir é ar taispeáint ar an mballa leis an abairt faoina bhun, *Christy ag glanadh suas.* Ar an Aoine thaispeáin Christy é dá dhaideo nuair a tháinig sé chun é a bhailiú.



Ábhar Machnaimh: An dtugaim dóthain ama agus spáis do leanaí chun a spriocanna foghlama féin a shocrú?

Learning experience 24b: I can do it myself!**Theme: Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 2****Age group:** Toddlers**Setting:** Sessional service (naíonra)

Christy (almost 3 years) has mild cerebral palsy. His parents speak English as a first language at home. They want Christy to have the opportunity to learn Irish as a second language and so they arrange for him to attend the local naíonra.

At the naíonra staff gather information on a daily basis about each child and use this to plan and support him/her. Niamh, Christy's Key Worker, is a native Irish speaker. She uses facial expressions, gestures and other non-verbal cues to help him understand the Irish language as she uses it to communicate with him. Niamh understands Christy well. She knows the things he can do, the things he finds challenging, and his understanding of words and phrases in Irish. Niamh focuses on helping him develop a range of skills including his language skills. As Christy's learning progresses, Niamh is there to support him, and offers him choices about what he is doing. She always asks before doing things for him because every day he is becoming more independent. One day she asks if he needs help picking up the blocks as sometimes he finds it hard to grasp things. Christy exclaims, *No, I do it.* Niamh acknowledges his wish to work independently and repeats his intention using correct vocabulary and grammar, *I will do it myself.* She gives Christy the time he needs and encourages him, as it takes a great deal of effort on his part to get all the blocks into the bucket. Niamh photographs Christy beside the blocks, prints the photograph and displays it on the wall with the caption, *Christy is helping to tidy up.* On Friday Christy shows it to his granda who collects him.



Reflection: Do I give enough time and space to children to set their own learning goals?

Learning experience 25: We can decide**Theme: Well-being, Aim 4 and Learning goal 1****Age group:** Young children**Setting:** Full and part-time daycare (after-school)

The children go from the infant classes of the primary school to the after-school club. Ray, the after-school worker, helps them to plan their activities. He tries to promote an atmosphere of democracy and independence. There is usually a flexible structure to the session with outdoor time, one or two group activities indoors (one decided by Ray, the other agreed on by the children), free play, and then a group activity before going home. A meeting is held with the eight children and they negotiate what they will do for the 2½ hours before their parents collect them. Direct access to the outdoor area is not available, so children go out as a group for activities that Ray has organised or for a particular activity or project they have decided on themselves. During the free play session children can choose from a variety of resources and materials, for example the computer area, the pretend area, the arts and crafts area, the sand and water area, the construction area, and the quiet area with books and jigsaws.

Ray has a magnet board on which each child can stick his/her photograph and/or write his/her name. The children put pictures of all the activities they intend to do during the session beside their names and/or photographs. Ray keeps a close watch to make sure that the children are experiencing a range of activities. Before going home the children come together again as a group to hear a story or to sing songs, and to talk about what they have done.



Reflection: How can I involve children more in deciding what they do in the setting?

Structuring the learning environment (Table 5)

Structuring the environment both indoors and outdoors is important, in order to ensure that it supports children's learning and development across *Aistear's* four themes. Through planning, organising, resourcing, and evaluating the adult continually makes decisions about equipment, materials and people in the environment. These decisions focus on

- location – the layout of where people and things are
- boundaries – how areas are separated and divided into small, child-sized spaces
- variety – the choice of materials and activities available
- storage – where things are kept and displayed
- time – the amount of time available for activities
- mood and atmosphere – calming, inviting, home-like, busy.

How materials are grouped and presented, what equipment is within easy reach of children, and what is accessible to adults only are all important considerations. When structuring the environment the adult thinks about when and where to place new materials, and how to rotate old materials, in order to encourage new and different activities and interactions. The location of adults in the environment is also a critically important part of structuring. Children need to know that adults are physically and emotionally available to them. When adults are positioned where they can play and interact with children they can ensure that learning and development are supported.

While an overall plan for the environment is important, daily changes based on children's interests and ideas enrich and extend learning. Wherever possible, children need to be involved in structuring the environment.

Below are three examples of adults structuring the learning environment.

Learning experience 26: Our place

Theme: *Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Diane is the manager of the baby room in a crèche. She and her assistant Monique give special attention to structuring the environment for the six babies in their care. They talk to the parents, observe and talk to the babies, and plan accordingly. Diane and Monique check regularly that everybody is safe and happy. They provide toys, natural materials, and items from home of different textures, colours, shapes, and sizes in order to stimulate the babies' senses. They display photographs of the babies and their families on the walls with the babies' names and words like *mammy* and *daddy* beside them. Some babies have photographs of their pets on the wall too. The double doors to the garden are often open and there is a ramp for babies who want to crawl outside. The less mobile babies are often placed near the window so that they can watch what is going on outside. There is a garden seat, as well as roll-along toys, rugs, and a variety of other toys and equipment to play with. All the toys and equipment are routinely checked for safety and added to regularly so that each baby's interests are extended. Diane and Monique position themselves near the babies at all times, and use a key worker system so that each baby is cared for by the same person as much as possible.



Reflection: *Do I make children feel welcome and motivated to explore and discover?*

Learning experience 27: Boxes galore!**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 3 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Home**

Jenna is a single parent and is at home with her two children, Robert (2½ years) and Rebecca (5 years). They live in a disadvantaged area in the city centre. At times Jenna finds it hard to cope with the children, especially as the flat has no access to a garden and the nearest park is a bus ride away. Pat, the family support worker, has been helping Jenna to join in with the children in their play. Pat and the family have been to the local electrical shop to get an assortment of empty boxes. Jenna and the children play together to turn these into garages and apartment complexes. Pat provides paints, glitter and glue, and the whole family work together happily in the kitchen deciding who is going to do what. At school Rebecca paints pictures, which she takes home to decorate the apartments. Jenna helps Robert to make a ramp for his car to get into the garage. Later that week, Jenna, Robert and Rebecca go for a walk and compare their garages and apartments to the ones in their locality. They have fun walking along and suggesting things to add to their cardboard apartments.



Reflection: What resources and materials can I get in my community to help improve the learning environment for my children?

Learning experience 28: A grand design for my classroom**Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1****Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

Miss O'Brien is getting ready for her new junior infant class. She divides the room into five interest areas: a messy play area (sand, water, play-dough, and paint), a pretend play area, a quiet area (library), a construction area, and a seated area with tables and chairs. She uses pictures to label the areas for the children. This year she will have four Polish children in the class. English and Irish will be second and third languages for these children. To support emergent literacy Miss O'Brien uses words in English, Irish and Polish when making the labels. She puts pictures and multilingual signs over the shelves and storage areas so that tidy-up time will be easier for everyone. She also provides welcome signs in the children's home languages, and borrows some displays of their work and family photographs from parents and feeder pre-schools.

Miss O'Brien uses colour codes to assist the children in recognising their assigned groups. She arranges the tables into five groups with a different colour assigned to each. She plans to use the colour coding to rotate and manage various activities among the groups on a daily, weekly and termly basis. She will review and vary the activities, resources and choices regularly. Miss O'Brien also hopes to move some activities like PE, group art projects, and pretend play outdoors throughout the year: at least once a month in the winter and once a week during the other terms.

Sally, a Special Needs Assistant, will be in the classroom to support Fergal who has autism. Fergal uses the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) to communicate. Miss O'Brien puts a number of sequence pictures around the room to help Fergal understand what is happening and what will happen next.

Planning and structuring the environment is a very important part of Miss O'Brien's work. She knows that many changes will have to be made once the children arrive, and even on a daily basis after that, as she gets to know the children and they share in making decisions about their learning environment inside and outside the classroom.



Reflection: How can I design and organise the classroom so that the children enjoy being in it, and so that it helps them to be as independent as possible?

Thinking together to build meaning and understanding (Table 4)

Children make sense of what they see and hear around them by interacting with people at home, in out-of-home settings, and in their local community. Children explore and discover, inquire and hypothesise, make choices and decisions, and take risks. Doing this, they gather, organise and interpret information. They try out their own ideas and represent these symbolically. They think about what they have done, heard and learned, interpret these experiences, and take their own meaning and understanding from them.

The adult encourages children to talk and think about their own ideas and understandings, and those of others. He/she builds on children's dispositions, knowledge, understandings, skills, attitudes, and values as they move between settings. The adult follows the children's leads, and together they investigate how things work, how to do things, and what things are made of. They search together for different ways of thinking about things, looking at different perspectives, and all the time try to connect with what children already know and understand. They research to find things out from different sources, such as other people, books, the library, and the internet. The adult works with and encourages children to solve problems, and to learn how to find answers to questions, conflicts, tasks, dilemmas, and issues. He/she shows, prompts, models, describes, explains, recaps, suggests, and questions when asked or when appropriate.

Below are three examples of adults thinking with children to build meaning and understanding.

Learning experience 29: Jelly play!

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking, Aim 4 and Learning goal 6*

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Darragh (14 months) and Ian (16 months) are playing outside. Susan, their Key Worker, makes some red jelly, and when it is set she gives it to Darragh and Ian to explore. The boys are sitting on a rug beside a sheet of paper which is stuck to the grass. Susan scoops out a little jelly and offers it to Darragh and Ian. Ian is eager to get his hands on some of the jelly and squeals to make sure Susan knows he wants it. Darragh doesn't appear to be interested. Ian rubs his jelly into the paper and is delighted to see red marks appearing. Susan makes some marks of her own. *You are having great fun with the jelly, aren't you Ian*, she comments, *What about you Darragh would you like to try some?* Darragh watches Susan and Ian and puts his hand out tentatively towards the jelly. Susan encourages him to explore it and to make marks on the paper with it. Darragh watches as Susan makes long red lines on the paper. Susan is observing his reactions closely. She kneels beside him and helps him to make a mark. She describes the jelly and Darragh and Ian's mark-making activities. Darragh puts some of the jelly in his mouth; he likes the taste of it and has another piece. Ian follows. After a few minutes Darragh starts to take pieces of jelly out of the bowl and offers some to Ian. The boys place the jelly on the paper and then pick it up to put it back in the bowl again. Darragh and Ian become engrossed in what they are doing. Not wanting to interrupt their concentration and thinking, Susan sits quietly beside them. Ian and Darragh's body language and the smears of red jelly on their faces show that they are loving the experience!



Reflection: What new experiences can I provide for children which will capture their curiosity and encourage them to try new things?

Learning experience 30: Tractors in difficulty!**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3****Age group: Toddlers and young children****Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)**

Twins Claire and Robert (nearly 3 years), Lauren (3½ years) and Oisín (4 years) are playing with the tractors, trailers and diggers outside. They are busy digging foundations for a new house they are building. They have filled two trailers with wet earth and stones. The next task is to transport this to the dumping area which is across a stretch of grass. Oisín and Claire set off on the tractors. They quickly realise that no matter how hard they push on the peddles the tractor wheels will not move. The ground is very bumpy and the loads are heavy! Robert and Lauren suggest they might be stronger. Drivers are switched but the problem persists.

They proceed to empty some of the contents of one trailer. This helps a little but it still takes a lot of effort to get the tractor wheels to move. Claire calls the playgroup leader, Rosaleen, to come and have a look. Rosaleen kneels down to see what is happening. Claire jumps on to the tractor and presses down on the peddles with all her might. *See the tractor's got stuck*, explains Claire. Rosaleen announces: *My goodness, why are those wheels not turning?* Jamie (4 years), standing nearby and overhearing the conversation, joins them and takes a look at the tractor wheels. *Granda uses long things of wood when his tractor is stuck in muck*, he explains. *Can we do that Rosaleen?* asks Robert. With Rosaleen's help, they find a large cardboard box which they cut into a long strip. Discovering the strip is not long enough to stretch across the grass area, they cut it in two to make a long path. All five children work together to manoeuvre the tractor on to the cardboard. Claire jumps back on board and presses down on the peddles again. Slowly, to everyone's delight, the tractor begins to move. Soon a convoy of tractors is using the new cardboard road, and the earth and stones get deposited in the dumping area. As the children play together Rosaleen explores with them why the cardboard helped the tractors to move. A whole conversation on friction ensues!



Reflection: Do I use children's discoveries to help extend their thinking and problem-solving skills?

Learning experience 31: What's that black stuff?**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 5****Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

Miss O'Meara teaches 23 junior and senior infants. During a hot spell of weather the children notice soft black tar on the road outside the school gate. Some step in it and discover it's very sticky! This sparks off a conversation in class about what the 'black stuff' is and how it got there. To help the children understand the effect of heat on materials she plans an investigation for the next day.

During structured play Miss O'Meara works with six children at a time, while the other children are in other areas including the pretend play area, the music and art area, and the construction area. The group has six containers and dishes of chocolate, ice-cream and butter. The children work in pairs and each pair is responsible for one of the three materials. Miss O'Meara shows the children her cooler box full of ice and a cupboard which is very warm as the heating pipes run behind it. She asks the children to think about what would happen the chocolate, the ice-cream and the butter if they were placed in the cooler and in the cupboard. She records the children's predictions on a large sheet of paper. The children proceed to test their theories. They place containers with the three materials (each one containing a different material) in the cooler box and the remaining three containers in the cupboard. They leave them overnight.

The next day Miss O'Meara and the children remind themselves of their predictions. Excitedly, the children retrieve their containers from the cooler box and the cupboard. The children are amazed by some of the changes. They are delighted that the ice-cream hasn't melted in the cooler box, but Aisling points out, *I might need a straw instead of a spoon to eat that ice-cream*, referring to the ice-cream in the cupboard. Peter is very disappointed that none of the chocolate can be eaten, because even when he bangs the one that was in the cooler box on the table he can't break a piece off, and the one that was in the cupboard *is all mushy like baby food*. Anna thinks that her mam would like the butter that was in the cupboard, *because it's nice and soft and won't rip holes in the bread for my sandwiches*. But the children are sure Anna's mam wouldn't like the butter that was in the cooler box because it is so hard.

The children and Miss O'Meara use what they see to explain where the sticky black tar came from. Over the next few days the children have great fun keeping watch on the tar at the school gate and setting up 'melting' investigations at home with siblings.



Reflection: How can I provide opportunities to predict and explore everyday happenings to help children to make sense of their world?



Thinking about my practice

1. *What methods do I use to motivate children to learn and develop?*
2. *What balance do I strike between conversation and questioning when I'm talking with the children? How long are conversations lasting? Do they encourage children to think about what they are doing, seeing and hearing?*
3. *How am I modelling behaviours and language to support learning and development?*
4. *When and how do I talk to the children about our plans for activities?*
5. *What system do I use to review and plan our learning environment?*

Children learning together

Relationships with peers provide children with emotional support, the opportunity to play with a friend, and experiences in leading, following, negotiating, conflict resolution, making mistakes, and taking risks. They also learn skills and develop knowledge and values through interactions with peers and mixed-age groups of children. Play also stretches and enhances learning and development.

The nature of children's interactions with other children depends on their social skills as they learn to understand and to balance their own 'wants' with those of others. Building relationships takes time, and friendships grow slowly through daily interactions with the same people. Child-child interactions thrive in settings where children have time each day to play, work, interact, and communicate with the same group of children, and where they are encouraged and supported to seek help from and offer help to each other.

How can I support interactions between children?

Adults play a key role in supporting interactions between children. They observe the friendships that children are making and support these by

Organising the environment

- providing space, materials and time for children to play together
- setting up the environment so that there are lots of opportunities for social play, particularly in the pretend play area
- planning pair and small group projects

Promoting positive interactions

- acknowledging that people are different, and helping children to understand that difference is normal and important by talking about skin colour, language, ability, boys, girls, religion, family structure, culture, values, and traditions
- anticipating conflict and supporting children in resolving it, coming to the assistance of frustrated children and helping them find solutions
- modelling social behaviour when interacting with adults and children, thus helping children to develop social skills such as taking turns, listening, sharing, asking for something, and saying excuse me, sorry, please, and thank you
- encouraging children to help each other during their activities, play and routines
- helping children share skills and knowledge with each other (peer mentoring)
- encouraging and acknowledging spontaneous co-operative efforts made by the children
- talking to children about the time they spend together
- encouraging children to play co-operative games.

Below are some examples of adults supporting peer interactions between babies, toddlers and young children. The learning experiences are clustered by age group to help show the different ways in which the adult is supporting the children as they play and learn together at different stages in early childhood.

Learning experience 32: Water play

Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Mammy puts baby Alisha (8 months) on the towel beside her baby cousin Leah (10 months) so that the two of them can put their hands into a basin of tepid water. Mammy sits on the ground and models putting her own hands in and out of the water. Her splashes make bubbles. Leah watches her intently and copies her actions but Alisha is a bit reluctant to join in. Mammy describes what she is doing while making eye contact with Alisha. She explains: *Look Alisha, Mammy and Leah are putting our hands in and out of the water. Look I am touching Leah's hands in the nice warm water. You can do it too!* Mammy gently takes Alisha's hand and places it in the water. She watches Alisha's body language, which is now positive, and continues with her descriptive comments on the girls' actions and emotions while using their names frequently. As soon as she notices a waning of interest in the water play she suggests another activity for the two babies.



Reflection: How can I help children try new activities together with confidence?

Learning experience 33: Come and sort with me**Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3****Age group:** Babies**Setting:** Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Rachel, a childcare worker, sits on the floor of the baby room with Ciara (12 months) and Jack (14 months) and helps them to play together putting the shapes into the shape sorter. She interacts with them playfully and models the act of sharing the shapes while commenting, *Look, Rachel puts in one shape, Ciara puts in another and then Jack puts in one.* As the children imitate the actions demonstrated by Rachel, she continues to describe what they do while using their names. If the children make an effort to say each other's names Rachel supports their attempts, affirms the efforts, and models saying the name correctly.



Reflection: Can I do more to model good interactions for children?

Learning experience 34: Making dinner with Granny**Theme: Well-being, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2****Age group:** Babies**Setting:** Home

Granny minds her twin grand daughters Abi and Ava (17 months) two days a week. The girls regularly watch Granny in the kitchen as she makes the dinner. Granny chats to them about what she is doing. Today she brings some old pots, pans, spoons, carrots, and potatoes out into the garden so that the girls can play together. She models making the dinner, stirring the potatoes and carrots in the pot. Granny talks to the girls about cooking the dinner for Mammy when she gets home from work. Granny ensures that materials are plentiful and occasionally provides a commentary on what the girls are doing. She watches as they become engrossed in the activity, stirring the vegetables in the pots and feeding them to their teddies. Later the two girls help her wash the potatoes in the sink when she is cooking the dinner.



Reflection: What can I do to encourage children to interact with each other during their play?

Learning experience 35: A mat with a difference**Theme: Communicating, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3****Age group:** Toddlers**Setting:** Childminding

Zoe (20 months) can't do her zip so Emma, her childminder, asks Conor (nearly 3 years) to help her to do it. She observes from nearby to make sure that Conor is able to do up the zip and thanks him for his help. She asks Zoe and Conor if they would like to hold hands on the way out to the garden and supports them in playing together outside with the clothes pegs, which they give her as she hangs the clothes on the washing-line. Spotting the doormat at the entrance to the utility room, Conor begins to attach the pegs making a decorative edge for the mat. Intrigued by what he is doing, Zoe joins him and together they empty Emma's clothes peg basket. Though Zoe has few words, her big smile and her body language show she is clearly delighted to be playing with Conor.



Reflection: Do children have lots of opportunities to spend and enjoy time with each other?

Learning experience 36: A problem solved

Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 3 and Learning goal 6**Age group:** Toddlers**Setting:** Childminding

Jean, a childminder, works four days a week looking after four children, two of school going age and two pre-school age. She is playing in the garden with two sisters, Aoife (2 years and 9 months) and Siobhán (nearly 4 years). Jean steps in to help the sisters sort out their problem about sharing the dolls' clothes, as Aoife is becoming very frustrated. She asks the girls what the problem is and then asks for suggestions on how to deal with it. After some discussion the girls agree to divide the clothes between them. Jean stays with the girls and talks to them about what they are doing. She encourages them to help each other and she asks Siobhán to help Aoife to put the socks on her baby doll. Jean suggests that they might pack the clothes and take the dolls on a holiday in the lovely sunny weather. Jean brings out the baby bath and the girls pretend it's a swimming pool for the dolls in sunny Spain. She encourages and acknowledges their efforts at playing together and they have great fun, ending up having a water fight between themselves and Jean!



Reflection: How can I help children to work together in solving problems and resolving conflicts?

Learning experience 37: My buddy Clare

Theme: Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1**Age group:** Toddlers**Setting:** Sessional service (pre-school)

Melanie, the pre-school leader, is concerned about Caitríona (nearly 3 years). Caitríona was born prematurely and has some special educational needs, including communication difficulties. Caitríona finds it hard to mix with the other children as often they cannot understand her very well. Melanie observes her closely and speaks to her parents. They decide to get some advice from the speech therapist to help Caitríona with her speech and language. Melanie also sets up a buddy system whereby each child has a special friend to work and play with. In their pairs the children help tidy up the room, give out lunches, and play together inside and outside. Caitríona's buddy is Clare, and since the introduction of this new system she and Caitríona have become good friends. They enjoy playing at going to the beauty salon (Clare's mum is a beautician). They also love playing ball and skittle games. Melanie observes from a distance and regularly plays with the girls to extend their activity or to model language.



Reflection: What methods can I use to help children make friends?



Learning experience 38: We both love dinosaurs**Theme: Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Young children****Setting: Infant class (primary school)**

Jason (4½ years) is in junior infants. He asks his teacher a question about dinosaurs. The teacher suggests he ask Sarah (5½ years) because she knows a lot about them. Sarah is able to answer his question and the two children start playing at the small world table with the dinosaurs. The following day Sarah brings in her scrapbook about dinosaurs to show Jason. Jason tells his mammy all about Sarah and she arranges for Sarah to come and play at Jason's house. The two children become good friends during their year in junior infants.



Reflection: Do I create opportunities for children to share their interests with each other and use this as a basis for learning?

**Learning experience 39: Lots of different families****Theme: Identity and Belonging, Aim 2 and Learning goal 2****Age group: Young children****Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)**

Today the children in the local crèche are making pictures about their families. When they're finished their pictures their room leader, Dervla, asks them to tell the other children at their tables about their picture. Amer draws a picture of his mummies and his big brother. Alan paints his mammy, daddy and dog. Diarmuid draws his daddy, and his mammy with a big tummy with a new baby inside, while Emma draws her mum and pet gold fish in their home and a picture of her dad and his other family in their house. Dervla kneels down beside each pair. She listens, comments and sometimes asks a question. Through this experience the children begin to develop an appreciation of differences in each other's home lives and families.



Reflection: What can I do to help children see difference as part of life?

Learning experience 40: Don't hurt me because I'm different**Theme: Well-being, Aim 1 and Learning goal 5****Age group:** Young children**Setting:** Sessional service (pre-school)

There are two Traveller children, Winnie (3 years) and David (4½ years), in the pre-school. The children live in a trailer on an official halting site on the outskirts of the town. Some of the children have made unkind comments about Travellers and where they live. Sarah, the pre-school manager, wants to deal with the name-calling and unkind comments immediately so that she can help the Traveller children feel proud of who they are. She also wants to make sure they feel they belong in the setting. Sarah thinks that, if the other children learn about Traveller life and come to understand that people have different backgrounds and traditions, Winnie and David will be able to make friends more easily. Sarah introduces a puppet, Ollie, who talks about how he feels when someone makes hurtful comments about him. She involves the children in the discussion and she explains that it is not nice to make nasty comments about people or about where they live. Sarah plans a number of small group activities in which two or three children play and work with Winnie and David. Sarah will support the children as they play together and will join in herself until the children are more comfortable with each other.



Reflection: How do I help children value and respect each other's background and traditions, and encourage them to play and work together?

**Thinking about my practice**

1. *What opportunities do I provide to encourage children to interact and play with each other? How can I develop these opportunities for children's benefit?*
2. *How can I encourage peer mentoring?*
3. *If I observe acts of racism, prejudice and discrimination between children what do I do? How can I improve this?*

Conclusion

Children learn and develop by interacting with others. Adults who are respectful listeners and keen observers, who are prepared to negotiate, who change their practice, and who make meaning with children are those who are most responsive to them. They know the children well, are sensitive to their current level of understanding, know their interests and intentions, and pitch activities and experiences which are just beyond what they can currently do and understand so that they can extend their learning. Their interactions promote children's learning and development and help children to reach their full potential.