



steps to choosing a childcare service

A PARENT'S GUIDE

**National Children's
Nurseries Association**





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Border Counties Childcare Network

Prof Francis Douglas, UCC

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High/Scope Ireland

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Montessori Ireland

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

OMEP Ireland. OMEP: World Organisation for Early Childhood Education

Fingal County Childcare Committee

foreword

I would like to welcome this publication in the strongest possible terms. Parents are often perplexed by the complexity of pre-school provision. This book goes a long way to answering many of their questions, and offers signposts which will help in choosing suitable childcare for their child.

In giving advice to parents of pre-school children I always emphasise a) that the child is first and foremost the parent's responsibility and parents usually know what is best for their children and what will best suit their children, and b) that they should always visit the pre-school facility and stay awhile before allowing their child to go there. Human instinct, especially that of the parent, is a very powerful force and should be respected!

The National Children's Nurseries Association has worked long and hard to improve the quality of early years provision in Ireland. They are to be congratulated and commended for this publication which follows a step by step format which is easy to read and helpful.

Francis Douglas
Professor of Early Childhood Studies
June, 2009



introduction

Since its foundation in 1988, the National Children's Nurseries Association has worked to improve the quality of daycare in Ireland and to increase the awareness nationally of the importance of quality in the provision.

In 2003, NCNA produced a guide to help parents find and choose good quality childcare. This updated guide has been produced in collaboration with the following organisations

Border Counties Childcare Network
Kildare County Childcare Committee
Limerick City Childcare Committee
OMEP Ireland (Organisation Mondiale des Education Prescolaire)
South Tipperary County Childcare Committee
Waterford County Childcare Committee
Wicklow County Childcare Committee

This revised guide has been extended to include information for parents on

- the range of programmes available in childcare centres
- an explanation of the new ECCE (Early Childhood Care & Education) Scheme
- an explanation of Aistear, the new curriculum for early years services and Síolta, the new national quality framework for early years services
- how childcare services accommodate children with special needs.

helping you make the right choice

There are many reasons why parents choose childcare in a centred based service for their children. For some it facilitates a return to work, training or education while others may simply want to see their child enjoy the socialisation and developmental benefits associated with quality childcare. There are many issues you need to consider when choosing the right childcare for your child, but the most important consideration is that you are happy and comfortable that you have made the right decision.

Your right choice is the one that meets your child's emotional and developmental needs and also meets your lifestyle needs. Step-by-step, this guide will help you choose the best available childcare for your child and you.



2

What do children
tell us they
want from
childcare?



Consulting children is very important if we are to find out more about what they enjoy about their childcare experience. Asking questions and listening to answers gives us insights about things that we can put in place to improve the quality of their childcare experience. This section describes some of the information gained from talking to children about what they want from childcare.

- ✓ For children, friendships are crucial as is how they feel about about themselves and how they are accepted by others.
“You come to play-school to meet your friends” – Mary 4 years.

The culture developed in the childcare setting supports the development of friendships and children’s acceptance of each other. Often children say they want to play with particular children but they may not always get a chance to do so in the course of the pre-school year.

“I never get to play with Finn” – Clare, 3 years, 3 months.

Family is also very important to them and services should be able to show parents how they are included when plans and decisions are being made that affect children in the service. Further, sometimes children ask to play with their older siblings or cousins in the childcare setting as part of their settling in process and parents should check out with the service that this is permitted.

- ✓ From listening to children we know that children want plenty of experiences. We also know that children want the adults to build on children’s interests so as to help them on their journey of holistic learning and development both with adults and their peers.

“I want to go to playgroup to paint, to play in the

sand, go on the slide and to learn” – Jessica, 2 years 10 months.

In pre-school settings children want to play in many different ways. For them play is a crucial element of the time spent there and for children can be serious as well as fun.

“Diggers are my best” – Josh.

“I like to play monster games in the sand”

“I like to play at the house” – Alana.

They also want to know that they have a special place to hang up their coats and keep their personal belongings and to be able to bring in things from home that are special and important to them to play with and share with the children and adults in the childcare service. Signs of childrens lives outside the childcare service should be apparent throughout the premises.

- ✓ Children want real choices to be available to them. They want what they feel, say and do to be respected and acted upon. They want to be included in any observation and assessment of their learning. “What are you writing about, is that about me, what does it say, can I write in it too?? – Clare, age 4 years, 3 months.

It is important to remember that each child has their own individual and group learning strategies and these should be harnessed for effective learning and development.

‘Children are not only influenced by their environment but actively change it’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) meaning that just by children being there they are influencing and changing what goes on within their pre-school experience.



3

**what are
your
childcare
options?**



There are a variety of options available when it comes to arranging childcare for your children. What suits you best depends on practical issues such as the hours that you work or study, where you live and the availability of places, as well as any personal preferences you may have for choosing a home or centre-based environment for your child. When choosing childcare it is important to take an honest look at what is best for your child's personality and your parenting style.

types of services

Childcare is available in crèches, nurseries, playgroups, Montessori schools, etc.

Typically a crèche provides care and education for children from infant to 5 years, and many also offer care for older children. It will usually open from 7.30 am to 6 pm all year round. It will offer a range of services including full day care, part time care, Montessori classes, playgroup, and after school club. It often offers breakfast clubs and school drop off/collection services.

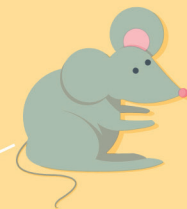
A stand alone playgroup or Montessori service (referred to as a sessional service) typically runs for a 3 or 3½ hour session, for 38, or up to 50 weeks a year. It will usually offer services from 9 am to 12.30 pm or from 2 pm to 5 pm, for example.

Depending on your needs, you can choose, full or part time care, or sessional childcare. You will find that some services have adopted a specific philosophy regarding early childhood education, such as Montessori or High/Scope, while others combine several approaches to pre-school development.

The following pages detail some of the differences between the various programmes available.

childcare is right for you if:

- ✓ You want your child to enter a stimulating environment with qualified and professional care, that offers stability and continuity to school-going age and beyond.
- ✓ You feel that your child will enjoy taking part in a programme of activities that are appropriate to his/her own development.
- ✓ Because of work or other circumstances you need reliability every day.
- ✓ You want your childcare provider to complement rather than replace your role as a parent.



Choice Tip: Choose what is best for your child's personality and your parenting style.

Steiner Kindergartens

Steiner Kindergartens, provide a secure, gentle, home-like environment where the young child can flourish and the wonder of childhood is protected. Steiner Early Years Care and Education has a consistent philosophy of child development underlying the curriculum which is responsive to childhood's developmental phases. It began with the work of Dr Rudolf Steiner and has been developed to become a part of mainstream provision in most European countries. Formal academic learning does not feature in the belief that children will learn these skills more effectively if they have had plenty of time and opportunity to develop socially, emotionally and physically first, in a creative, secure and harmonious environment.

What parents look for in a Steiner Childcare Setting

- ✓ Warm, nurturing environment.
- ✓ An emphasis on learning through doing, child led creative play, natural materials, celebration of seasonal festivals and activities.
- ✓ Healthy daily rhythms, alternating child-led time with teacher-led activity and rest.
- ✓ Simple natural playthings to nourish the senses and stimulate imagination.
- ✓ Regular activities like handcraft, baking, painting, “ring time” songs, verses, stories.
- ✓ Outdoor play.

Benefits for children

- ✓ The Steiner curriculum meets their developmental needs in an artistic, age appropriate way.
- ✓ Their imaginations are nurtured and social, emotional and physical skills developed as important prerequisites for formal school learning.
- ✓ Careful consideration is given to the impact of everything in their environment upon their senses.

Play Based

The play based programme offers play based learning that helps children explore, think, be creative, express themselves etc. Different types of play help children to learn and develop. A play based programme will promote

- ✓ physical play, for example climbing, riding a tricycle, and exploring and finding out what an object is and does.
- ✓ creative play, for example dancing, painting, and making things with junk and recycled materials.
- ✓ pretend play, for example dressing up and taking on the role of a fairy or a super hero, making a bus and collecting and dropping off passengers, playing ‘shop’, and building roads and bridges.

- ✓ games with rules, for example games in which children play by their own rules and more conventional games with 'external' rules such as Peek-a-boo, Hide-and-seek and Hopscotch.
- ✓ language play, for example exploring sounds, nonsense and 'real' words when finding words that rhyme or when saying tongue twisters.

Children need time and lots of opportunities to play. It is important, therefore, that the setting has

- ✓ space to play inside and outside.
- ✓ toys, equipment and real objects that reflect his/her culture.
- ✓ other children to play with.
- ✓ choices about when, what, where, how and with whom to play.
- ✓ adult support.

High/Scope

The High/Scope curriculum is used internationally in a variety of settings including day care, creches, playgroups, childcare and primary schools.

What does a High/Scope setting look like?

In a setting using the High/Scope curriculum you will see an environment which provides active participatory learning experiences through the use of:

- ✓ Clearly defined interest areas such as painting, sand and water, home, books and blocks.
- ✓ Many natural, real and open-ended materials.
- ✓ Materials which are accessible to the children.
- ✓ Clearly labelled interest areas, shelves and storage containers which promotes the Find-Use-Return cycle.

What happens during a High/Scope session?

- ✓ Children engage in enjoyable active participatory learning experiences throughout the session.
- ✓ Children plan their activities, carry them out and reflect on them.
- ✓ Children choose, use and return materials.
- ✓ Children solve problems and resolve conflicts with adult support.
- ✓ Opportunities for children to play alone and together in small and large groups.
- ✓ Adults use Child Observation Records to observe, encourage and support children's development and learning
- ✓ Children and adults play, talk and learn together as partners.

Naoínra

Naíonraí use the immersion education method, which is internationally renowned and proven to be the most effective way of acquiring a second language (Irish).

Potential Benefits

1. Greater academic success	6. Broader exposure to and appreciation of the value of various cultures
2. Easier to learn a third and fourth language	7. Thinking benefits
3. Bilingualism	8. Raised self-esteem
4. Biliteracy	9. Assured identity
5. Wider communication	10. Economic and employment benefits

Montessori Pre-school Education

Montessori education is based on the understanding that education begins at birth and is a natural process which develops spontaneously. Respect for the child is the core principle of the Montessori method of education. Classrooms are bright spacious multi-age learning communities guided by a trained teacher.

Children are free to move around and independently choose their own activities. Using real child sized utensils the children learn to care for themselves and their environment. The specifically designed Montessori educational materials increase sensory awareness and refinement of the senses and guide the child in their individual growth and development. These activities help develop concentration, dexterity and independence while providing indirect preparation for more formal learning such as reading, writing, and number work. The self-correcting materials provide positive feedback to the child aiding the development of self-esteem and self-discipline. The child who feels good about himself/herself learns to love his companions, the natural environment and learning.

The Montessori class provides comfort, security and a cohesive community. The flexibility of the programme makes it adaptable to the needs of the child regardless of the level of ability, learning style or social maturity. Small steps, self correcting materials, individual lessons and self chosen tasks all lead the child to experience success. The focus is on the development of the whole child and the provision of an environment complete with enriching activities that will foster growth in this vital period of development.

4

children with
special needs



For the parents of a child with special needs it can be an exceptionally hard decision to entrust your child's care into a childcare service or pre-school especially if your child is non-verbal or has complex needs. However, every child is entitled to an inclusive education, and has the right to play.

The Legislation

- ✓ No child can be discriminated on the grounds of disability and childcare services must provide 'reasonable accommodation' for the inclusion of children with special needs in their service. Equal Status Act (2000-2004)
- ✓ According to the Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations Part 2, 2006, practitioners "should be pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's needs, in co-operation with his/her parents, and following consultation, where appropriate with other relevant agencies" e.g. HSE or Early Intervention services.

What would an inclusive childcare service look like?

- ✓ Although not a legal requirement yet, an Individual Educational Plan should be provided for children with Special Education Needs.
- ✓ It is also good practice to record the child's progress, and work with the Special Educational Needs Organiser (Seno) to help ease the transition of the child from pre-school to primary school.
- ✓ Staff being pro active in getting as much information as possible on your child on such needs as positioning, communication styles, manual handling, feeding and dietary concerns etc.
- ✓ Staff being willing to link with your child's therapists for further guidance

- ✓ Staff being willing to work inclusively with the preschool child's special needs assistant (if available)
- ✓ Parents are informed as to whether the service will have a 'key worker' system in place
- ✓ Ethos of the service should include inclusiveness
- ✓ Warm, inviting to both you and your child and willing to work with you to make the childcare as accessible as possible
- ✓ Will see your child first and all his/her abilities, and while some additional resources may be required, there is a can do attitude and a commitment to making inclusion happen
- ✓ Pictures, books and dolls reflect disability in a positive way
- ✓ Staff have had training in disability awareness or, are willing to train
- ✓ Children of mixed ability are encouraged to play and become friends
- ✓ Activities are planned and adapted to suit the needs of all the children

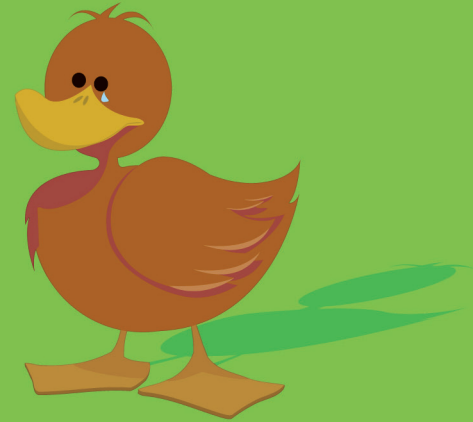
What are the benefits of an inclusive education?

- ✓ All children will be encouraged to participate in achievable activities building self-esteem and confidence
- ✓ All children will appreciate diversity and develop empathy and a sense of community and citizenship through helping each other and respecting each other
- ✓ Our children will not need to "do disability awareness" because they will have been socialised to, and have friends with a disability



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what should
I look for in
a childcare
service?



good childcare...

- ✓ Is an enjoyable place where your child will have fun while learning and discovering their own potential under the guidance of professional and experienced carers.
- ✓ Works with you as a parent, in every aspect of your child's happiness and development – involving you in your child's childcare life and building mutual trust through communication.
- ✓ Offers a safe and secure environment that is stimulating and challenging for children at every stage of their development.
- ✓ Fulfills its statutory obligations in terms of notification to the HSE, health and safety requirements, staff/child ratios and available space.
- ✓ Offers a defined development programme with the flexibility to respond to each individual child's needs at his/her own pace.
- ✓ Recognises diversity of culture.
- ✓ Can provide written policies and procedures for the daily running of the childcare service.
- ✓ Provides you with information about how you can make a complaint about the service, and information about how to complain to the HSE about the service.

as a parent you need...

- ✓ Support with your return to work, training or education.
- ✓ To be happy that your child is happy and is receiving the best of care.
- ✓ A childcare service that works with you in partnership in every aspect of parenting.
- ✓ Open two-way communication.
- ✓ Respect for your parenting preferences and the flexibility to respond to your own individual requirements.
- ✓ Confidence that your child is happy.
- ✓ Support in your choice to access a place in an early years education setting for your child for the benefits it will offer your child.



the practical considerations:

location

It is important that your chosen childcare service is conveniently located. Childcare in a location that puts you under unnecessary time pressure in the morning or the evening is not ideal. If you cannot locate childcare near you, consider a childcare service en-route to work or near your work place. Remember to keep in mind how long it would take to drive to and from home and work, both at off peak and rush hour times. Also, how long it takes to reach the childcare service in case of an emergency. Where possible, share the responsibility of the 'childcare run' with a partner or other family member or friend.

opening hours

Most childcare services are open between 7.30 am and 6.00 pm and will require you to collect and drop off your child during these hours. Check to make sure that there is convenient parking and that the childcare service is accessible at busy times.

costs of childcare

The cost of childcare varies from one childcare service to the next. When agreeing a price make sure you fully understand:

- What is covered by the cost
- When the next review is due
- What your commitments are in terms of provision of food and items such as nappies, etc.

full or part-time

Most childcare services offer a combination of full and part-time places on a permanent basis.

which is best? near home or work?

If you have the choice between a childcare service close to your home or near work, there are a number of factors to consider, such as the amount of time your child will spend in the car, what would happen if you were sick, and if it is convenient for a partner or family member to share the childcare run. Whichever you choose, it is important that you are on time each day to pick up your child. It is unfair on your child and the staff to keep them waiting.

Choice Tip: Childcare near where you work facilitates you if you wish to continue breast-feeding or wish to see your child during your work break time. Childcare near home helps your child get to know the children in your local community.

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making the choice

- ✓ Draw up a list of childcare services convenient to you
- ✓ Telephone with specific questions to shortlist
- ✓ Make appointments to visit the childcare services for you to ask questions and see for yourself the childcare services' policies and procedures
- ✓ Confirm your decision & sign contract



step 1: where to look

- 1 The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA) provides a free listing of members. Each of these member childcare services has passed very strict membership criteria, whilst some members have attained the NCNA All Ireland Centre of Excellence Award.
- 2 The Health Service Executive (HSE) in Ireland regulates and inspects all pre-school childcare services. Check out www.hse.ie for more information.
- 3 Your local HSE will have lists of childcare services that have notified them under the Pre-School Regulations. Ask the service if you can view their latest pre-school inspection report.
- 4 Other sources for locating childcare include:
 - ✓ Golden Pages
 - ✓ Local newspaper advertising
 - ✓ Work place notice-boards
 - ✓ Recommendations by friends or family
 - ✓ The internet
- 5 The local City/County Childcare Committee (CCC) will have information about notified services in their area. The CCC will also have a list available of services in the area offering the ECCE Scheme, or Free Pre-school Year. Check out www.pobal.ie for

a full list of City and County Childcare Committees. (See page 28 for more information on the ECCE Scheme).

step 2: draw up a list

This list should include all the childcare options that are convenient to you. Should you find that there are no childcare services close to your home, some alternatives could be those located en-route to or nearby your place of work or training.

step 3: save time – the telephone checklist

Save time - by telephoning and asking a few key questions, such as:

- ✓ Have they fulfilled their legal obligation to notify the HSE?
- ✓ Do they offer an early education programme, what is the programme and for what ages does it apply?
- ✓ What is their cost structure?
- ✓ Is there a place available for your child?
- ✓ Are they a member of the NCNA?
- ✓ What are the opening hours?
- ✓ Can they send you out a brochure to review before your visit?

Choice Tip: Not every childcare has its own outdoor play area. If the childcare you visit doesn't have one – find out if regular outdoor field trips are organised.

step 4: the visit

Visiting a childcare service for the first time is an exciting experience. During your visit it is important to gather the information you require, through observation and by asking questions. If you forget to ask a question – ring back later for clarification. To help you remember what to look for, bring the checklist at the back of this publication.

preparing for your visit

- ✓ Make a fixed appointment, this way the manager will have time to spend with you and answer all your questions.
- ✓ Bring your checklist along.
- ✓ Bring a pen and paper to take notes on any questions that may occur to you during your visit.
- ✓ If possible bring your child and a friend or family member with you, to see how the staff interact with your child.

what should you expect when visiting a childcare

Make sure that you allow yourself time to look around to see the facilities, to observe staff interacting with children and to sit down and discuss your requirements with the manager or owner. Remember it is unlikely that every childcare service will offer everything that you require, so choose, the one that best meets your needs.



the premises

The childcare service should be large enough to offer freedom and space to each child, yet the area should not be so large as to hinder supervision.

what should you see

- ✓ A clean, spacious, organised, self-contained, and child-friendly environment.
- ✓ Bright and stimulating rooms.
- ✓ For infants and young children, a quiet and comfortable sleeping area.

what you need to know

- ✓ Does the childcare service meets its statutory space and ratio requirements? See page 27 for more information.
- ✓ Are age groups mixed or cared for in separate areas?
- ✓ Will your child will have enough space to play?
- ✓ Do siblings get to meet and play together at times during the day?

facilities

The premises should have a sense of order and cleanliness that is balanced with a sense of creativity and fun. The specific facilities that you require will depend on the age of your infant, toddler or pre-schooler.

what you should see

- ✓ Materials for interactive play and learning activities.
- ✓ Evidence of childrens' art and creative work.
- ✓ Puzzles, books, toys, blocks.
- ✓ A quiet area for rest and relaxation.
- ✓ All child equipment is at child level.

what you need to know

- ✓ All the equipment in the childcare service is safe and well maintained.
- ✓ Each age group has access to age appropriate equipment and toys.
- ✓ The provisions in place for sleep or rest are suitable for your child's routine and requirements.
- ✓ If there is a radio, TV or video in the childcare, what is the policy on its usage?

food preparation & diet

what you should see

- ✓ A separate kitchen area that is inaccessible to children.
- ✓ Babies' bottles, if supplied by parents, are stored in fridges and correctly labelled.
- ✓ A designated area for preparation of baby food and sterilising equipment.
- ✓ A safe & hygienic system for the handling and storage of all food.
- ✓ Cleaning and sterilising chemicals are stored separately from food and drinks.
- ✓ A sample menu for you to see.

what you need to know

- ✓ What is the schedule for snacks and meals during the day?
- ✓ Who supplies the food? Is it you, the childcare service, or is it brought in by another company? If you are not providing the food, what steps are in place to ensure your child receives a nutritionally balanced diet?
- ✓ That children do not have access to the food preparation or storage areas.
- ✓ That the menus are balanced and varied.
- ✓ That the menu does not include junk or processed food on a regular basis.
- ✓ Special dietary requirements are catered for and understood by all staff.
- ✓ The only drinks offered during the day are milk, water and natural fruit juices.
- ✓ If you are still breast-feeding, that adequate provisions are in place such as a quiet area for feeding.

the programme

The childcare service you are happiest with should offer a structured curriculum that includes physical activity, play, quiet time, group and individual activities, creative activities, meals, snack time and free time. Children of all ages learn through play, so look out for childcare that places high value on children simply doing activities they enjoy. The programme offered by the childcare service should be flexible enough to respond to your child's needs and there should be some activities throughout the year that include you as a parent.

what you should see

- ✓ Activities that children can participate in.
- ✓ The evidence of creative work, group work or outings displayed in the childcare.
- ✓ Both child-led activities and play supported by the carers.

what you should know

- ✓ If the service offers a prescribed programme such as Montessori or High/Scope, are the carers qualified?
- ✓ What age does the programme start and finish? It is most common for childcare services to have programmes for children aged 2 and older.

the atmosphere

what you should see

- ✓ A warm and loving fun atmosphere where you feel your child will flourish and grow.
- ✓ Children looking comfortable and relaxed.
- ✓ Friendly and welcoming and attentive staff.
- ✓ Is there a warm and genuine welcome for your child?

what you should know

- ✓ The number of children in the group.
- ✓ That positive behaviour is rewarded, whilst inappropriate behaviour is discouraged.
- ✓ What steps are in place to encourage good communication between children?
- ✓ That the childcare service has procedures in place for children who are upset coming into the service or during the day.
- ✓ Is there a respectful approach towards diversity where each child's individuality and sense of identity is valued?



the staff

what you should see

- ✓ Staff being attentive to the children.
- ✓ Staff communicating with children at the child's level.
- ✓ Staff dealing with issues as they arise.
- ✓ Staff being friendly to you.
- ✓ A notice-board showing the staff/child ratio for each area in the childcare service.

what you should know

- ✓ The staff are experienced and trained childcare professionals.
- ✓ The staff have undertaken first aid training.
- ✓ That student carers or those on placement are not left in sole charge of children.
- ✓ The childcare has an acceptable staff turnover rate. This is particularly important for younger infants where one to one bonding is vital.
- ✓ A staff member is allocated to each child, either formally or through natural bonding.

communication/parental involvement

what you should know

- ✓ Does the childcare service have a policy on parental involvement?
- ✓ Does it have an open door policy?
- ✓ What form of daily feedback will you receive? Is it written or verbal?
- ✓ Are there parent's evenings/barbeques or other social activities organised?
- ✓ Is there a regular arrangement for discussing your child's progress?
- ✓ Is there regular written communication from the childcare to parents? e.g. newsletters?

health & safety

what you should see

- ✓ A visible safety statement and evidence of a system in place.
- ✓ No accessible flexes, sockets or trailing cables.
- ✓ An accident and incident book.
- ✓ Evidence of fire safety equipment.
- ✓ Clearly marked and accessible emergency exits.
- ✓ No broken or dangerous equipment or toys.

what you should know

- ✓ Does the childcare service have public liability insurance?
- ✓ They have a written policy for reporting accidents to parents.
- ✓ Is there regular fire drills or fire inspections.
- ✓ What is the procedure for emergency; under what circumstances will the service contact you?

finalising details, signing contracts & settling in



agreeing details

Every childcare service should provide you with a written statement of policies and procedures. This is often in booklet form. It is important for you to read them carefully, and if you have doubts or queries to raise them with the childcare before you book your place.

the statement of policy includes:

- ✓ Quality of care provided
- ✓ Parental involvement
- ✓ Food
- ✓ Religious ethos
- ✓ Child illness
- ✓ Discipline
- ✓ Child protection
- ✓ Sleep and rest policy
- ✓ Medical administration
- ✓ Garda vetting
- ✓ Settling in policy

the statement of procedures includes:

- ✓ Opening hours
- ✓ Charges
- ✓ Holidays/Absent days
- ✓ What you as a parent are expected to provide
- ✓ What the childcare service will provide
- ✓ Emergency procedures

signing contracts

Before signing contracts it is important to have thoroughly understood the policies and procedures for your chosen childcare service and have agreed your terms of payment:

- ✓ The weekly cost and when it is to be paid?
- ✓ How you can pay the fees – cheque, cash & direct debit are the most common options available.
- ✓ How much is the deposit to secure your child's place, when is this deposit to be paid, and under what circumstances is the deposit refundable?
- ✓ What is the pay arrangement for holidays and illness?
- ✓ Does the childcare close for Christmas or other breaks during the year?
- ✓ How much notice does the childcare service require?
- ✓ Are there reductions for second or third children from the same family?

Choice Tip: Because of the increased staff to child ratio required for babies - often baby places will cost more than places for an older child.

settling in ...

- ✓ Arrange to visit the childcare service at least twice with your child, staying with them, but in the background. Then leave them for a short time, making sure to return exactly when you said you would, before committing to longer periods.
- ✓ Seek advice from the childcare manager as to how to handle the settling in stage for your child.
- ✓ For older children such as toddlers or pre-schoolers, prepare them in basic skills to boost their confidence. Find out what they are expected to do at different ages and let the childcare service know if they need help.
- ✓ Give your child a familiar item such as a cuddly toy, blanket or toy from home to bring with them.
- ✓ When you have to leave to go to work, don't just leave your child with the carer and hurry off, make sure they are settled, and the carer knows what stage they are at with sleeps, feeds etc.
- ✓ Be happy and positive, your child will pick up on your mood!
- ✓ Stay involved. It's not all over once you find a good childcare for your child. You and the childcare service are partners.
- ✓ Ask questions, attend meetings, your input will be welcomed.
- ✓ Join in special events such as outings or fundraisers e.g. NCNA's Pyjama Day, St Patrick's Day parade, People in Need, Goal Jersey Day etc.
- ✓ Visiting and participating in events at your child's childcare sends a strong message to your child that you think what your child is doing and learning is important.

8

school age
childcare



choosing school age childcare

Many childcare services offer school age childcare for children aged 5+. These services provide a safe place for older children to enjoy a range of sports and creative activities with children of a similar age. They are great for children who want a place to play and have fun with friends from school, for supervised homework and the assurance that your children are being cared for after school. Looking after school-age children requires different skills and facilities than infants and pre-schoolers – so it is important to make sure the childcare service is capable of offering the best of care.

what to check?

- ✓ Staffing Ratios.
- ✓ How is access to the building regulated?
- ✓ Secure drop off and pick up procedures.
- ✓ What activities are undertaken, do the children get a chance to undertake projects or supervised outings for example?
- ✓ Are activities suitable for the age of the child?
- ✓ What kind of equipment is provided for the children?
- ✓ Is the equipment and furniture suitable for the age of your child? Do the children have comfortable places to relax, quiet places to do homework, places to play, places to take part in messy activities?
- ✓ Who is in charge of the school group and are they qualified and experienced?
- ✓ Is there a separate play area for after-school children?
- ✓ Are children provided with a quiet supervised space within which to work on homework? What is expected during this time? What happens to the children who do not have homework to do?
- ✓ Is there somewhere the children can change their clothes?

- ✓ How many staff are qualified in first aid?
- ✓ What training do the staff have?
- ✓ Can siblings of different ages meet and spend time together?
- ✓ Is there provision available for in-service days, school holidays, bank holidays etc.?
- ✓ Are children provided with a hot nutritious meal after school?

collection & delivery from school

Whilst some parents collect and drop off their children from school to the childcare service, either individually or by sharing responsibilities, some childcare services offer a collection service. If they do, you need to make sure of the following:

- ✓ Is the service limited to a number of specific schools?
- ✓ Do they use their own cars, do they have the appropriate insurance cover?
- ✓ Do they have sufficient bumper seats/seat belts for every occupant?
- ✓ If they use public transport, what is the ratio of supervising staff to children?
- ✓ Who is responsible for the children when in transit?

the childcare service visit checklist

the premises

- ✓ The interior is attractive, clean, well decorated, warm and bright.
- ✓ The equipment is good quality, clean, safe and appropriate.

diet & nutrition

- ✓ If meals are provided, the food is fresh, the menus balanced and special diets can be catered for.
- ✓ The menus are changed regularly.

the children

- ✓ The children in the childcare service appear happy and well occupied.
- ✓ The children are using a variety of equipment and the staff are involved.
- ✓ The staff are happy, relaxed, well presented, calm and confident.

staff

statutory

requirements

- ✓ The childcare service meets its guidelines on carers and space.

Carer/Child Ratio

0-1 years	1 carer for every 3 children
1-2 years	1 carer for every 5 children
2-3 years	1 carer for every 6 children
3-5 years	1 carer for every 8 children

Space per Child Ratio

0-1 years	3.50 sq. meters
1-2 years	2.80 sq. meters
2-3 years	2.35 sq. meters
3-5 years	2.30 sq. meters

Sessional Service

3-5 years	1 carer for every 10 children
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Sessional Pre-school Service

0-6 years	2.00 sq. metres
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School Age

4-6 years	1 carer for every 8 children
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(NCNA recommended)

6-8 years	1 carer for every 10 children
8-12 years	1 carer for every 12 children

general

considerations

- ✓ Parents and staff work in partnership, recording your child's activities and achievements.
- ✓ Your child will be attached to a key-worker, who will be your main contact and will keep you informed.
- ✓ The costs and terms and conditions are clear.
- ✓ The childcare service has written policies and procedures.
- ✓ You enjoyed your visit. It was friendly, relaxed and informative.





What is the new Free Pre-school Year in Early Childhood Care and Education – the ECCE Year? ...and how can parents access it?

The ECCE is a new scheme designed to give children access to a free Pre-school Year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment.

Will your child be eligible?

The ECCE Scheme is open to all children aged between 3 years 3 months and 4 years 6 months at any stage during the September of each pre-school year (i.e. in practise, all children at least 3 years 2 months and 1 day old on 1st September, but under and 4 years 7 months of age on that date). This means that to avail of the free pre-school year in January 2010, children must have been born between 2 February 2005 and 30 June 2006. To avail of the year in September 2010, children must have been born between 2 February 2006 and 30 June 2007. Exceptions may be allowed where a child is verified as having Special Needs which make a later starting date appropriate, or where local primary school enrolment policies require (i.e. rather than allow) a later enrolment date.

Where can I enrol my child for the free Pre-school Year?

There are nearly 5,000 pre-school services notified to the Health Service Executive (HSE) or registered with the Irish Montessori Education board (IMEB). All of these are eligible to apply to participate in the scheme. A list of those accepted under the scheme will be available for parents from their local City and County Childcare Committee from October 2009. There may be services in your area that are offering a pre-school service but are not participating in the ECCE Scheme. You can avail of this provision at your own expense. Parents can contact listed services in their area at that time to arrange for enrolment. If your child is already attending a pre-school service, or will be from September 2009, whether it is a playschool or a full or part-time daycare service, you can also ask the service provider if they plan to participate in the scheme.

The upper age limit of 4 years 6 months will be extended where a child cannot start primary school until s/he is more than 5 years 6 months of age, due to either the enrolment policy of the local schools or having been assessed as having developmentally delays.

How is the Pre-school Year funded?

Services participating in the scheme will be paid a capitation fee by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) for each qualifying child enrolled. In return, the service will be required to provide an appropriate programme of activities in early childhood care and education (ECCE) which will be free to parents. While the pre-school year will normally commence in September of each year, a shorter period will apply for those attending from January 2010.

How will the Pre-school Year be provided?

Children attending a full or part-time service will normally receive pre-school year sessions for 2 hours 15 minutes a day, 5 days a week over 50 weeks. To facilitate parents whose children attend a full or part-time service for only 3 days a week, the service may provide 3 daily sessions of 3 hours 45 minutes each week. Children availing of the free pre-school year during January to August 2010 will receive 35 rather than 50 weeks of free pre-school. Parents of these children will receive €48.50 off their childcare fees per week for 50 weeks of the year.

Children attending a sessional service, will normally receive pre-school year sessions for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week for 38 weeks. Sessional services which are unable to open 5 days a week, can apply to provide the pre-school year in the form of 3 hours 30 minutes a day, 4 days a week over 41 weeks. Children availing of the free pre-school year during January to August 2010 will receive 23 rather than 38 weeks of free pre-school. The weekly capitation fee in these cases will be €64.50. Parents of these children will pay no fee for their sessional care.

Some sessional services may choose to open for 50 weeks in the year rather than 38, in which case they will provide daily sessions of 2 hours 15 minutes, and full or part-time services may choose to also provide sessional services, in which case the 38 week model will apply. The free pre-school year will run in conjunction with the primary school year.

Will parents have to pay additional charges to the service for the free Pre-school Year?

No, services which participate in the scheme must provide the pre-school year free to parents. A service may charge parents for additional services as long as (a) these are provided on an optional basis and (b) appropriate programme based activities are provided to children not participating in an optional activity. Services can also charge for hours which are additional to the free pre-school provision e.g. if a child is in a full-day service for 10 hours, a parent should expect to pay for 7 hours, 45 minutes per day which are not free. An additional 30 minutes per day, which would be charged for, may be offered to a child in a sessional service. Outings, birthday parties, snacks, etc can also be charged for, provided they are optional for parents.

What are Síolta and Aistear?

The Department of Education and Science has overseen the development of national practice frameworks in Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, and Aistear, the Framework for Early Learning. Síolta addresses all dimensions of practice in all ECCE settings where children aged birth to six years are present. All services participating in the ECCE Scheme must subscribe to the Síolta principles and be prepared to work towards Síolta validation.

Aistear, the Framework for Early Learning has been developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Aistear is structured around four themes, each of which has a set of aims and goals for children's wellbeing, learning and development. A childcare service committed to providing a quality service will be aware of the new curriculum and will be committed to its inclusion in the service. The completion of these practice frameworks provides a set of essential tools for services engaged in ECCE. For more information: www.siolta.ie and www.ncca.ie/earlychildhoodframework



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