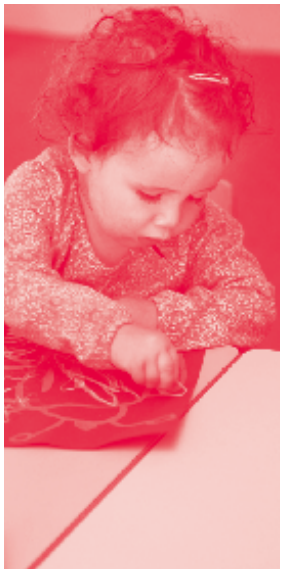
NCCA

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

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Guidelines for good practice

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework has four elements:

- Principles and themes
- Guidelines for good practice
- User guide
- Key messages from the research papers.

This hard copy of *Aistear* includes the first two elements, *Principles and themes* followed by *Guidelines for good practice*. These and the other two elements are available on the website of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) at **www.ncca.ie/earlylearning**. The website which is updated regularly also has a toolkit containing practical resources to help you use *Aistear* in your setting.

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Introduction

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It describes learning and development through the four interconnected themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating,* and *Exploring and Thinking.* Four sets of guidelines, focusing on different aspects of pedagogy, describe **how** the adult can support children's learning and development across these themes. The guidelines focus on

- building partnerships between parents and practitioners
- learning and developing through interactions
- learning and developing through play
- supporting learning and development through assessment.

The guidelines describe good practice and use a number of *learning experiences* to show what this practice might look like. While these learning experiences usually focus on a particular age group of children and a particular type of setting, many of them can be adapted to suit other age groups and other settings. *Thinking about my practice* questions help the adult reflect on what he/she does and says to support children's learning and development.

There are many connections across the four sets of guidelines. For example, many of the learning experiences in an individual set can support practice in the other guidelines.

Building partnerships between parents and practitioners

Introduction

Parents are the most important people in their children's early lives. Children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities, and routines with parents and families. Parents can also support children's learning in out-of-home settings, such as childminding settings, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools, and primary schools. By working together parents and practitioners can enhance children's learning and development.

All parents need support at some time or another. For example, the loss of a loved one, a money problem, or ill health might mean that they need extra help. Time constraints, poverty, social and economic background, cultural identity, discrimination, previous negative experiences, literacy difficulties, language, or different disabilities, can also make it difficult for parents to participate in their children's learning and development as much as they might like to. While partnership can benefit all parents and families, parent/practitioner partnerships can be especially important for these families.

These guidelines outline what partnership means and describe different ways in which parents and practitioners can work together.

What are partnerships? Why are they important?

Figure 1: Definition of partnership

> Partnership involves parents, families and practitioners **working together** to benefit children. Each **recognises, respects and values** what the other does and says. Partnership involves **responsibility** on both sides.

Increasingly, the early care and education of babies, toddlers and young children is shared among parents, families and practitioners. A partnership approach between these people is very important, especially at times of change in children's lives. These times might include settling in to a new setting, getting to know a new practitioner, or getting used to a new baby at home. Other critical times might be when children experience bereavement, are upset or worried, or feel left out or different in a negative way. By working together and sharing information parents and practitioners can help make these times in children's lives easier. Good partnerships are built on trust. Practitioners need to respect the confidentiality of information they receive about children, while understanding that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed for example in cases involving child protection issues.[1]

Table 1 outlines the benefits of good partnerships for parents, practitioners and children.

[1] See *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999), *Our Duty to Care: the principles of good practice for the protection of children and young people,* (Department of Health and Children, 2002) and *Child Protection—Guidelines and Procedures* (Department of Education and Science, 2001).

Table 1: The benefits of parents and practitioners working together

Parents	Practitioners	Children
■ feel valued and respected ■ are more involved in their children's learning and development ■ can share information about their children ■ feel their family's values, practices, traditions, and beliefs are understood and taken into account ■ feel comfortable visiting the setting, talking to, and planning with practitioners ■ know more about their children's experiences outside the home and use this information to support their learning and development more effectively ■ understand why early childhood care and education is important ■ have increased confidence in their own parenting skills.	■ understand better the children and families in their settings and use this information to make learning more enjoyable and rewarding for all children ■ can help children develop a sense of identity and belonging in the setting by actively engaging with and finding out about family values, traditions and beliefs, and building on these where appropriate ■ benefit from parents' skills and expertise ■ can provide a more emotionally secure environment for children.	■ feel more secure and benefit more from the educational opportunities given to them ■ move from one setting to another with greater confidence ■ see learning as more enjoyable when their home life is 'visible' in the setting ■ enjoy hearing and seeing their home language in the setting when their home language is neither English nor Irish ■ experience more connections between the different services that support them.

Partnership in action

There are many different ways in which parents and practitioners can work together. These guidelines focus on four:

- supporting learning and development
- sharing information
- contributing
- making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action.

There are connections across these different ways as can be seen in a number of the *learning experiences* on pages 11 to 25.

Supporting learning and development

Parenting involves giving children the care, education and attention they need to learn and develop. Parents provide children with their first learning experiences and they help ensure that children reach important developmental milestones such as sitting, walking, becoming toilet-trained, talking, cutting, doing up buttons, cycling, reading, and so on. As children go on to spend time in out-of-home settings parents continue to support their learning and development. This is more effective when parents complement children's experiences in a particular setting. Likewise, learning is more meaningful when practitioners use information from parents about children's interests, skills, abilities, and dispositions as a starting point for new experiences. Below are some ways in which parents can support their children's learning and development at home, and how practitioners can help them to do this.

Parents

You can support your child's learning and development at home in the following ways:

- Ask the **practitioner for suggestions** for what you can do at home with your child.
- Involve your child in **everyday activities** like cooking, shopping, working in the garden, going to the launderette, and travelling on the bus. Talk to your child about what he/she is doing, sees, and how he/she feels.
- Give your child opportunities to use his/her **senses**—to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear different things.
- **Read** to your child. Join your local library, and help your child to choose books to enjoy together.
- **Sing songs, tell stories** and **play games** with your child. Have **fun** together.
- **Talk** to your child. Encourage him/her to ask questions. Let your child know you don't always have the answer. Find things out together.
- Limit the amount of time your child spends watching **television**. Talk to him/her about what he/she watches.
- Find out **how children learn and develop.** Ask your child's practitioner about useful books or websites for information.
- Look at ***Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*** for ideas about what you can do to support your child's learning and development. The *sample learning opportunities* in the four themes and the *learning experiences* in the guidelines suggest lots of activities that you can do together.

Practitioners

You can help parents to support their children's learning and development in the following ways:

- **Share information** about the curriculum with parents.
  - Use a notice-board to let parents know what activities children do on a particular day. Pictures might be useful in sharing this information with parents who have little English or Irish.
  - Send home photographs of the children with captions which describe what they have been doing and learning.
  - Let parents know about topics that interest their children. Find out what their interests are at home and build on these.
  - Invite parents to share information about their culture and traditions that might be useful in supporting their children's learning and development.
  - Organise information sessions for parents. Some of these might be especially important before and/or after children join the setting. A session might focus on *Aistear's* four themes and what you do to support children's learning and development in these. In the case of children in junior and senior infants, the information session might focus on the *Primary School Curriculum* and *Aistear*. Another session might highlight the importance of play and how children can learn through it.

- Meet with the infant class teacher(s) to find out how you can help parents and their children move on to primary school with confidence, ease and excitement.
- Give parents the address of the NCCA website so that they can find out more about *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (see www.ncca.ie/earlylearning).

- **Share resources** with parents.
  - Make leaflets, tip sheets, DVDs, and other resources available to parents. Provide these in children's home languages where possible.
  - Lend story books and tapes of songs and rhymes.
  - Make learning kits with ideas for activities, and include items like chubby crayons and safety scissors if funds allow.
  - Share easy-to-read books on child development.
- Invite parents to **spend time in the setting** so that they can join in with activities and learn about what their children do.
- Develop a regular **newsletter** that provides useful information such as the words of songs and rhymes that the children are learning, important dates, updates on policies, and snippets of theory followed by ideas for activities to do at home that are fun and don't cost much.

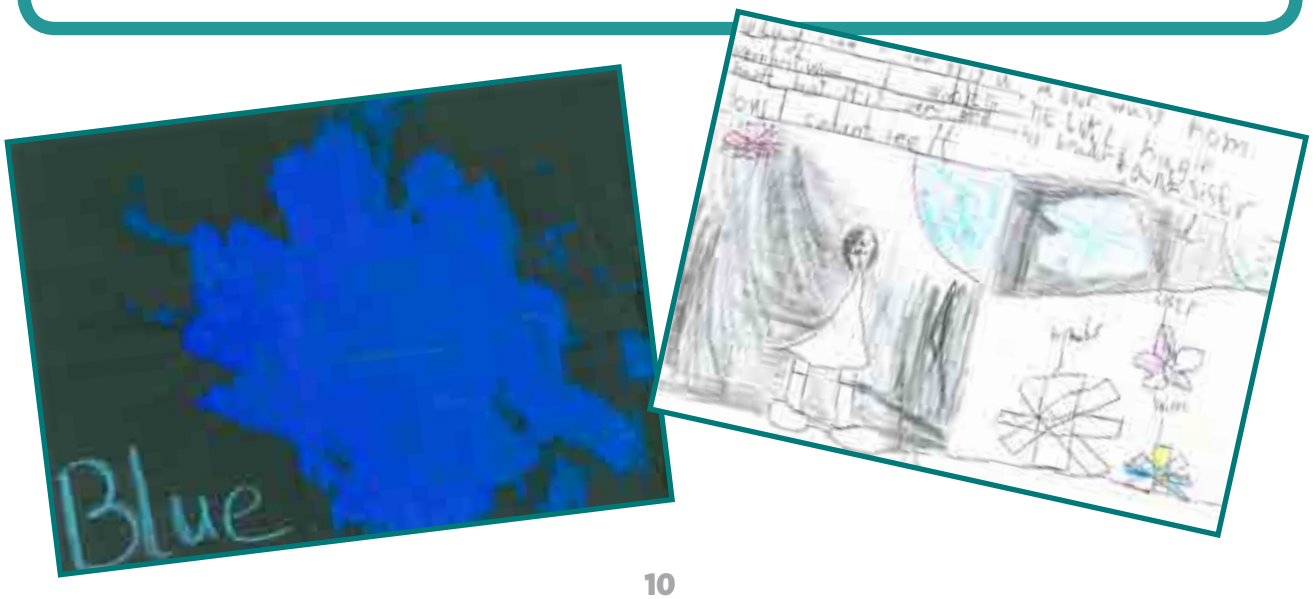
Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *What new and fun activities can I do with my child to help him/her learn and develop?*
2. *How much do I know about what my child is learning in the out-of-home setting?*
3. *How can I find out more about how to support his/her learning and development at home?*

As a practitioner

4. *How can I gather and use information from parents to improve children's experiences?*
5. *What steps can I take to help parents support their children's learning and development?*
6. *What resources do I have that I could share with parents?*



Learning experience 1: Jack's New Zealand roots

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Babies and young children

Setting: Home and childminding

Every evening Luke reads a bedtime story to his son Jack (5½ years) and his baby daughter Kate (16 months). As they snuggle up to their Daddy, Kate helps to turn the pages and points to her favourite characters. She loves 'lift the flap' books and Luke told Kate's childminder, Mags, about this when she was starting with Mags a few months ago. Mags has a number of these books and Kate loves to sit on her knee on the garden seat looking at them.

Luke also told Mags about Jack's interest in books, especially books about sport. Luke is originally from New Zealand and he and Jack love to read about rugby. Jack has taught the other children at Mags' to play rugby, and a few weeks ago Luke arranged for Mags and the four children she minds to go to a local school rugby match. She also purchased two books about New Zealand as Jack and his family are planning a trip there during the summer to visit his grandparents. The children and Mags are learning a lot about New Zealand. They are finding out about the weather, the sports people play, the food they eat, and the types of farms they have. They are also comparing these with the village in Co. Tipperary where they live. The children are really excited about Jack and his family flying on a huge aeroplane. They are even building one just like it in Mags' playroom. It's massive!

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Reflection: How can I build on children's interests to enhance their learning and development, and to strengthen their sense of identity?

Learning experience 2: The beat of the drum

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Toddlers

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

Gloria moved to Ireland from North Nigeria three years ago. She speaks English and helps out in the toddler room on a Tuesday morning every two weeks. Her grandson Lee (2½ years) has been attending the crèche since September and is in the toddler room. On each visit, Gloria brings along something from North Nigeria for the children to see, play with, and learn about. These items are all familiar to Lee. Today she brings an African drum. She plays it while she sings an African song. The children gather round her. Some sway and some clap while others dance to the beat. Lee and some of his friends join in with some of the repeated words and phrases. Afterwards, the children take turns to play the drum. Next time, Gloria plans to play some outdoor games with the toddlers. Sorcha, the room leader, takes a few minutes of video which she shows the children after Gloria goes home.

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Reflection: In what ways can I involve parents and grandparents in giving the children rich experiences?

Learning experience 3: Helping me to learn

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home and infant class (primary school)

Kara (4 years) is in junior infants. Her parents left school early. They have difficulties with literacy and know this is a disadvantage. They really want Kara to do well in school and to get a good education. But Kara says she doesn't like school. Kara and her family have the support of a Home School Community Liaison co-ordinator, Betty. Betty encourages Kara's parents to talk to her teacher, Ms. Nugent, and she suggests some questions they might ask. Ms. Nugent encourages them to help Kara in whatever way they can. She suggests that they use a picture book to read a story or to tell her stories themselves about when they were children. They can draw pictures together at home and talk about them. If they have time they can come in some days and help out in the classroom.

Ms. Nugent also encourages Kara in school by asking her what kind of books she likes to look at and read. Kara replies, Books about babies are good and books about dressing up and going to my friend's house. Ms. Nugent regularly uses books on these topics when reading stories to Kara and her friends. She puts dress-up clothes and props such as tiaras, dolls, buggies, and hand-bags in the pretend play area. Ms. Nugent regularly talks to Kara's mam to see how they can continue to work together to support Kara at home and in school. Betty also liaises with Ms. Nugent and Kara's parents regularly to ensure Kara and her family have positive school experiences.

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Reflection: What can I do to give extra support and encouragement to some parents?

Sharing information

Good communication between parents and practitioners is key to promoting children's learning and development. Each person needs to be clear about the role and expectations of the other person. As noted earlier, it is important that everyone understands that some information shared by parents and practitioners is confidential although not in the case of child protection issues.

Some parents may have specific needs in accessing information or participating in activities. For example, parents who have physical disabilities, sensory impairments, literacy difficulties, whose home language is different from that of the setting need information in an accessible form. Parents themselves are the most valuable resource in building a partnership relationship. However, some parents may be shy or lack confidence, but with a little encouragement they may be happy to get involved. Getting to know them, their needs and their expectations, is the first step, as parents can offer valuable insights into how services can be improved or made more accessible for them.

Partnership between practitioners and other professionals who are involved in supporting children's learning and development is also vital, so that their inputs benefit children as much as possible. When direct contact between practitioners and other professionals is not possible parents can often act as a link and pass on information.

The setting

Parents should be given information about their children's out-of-home setting and the staff. This information[2] includes details of

- the setting's vision or mission
- the curriculum—its principles, what children learn and how
- the manager/principal, and the primary contact person and/or the child's key worker
- the setting's facilities
- opening and closing times
- staff training and qualifications
- adult/child ratios, and the maximum numbers and age range of the children
- fees
- policies on areas such as managing behaviour, promoting healthy eating, giving first-aid, and settling in.

Children's experiences and progress

Parents and practitioners need to communicate regularly about children's progress, interests, needs, and daily experiences. Parents have a wealth of information about their children. Sharing this information with practitioners helps build a more complete picture of what children can do—their likes, dislikes, interests, and so on. It is important, therefore, that parents have opportunities to meet with practitioners and share information about their children. For more information see the guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment.*

Parents often talk with people from different professions about their children, and each profession can have its own specialised language. Even everyday terms can have different meanings in different situations. It is important that everyone understands what is being discussed, what terms mean, and what is being suggested for children. This is important for all children, but especially when parents' or the practitioner's first language is neither English nor Irish, when parents have little or no formal education, and, in the case of children with special educational needs, when technical terms may be used.

Information should be shared in plain English/Irish. Writing notes, talking, using pictures, and translating information are all helpful ways of communicating with parents. Different arrangements may be needed for different families. Practitioners need to be particularly mindful of parents who are separated or divorced when thinking about communication. The information may need to be sent to two different homes and separate appointments may need to be made to talk to the parents. Different arrangements work in different situations.

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[2] The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (2006) set out the basic information that parents must be given. Many settings like to share more information than this about the way they work.

Parents: Sharing information with your child's practitioner

- **Get to know** your child's practitioner. Show your interest in hearing about your child's experiences. Talk to the practitioner regularly when dropping off or collecting your child. Where this may not be possible make an appointment or use a note or a diary to share information.
- Give the practitioner **feedback**. For example, tell him/her when your child comes home excited about an activity and wants to try it out at home.
- Tell the practitioner about your child's **achievements at home**.
- Share your family **traditions and culture** so that the practitioner can help your child feel he/she belongs in the setting. Let practitioners know about your **childrearing practices,** especially when these may differ from those in the setting.
- Tell the practitioner about anything that might be affecting your **child's mood** or **behaviour**, such as the death of a pet, a sick parent, a separation, as well as about exciting events at home such as a birthday, a cultural event, a new pet, or a visit from a cousin.
- Look at **displays of your child's work** or photographs of him/her in the setting. Talk to your child about these.
- Share **concerns** you may have about your child's learning and development with the practitioner.
- Share information about particular **supports or help** you or your child need in order to participate in activities. Share **specialist knowledge** about your child's needs with the practitioner. Pass on recommendations or suggestions that specialist services have made about your child. For example, if the physiotherapist has recommended exercises to improve your child's upper body strength make sure that the practitioner knows about these.
- Let the practitioner know if you would like more **information about the setting** and about how you would like to receive that information. If there is something that you are not clear about or that you are concerned about, **ask**.
- **Offer to help** with translation, or in other ways, to help other parents who use the setting.

Practitioners: Sharing information with parents

- Where possible **talk informally** to parents on a regular basis as well as at parent/practitioner meetings. Encourage them to come to you for information.
- Share **examples of children's work** with parents and families. For example, make portfolios of the children's work. Organise open days and exhibitions to display and celebrate these. Send the portfolios home at the end of a month, term or year. Display children's work and photographs in hallways and change these regularly.
- Make sure that displays reflect the **diversity of the families** who use the service, including family structure, disability, Traveller, and new community. (See the theme, *Identity and Belonging*.)
- Provide **information and feedback verbally** as well as in writing, and in children's home languages where possible. Use **email** as well as printed notices, handouts and newsletters. Use **text messages** to remind parents about special events, and leave details on **voice mail** or **answering machines** that can be accessed at weekends and holidays.
- Share **records** with parents, in addition to the statutory minimum requirements under the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006). For example, a crèche or childminder might keep a daily notebook recording the baby's or toddler's physical care (bottles, meals, nappies) and achievements such as smiles, new words, friendships, and so on. It is important that practitioners are honest with parents and let them know about problems and issues of concern, as well as progress and achievements, as early as possible. This needs to be done in person. (See the guidelines, *Supporting learning and development through assessment*.)

- Some parents may need help to interpret **report cards** when these are used, for example in primary schools. Including definitions of words or using graphics on the cards could help with this.
- Let parents know that there is a **regular time** when a staff member is available to **talk** on the phone. This might be especially helpful for parents who are at work during the day or have difficulty in coming in to the setting. However, it is generally better to have face-to-face discussions, especially if there is a problem.
- Hold **workshops** on children's learning and development, for example on learning through play. Give parents hands-on experience of some of the activities. Inform them of the social and emotional aspects of learning, and help them to see the importance of play and active exploration.
- Organise a **variety of activities** for parents at **different times** of the day and week to include as many parents as possible. For example, organise a crèche to allow parents of younger children to attend a meeting or another event. Ensure that people with mobility problems, literacy problems and sensory impairment can take part.
- Make a special effort to include **dads**. Building a relationship with them as they drop off and/or collect their children might help to encourage them to get more involved in their children's learning and development, and to come along to activities and meetings in the setting. Providing a crèche facility might encourage and enable both parents to attend a meeting or social event.
- Arrange **social events** for parents to help them to meet and build support networks with other parents as well as with practitioners.
- Collaborate with **local adult education groups** and encourage parents to participate in adult learning initiatives which can help to build parents' confidence in their own literacy and numeracy skills and in using the home as a learning environment.

Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *What information can I share with the practitioner that will help him/her to get a clearer picture of what my child's interests and strengths are?*
2. *Do I share my concerns with the practitioner? How could I do this better?*
3. *How can I use the written and oral feedback I get on my child's learning?*
4. *Have I told the setting of any difficulties I have with attending events or accessing information?*
5. *What could I do to help other parents to get involved?*

As a practitioner

6. *How can I improve how I communicate with all parents about their children?*
7. *How can I make better use of the feedback and information that I get from parents about their children?*
8. *In what ways can I share my knowledge with parents about how children learn and develop?*
9. *When I invite parents to events, how can I make it easier for them to attend, in terms of timing, accessible information, crèche facilities?*

Learning experience 4: An open-door policy

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Home and sessional service (playgroup)

Mina greets the children and their parents as they arrive at the playgroup every morning. She finds these few minutes of contact invaluable. Parents can let her know if they would like more time to chat about their children and she arranges a time to suit. At the beginning of the year she also lets them know that she can be contacted by phone every day from 1 p.m. to 1.30 p.m. if they have any concerns, or just want to chat about how their child is getting on in the playgroup. She reminds them of this regularly, and many of them find it reassuring that they can keep in touch like this. Some children are brought by relatives or childminders, and this form of contact is invaluable for their parents as they can ring Mina during their lunchtime.

Mikie (2 years and 11 months) started in the playgroup a month ago. His mam, Lucy, is very shy and Mina makes a special effort to have a chat with her once a week. Mina shows Lucy something, such as a photograph of him playing or a picture that Mikie has made. She uses this to encourage Lucy to talk about Mikie. She asks about things he likes to do at home and she offers ideas to Lucy to help extend what he is learning in the setting.

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Reflection: What strategies could I use to help parents to feel more confident in talking to me about their children?

Learning experience 5: The newsletter

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Home and full and part-time daycare (nursery)

The staff of the Happy Start Nursery have made a welcome pack for parents of new children. The pack includes the nursery's mission statement and information about how the staff support children's learning and development. They also send home a short newsletter each month so that parents know what songs, stories and activities the children are doing. Children are involved in deciding what information is included. An example of a recent newsletter available in English, French and Polish (the main home languages of the children) is included below. The staff also plan to use text messages for parents who want to receive reminders about events in the nursery.

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Reflection: How can I share more information with parents about what their children are doing in my setting?

May 2009

Doing Great Things Together!

Happy Start Nursery: Senior toddlers and pre-schoolers

Our day out in the woods!

A big thank you to all the parents who came with us on our trip to Glengarra woods. A great day was had by all. The children tell us that they enjoyed the trip on the bus and the picnic the best! They also loved splashing in the puddles in their wellies. Since our return we have been learning about the trees and flowers that grow in the woods. We have also begun to learn about making honey since we discovered the bee hives hidden in the corner of the woods. Mr Mackey, who supplies honey to the local shops, is visiting the pre-school on **June 12**. He will bring some honey and show a video of the bees. Why not join us at 10 a.m. that day?

Photos of the Glengarra trip are on display in the main hall.

Time for more stories

We are going to the library as usual on the **last Friday of this month**. Thanks to the parents who came with us last month.

Have you spotted our bus?

Since the children enjoyed the trip on the bus to Glengarra Wood so much we decided to make our own bus. Thanks to Darren's daddy who gave us some lovely big cardboard boxes to work with. After much hard work we now have our own colourful buses complete with steering wheels, horns and seats. To build on the topic of transport Ava's mam Nora is coming in next week to talk to us about her job as the driver of the primary school bus. Many of the children in the pre-school will be travelling on this bus when they start school in September. Nora will be here at 10.30 on Thursday morning **May 14.** Come along if you can and stay for a cup of tea/coffee afterwards in the parent room.

Rhymes

As you know we always include a nursery rhyme or a poem in our newsletter. This month the children asked us to give you the words of the song, *The Wheels on the bus.* They'll teach you the actions. Hope you enjoy it.

- The wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round,
- The wheels on the bus go round and round, All through the town.
- The wipers on the bus go swish, swish, swish …
- The doors on the bus go open and shut …
- The horn on the bus goes beep, beep, beep …
- The gas on the bus goes glug, glug, glug …
- The money on the bus goes clink, clink, clink …
- The people on the bus go chatter, chatter, chatter …
- The wheels on the bus go round and round …

Look who has a birthday in May

Rarish Obert will be 2 on May 1st.
Sharon O'Brien will be 3 on May 7th.
Fiachra Long will be 4 on May 15th.
Kia Mihas will be 5 on May 17th.
We hope you all have a lovely birthday.

Important date for your diary

During the **first two weeks in June** we hope to meet you and your child for a short while. Your child will show you his/her portfolio so you can see what he/she has been doing and learning through the year. If the time and date don't suit please contact Michelle on 084 6655437.

Learning experience 6: Paul's daily diary

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home and infant class (special primary school)

Paul (5 years) has moderate general learning disabilities. He goes on a bus every morning to attend Holy Angels' Special School seventeen miles from home. His parents rarely visit his school because of the distance, so they and his teacher use a daily diary to keep each other up-to-date on how Paul is getting on. This means that his parents can talk to him about what happens at school and can reinforce his learning at home. It also means that his practitioners are able to take what happens at home into account, as Paul has difficulty communicating this himself.

Paul was very excited recently when his family got a new puppy. His mam wrote about this in his diary. His teacher used this information when planning his activities for the week. Paul screeched excitedly when Miss O'Malley knew the name of the puppy and he seemed to really enjoy it when she read him a story about a sheepdog working on a farm. An example of an extract from Paul's diary is included below.

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Reflection: What special arrangements can I put in place to share information with parents I don't often see?

Figure 2: Extract from Paul's daily diary

February 28

Hi Fiona
Paul had a poor night's sleep. Seemed fine when he came home from school. Had his tea and we went for a walk with him in the wheelchair. Toby, the puppy came too. As usual Paul had his bath and we read him a story but for some reason he never settled. He may be tired in school today. I know I am!

Regards
Aileen

February 28

Thanks Aileen. Jackie, Paul's physio did a session with him today. I told her he might be a little tired. She did some gentle exercises with him and when she brought him back to class he seemed very tired so we put him in the quiet area with his teddy and his blanket and he went for a short sleep. He had a good lunch and seemed in good form after that. He's still enjoying the books about animals. He's also getting very good at knocking the towers of blocks with his head and your practice at home is really showing. Hope you sleep tonight.

As always, give me a call on 087227569 at any time,
Fiona

Learning experience 7: Showing empathy

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home, childminding and infant class (primary school)

Mike, a widower visits his daughter Saoirse's school today to hear how she is getting on in senior infants. The school has a policy of giving parents a written mid-year report in February at the parent/teacher meetings and again towards the end of June. This is Mike's first face-to-face meeting with Saoirse's teacher. His wife Mary used to look after all contacts with the school. Saoirse's childminder, Niamh, drops and collects Saoirse from school every day while Mike is at work and she fills Mike in about how things are going at school. She knows Saoirse's teacher well and has an informal chat with her regularly, especially since Mike asked her to do this for him. The school has been very good about supporting Saoirse since her Mammy died five months ago. Miss Buckley, Saoirse's teacher, has been in regular phone contact with Mike since then. However, Mike is still a bit nervous about the meeting.

Miss Buckley immediately puts Mike at ease and reassures him that Saoirse is doing very well. She goes through the report card in detail with him and regularly asks him if he has any questions. She also shows him samples of Saoirse's work on display on the walls, in her books, and in her portfolio. She shares some photographs with him. Two of these show Saoirse minding two babies while playing with a friend. The caption beside the photographs reads, Don't worry Lucy. I'll look after you. Miss Buckley explains that Saoirse and her friend were pretending that Lucy's mammy was sick and died. She asks Mike how Saoirse is getting on at home and he tells her about the things she enjoys and the things that she finds hard, now that her Mammy is gone. Miss Buckley gives Mike the report card to take home and tells him to call or to send in a note if he wants to talk to her about Saoirse. She reassures him that she will continue to keep a close eye on Saoirse and that she will give him a call in a few weeks to give him an update. She re-emphasises that Saoirse is doing well in her learning and is coping well at school after losing her Mammy.

Reflection: Do I give enough thought to the events and circumstances in families' lives which can impact on children's learning and development?

Contributing to the setting

Parents can make a valuable contribution to their children's learning and development by sharing their time, experiences and talents with the out-of-home setting. For example, they can help with sports, drama or musical activities. They can share information about their home culture and background. They may be able to suggest or organise places for the children to visit or interesting people to talk to. Parents can also work together through parents' associations to support the setting and to improve their children's learning environment. Grandparents can contribute in similar ways. They can visit the setting and talk about their childhood helping the children to begin to develop a sense of time. Seeing members of their own family in the setting enhances children's sense of identity and belonging, as well as enriching their learning and development.

Involving parents in the setting can also benefit the parents themselves. Often, the best way to improve children's lives is to support their parents in their parenting role. One source of this support is the informal networks and friendships that are often created when parents meet. These can act as a valuable source of support and information for parents, particularly those who are isolated or new to the area. Parents can act as mentors for each other, or can simply offer friendship.

Parents: Contributing to your child's setting

- Spend **time** in the setting. Share a learning activity with the children like playing an instrument, coaching in a sport, demonstrating a craft such as knitting or origami, planting bulbs, playing a game, making a book, accompanying the children on a trip, telling a story using some words from your home language where this is different from the setting's.
- Support **play**. Help to develop an outdoor planting and play area. Help with a play activity or send in play props such as dress-up clothes and empty shopping containers.
- Share **information** with the children and staff about who you are, for example Irish, Traveller, or American, and what is important to you. Talk about your family, festivals, interests, and so on.
- Talk to the children about **your work**. Organise a trip to your workplace if possible and provide props from your work that can be added to the pretend play area.
- Help organise **outings, sports days** and other events.
- **Fund-raise** for new equipment or help the setting access statutory funding.

Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *What talents and skills could I share with children in the setting?*
2. *Could I offer to help with or organise an activity or outing?*

As a practitioner

3. *How can I tap into parents' knowledge, skills and goodwill to ensure the best outcomes for all the children in my setting?*
4. *What could I do to let parents know that their help and input are valued, and benefit their children?*

Learning experience 8: Dan the music man

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Babies, toddlers and young children

Setting: Home and childminding

Dan is a musician. His own children love music, and he has sung with them at home since they were babies. Now he comes to their childminding setting once a fortnight on one of his days off work to play his guitar and sing songs with the children. They are fascinated by his guitar. They want to know how heavy it is, what it is made from, and how strings make music. Dan shows them how it works. One day he brings along his drums and introduces them to drumming. He uses spoken rhythms to help them tap out the beat: *An-nie Jou-bert* (names with the younger children) and *Do you want a cup of tea?* (sentences with the older children). The children look forward to his visits. They practise almost every day so they can show Dan how good their clapping is when he returns. Before his next visit Noeleen the minder and the children make guitars and drums from junk materials. They can't wait to show Dan their band!

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Reflection: What special talents do the parents have that I could tap into and share with the children I mind?

Learning experience 9: It's never too late.

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home and sessional service (pre-school)

When Sonia was young she missed a lot of school. As a result, she had difficulties reading and she found it hard to work with written information. When her children's pre-school sent notes home she had to ask her sister to read them for her. Over time she got to know Maggie, another parent. Maggie persuaded her to go along with her to the classes in the parents' room. There was a crèche in an adjoining room where Sonia's toddler could stay. Sonia and Maggie chose a craft course for beginners. Sonia's four-year-old Evan was delighted to see her coming into his pre-school. Sonia enjoyed the course and felt more confident about talking to Evan's practitioner. Next, she attended a parenting course and felt that she was able to contribute a lot to it from her own experience. The teacher who organised the courses encouraged her to enrol in an adult literacy class. Sonia is making good progress. She especially enjoys reading to her children and looks forward to notes coming home, which she can now read herself.

?

Reflection: What can my colleagues and I do in our setting to help parents in their role as their children's educators?

Learning experience 10: Bláithín's dad

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Young children

Setting: Home and infant class (primary school)

Joan and Con have three children at primary school. They are both active members of the Parents' Association (PA) and take turns going to meetings. They have built good relationships with the teachers and other parents since their first child started school. A new housing estate has been built locally and the number of children attending the school has greatly increased. The PA and the school staff recently helped to organise an open day for parents of new children. Patrick whose daughter Bláithín started junior infants this year, went along. The PA are also developing an outdoor play area for the infants which includes a place for planting. Con suggested to the teachers that Patrick might be interested in getting involved in setting up the outdoor area. Patrick looks after his children each weekend since he and his wife separated. He is a part-time builder. Patrick is delighted to be asked and especially so when the teacher suggests that the children might help him out. His daughter Bláithín is delighted about this. Patrick feels that he is contributing positively to his children's learning and development and also benefiting the school community by using his skills.

Over the next few weeks Patrick, the class teacher, children, and some other parents enjoy working together and have the play area ready for the sun in June!

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Reflection: Are there ways in which I can encourage dads to become more involved in their children's learning and development?

Making decisions and advocating different approaches and courses of action

Parents continually make decisions about their children—about their health, activities, food, routines, who they spend time with and where, and the kind of care and education they receive. Parents can provide settings with important information to help with decisions about their children's learning and development. They also need to be included when important decisions are being made about their children by others.

In addition, parents can act as advocates for their children, seeking out services they need and letting the practitioner know of special or individual needs that they may have. They sometimes work as advocates for children in general, for example by campaigning for amenities in the local area or for particular facilities for children in the school. Management boards and committees, parents' associations and consultative committees, can be a way for parents to do this. To become involved, parents need to understand these structures and the role they can play in them.

Thinking about my practice

As a parent

1. *How can I be more involved in decisions that affect my child?*
2. *What can I do to improve services and experiences for all children?*

As a practitioner

3. *How can I involve parents to a greater extent in making important decisions that affect their children?*
4. *What can I do to encourage parents to get involved in the Management Committee/ Board of Management/Parents' Association?*

Learning experience 11: Do you understand my culture and traditions?

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Home and sessional service (playgroup)

Joseph (2 years and 11 months) and his family are Travellers. They recently moved to the area and Joseph's mammy, Kathleen, enrolled him for two mornings a week in the local playgroup. The manager, Joan, meets with Kathleen and explains how the service works and shows her the different rooms and the outdoor play area. Joan asks Kathleen about Joseph and his likes and dislikes. She explains that she knows very little about Traveller culture and traditions. Joan asks Kathleen to tell her a little about their way of life and the Traveller traditions that are important to her. Understanding these will help the staff to support Joseph. Kathleen tells Joan that as a family they generally travel in their trailer during the summer months and settle in one area for the rest of the year. She also explains that most Travellers are not as nomadic as they used to be. Kathleen says that Joseph loves animals, especially horses and dogs. She tells Joan that she doesn't want Joseph to be discriminated against because he is a Traveller. She is worried because her older children had negative experiences in other settings.

In preparation for Joseph's arrival, and with Kathleen's help, Joan gets some books and jigsaws that depict Traveller life today. She organises displays of animals for Joseph to look at when he arrives. She tells the children that a new boy is joining them. A few days after Joseph's arrival Joan talks to the children about their homes. She uses wall displays to reinforce some of the points they talk about. These include pictures of the children's homes such as trailers, flats and terraced houses. They use these to talk about 'where we live'. The children bring photographs of their families and homes, and make lollipop stick models of them using junk materials, fabrics, wool, glitter, fancy paper, and card. They display these beside their photographs. Over the coming days they enjoy sharing stories about their family, pets and outings. Joan observes the children during their activities and ensures Joseph is included and that he is beginning to form friendships. She updates Kathleen regularly on how he is settling in.

Reflection: How much do the children and I know about each other's family life and community?

Learning experience 12: A big move

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home and childminding

John has been a stay at home Dad for the past six months. He and his partner Bernice are now looking for a setting to look after their baby, Eimear (1 year) three days per week, as John is returning to work part-time. They would like to find a childminder as they are keen for Eimear to experience a setting similar to her own home. John and Bernice contact the local Health Service Executive for a list of notified childminders in their area. They have short-listed three and have made arrangements to visit them. They prepare a number of questions they want to ask. Each childminder describes her training and qualifications. All three have first-aid training. Through the childminding grant from the local County Childcare Committee all three have bought a range of toys and safety equipment. Each childminder has access to an outdoor area.

When they get home John and Bernice go through their notes and they agree that Liz's home would suit Eimear the best. It is a bungalow with easy access to a garden with lots of grass and a plant area. Liz minds two other pre-school aged children which John and Bernice think is important for helping Eimear to learn to interact with other children. Liz interacted very well with Eimear, and Eimear seemed to like being with her. Liz made John and Bernice feel welcome and at ease. She gave them a booklet with information about her childminding service, including the types of activities she organises and the routines she follows with the children. She also explained to them that she uses a little notebook each day to record basic care provision and the child's activities, expressions and achievements. She takes regular photographs and gives these to the parents. John and Bernice appreciate these as a way of sharing information. They ask Liz for references from other parents. After checking these out they contact Liz. Together they fill out an application form and discuss Eimear's preferences, medical conditions, allergies, vaccinations, comfort items, games she likes to play, routines, and general contact information. Eimear spends a short time each day with Liz over the coming two weeks. Liz uses the information from John and Bernice to help Eimear settle in and feel happy and content in her new setting.

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Reflection: What information should I gather from parents to help children settle in my setting?

Learning experience 13: Transitions

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 3

Age: Young children

Setting: Home, sessional service (pre-school) and infant class (primary school)

Simon (almost 6 years) attends his local primary school. His parents became concerned about his behaviour when he was around two-and-a-half. Simon had difficultly concentrating and completing activities. They spoke to the public health nurse. She felt that there was no immediate cause for concern and advised them to send Simon to pre-school the following September. He settled in well. The ratio of adults to children was very good and Simon was assigned a Key Worker, Kelly, who often spent time in one-to-one interactions with him and helped him to play and interact with other children in the group. Kelly helped break down tasks for Simon and modelled things for him a number of times. She gave one piece of information or direction at a time which helped him to join in activities with others. Simon especially liked water play and being outdoors. Kelly helped set up a buddy system and Rachel really enjoyed being Simon's special friend. Simon spent two years in the pre-school.

Simon's parents were concerned about his transfer to primary school. He was going to the local school where there were 19 junior infants, senior infants and first class children in the classroom. Simon's parents met the principal and his teacher before he started school and they outlined their concerns and the additional help Simon had received at pre-school. They arranged to meet again in mid-October when the teacher had a chance to get to know Simon. After that meeting Simon was referred for an educational assessment. Following his assessment, an Individual Education Plan was drawn up and a special needs assistant was appointed to help him in the classroom for 10 hours per week.

Simon is now in senior infants. He spends time with the school's special education teacher working on specific skills that will help him to learn. His parents are pleased with Simon's progress and the work his teachers are doing to ensure that his needs are met. They get regular feedback from the school and they talk to his teacher once a fortnight by phone to find out what they can do to help Simon progress.

Reflection: How can I improve how I work with parents of children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) to involve them more in their children's learning and development?

Conclusion

One of the hallmarks of a quality early childhood service is that it works in partnership with parents to provide an environment in which babies, toddlers and young children are happy, feel they belong, and can develop to their fullest potential. In this environment parents and practitioners work together to share information and expertise, and to make decisions in order to give children rich experiences across settings.

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
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.	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.	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.	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.

Children Lead Learning **The Adult Leads Learning**

Table 3: Building relationships

Sample methods	The adult
Accepting and valuing children, their families and communities	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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 *Aistear's* 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	■ 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	■ 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	■ 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 imní 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 gcuairt ar an ospidéal. Rinne roinnt mhaith de na leanaí comhbhá le mothúcháin imní 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 éisteacht 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 Mhúinteoir 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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

Eispéireas 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 geáitsí 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 cúnamh 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 fhoclaíocht 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 bloic 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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 classrom

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!

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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!

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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?*

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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 mammies 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.

Learning and developing through play

Introduction

Children love to play, and play often mirrors what is important in their lives. When asked about play children talk about having fun, being with friends, choosing activities themselves, and being outdoors. Play can be quiet or noisy, messy or orderly, funny or serious, strenuous or effortless. It can take place inside or outside and develops as children grow and change. Children play for different reasons. Sometimes they are exploring or learning new things. At other times they are consolidating existing learning or practising a skill. Play can also be a way of building or strengthening a relationship. Children often play simply for fun and enjoyment. They bring their own interpretations of situations, events, experiences, and expectations to their play.

Children need time to develop their play. They like having spaces inside and outside, and often enjoy playing with other children and adults. They also need props such as toys, equipment and real objects to play with and manipulate. They love to make choices about when, what, where, how, and with whom to play. These guidelines offer information and suggestions on how the adult can extend and enrich children's learning and development through play.

What is play?

Play is a way of 'doing things'. Table 7 outlines some of its characteristics in alphabetical order.

Table 7: Characteristics of play

Characteristic	Description
Active	Children use their bodies and minds in their play. They interact with the environment, with materials and with other people.
Adventurous and risky	Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks.
Communicative	Children share information and knowledge through their play. Their communication can be verbal or non-verbal, simple or complex.
Enjoyable	Play is fun and exciting, and involves a sense of humour.
Involved	Children become deeply absorbed and focused in their play, concentrating and thinking about what they are doing.
Meaningful	Children play about what they have seen and heard, and what they know. Play helps them to build and extend their knowledge, understanding and skills in a way that makes sense to them.
Sociable and interactive	Children play alongside or with others. Sometimes they also like and need to play alone.
Symbolic	Children imagine and pretend when they are playing. They try out ideas, feelings and roles. They re-enact the past and rehearse the future. This can involve them 'reading' and 'writing' long before they develop these skills.
Therapeutic	Play helps children to express and work through emotions and experiences.
Voluntary	Children choose to play. Their play is spontaneous. They shape it as they go, changing the characters, events, objects, and locations.

Are there different types of play?

There are many different types of play and children can be involved in more than one type at any time. For example, children often pretend they are builders (pretend play) when they are constructing a tower or a road (constructive play). Likewise babies can initiate *peek-a-boo* (games with rules) while investigating a piece of fabric (exploratory play). While children may show preferences for one type of play it is important that they experience a variety of types to support their learning and development across the four themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating,* and *Exploring and Thinking*. Table 8 describes different types of play in alphabetical order.

Table 8: Categorising play

Type of play	Description
Creative	**Creative play** involves children exploring and using their bodies and materials to make and do things and to share their feelings, ideas and thoughts. They enjoy being creative by dancing, painting, playing with junk and recycled materials, working with play-dough and clay, and using their imaginations.
Games with rules	Another type of play involves **games with rules**. Even babies and toddlers can partake in these, as *peek-a-boo* and turn-taking games have rules. In the beginning children often play by their own rather flexible rules! In time they also partake in more conventional games with 'external' rules. Language is an important part of games with rules as children explain, question and negotiate the rules. Rules are often an important part of pretend play where children negotiate rules about what can and can't be done.
Language	**Language play** involves children playing with sounds and words. It includes unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of these, often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. Children like playing with language – enjoying patterns, sounds and nonsense words. They also love jokes and funny stories.
Physical[1]	**Physical play** involves children developing, practising and refining bodily movements and control. It includes whole body and limb movements, co-ordination and balance. These activities involve physical movements for their own sake and enjoyment. Children gain control over their gross motor skills first before refining their fine motor skills. **Exploratory play** involves children using physical skills and their senses to find out what things feel like and what can be done with them. Children explore their own bodies and then they explore the things in their environment. **Manipulative play** involves practising and refining motor skills. This type of play enhances physical dexterity and hand-eye co-ordination. Over time children need to experience a range of different levels of manipulation if they are to refine their motor skills. This type of play includes manipulating objects and materials. **Constructive play** involves building something using natural and manufactured materials. As children develop, this type of play can become more complex and intricate.
Pretend[2]	**Pretend, dramatic, make-believe, role,** and **fantasy play** involves children using their imaginations. It includes pretending with objects, actions and situations. As children grow, their imaginations and their play become increasingly complex. Children use their developing language to move from thinking in the concrete to thinking in the abstract. They make up stories and scenarios. Children act out real events and they also take part in fantasy play about things that are not real, such as fairies or super heroes. Children try out roles, occupations and experiences in their pretend play. **Early literary and numeracy** are clearly evident in this type of play, for example children make lists and menus and pay for cinema tickets. They also get the chance to play with different forms of ICT such as mobile phones, keyboards, cameras, and calculators. **Small world play** involves children using small-scale representations of real things like animals, people, cars, and train sets as play props. **Socio-dramatic play** involves children playing with other children and/or adults. It provides opportunities for children to make friends, to negotiate with others, and to develop their communication skills. This play helps extend language. The ability to write stories also has its roots in socio-dramatic play.

See Appendix 1 for examples of resources that can be used to support these different types of play.

[1] Physical play is used to refer to physical, exploratory, manipulative, and constructive play.

[2] Pretend play is used to refer to pretend, make believe, dramatic, socio-dramatic, role, fantasy, and small world play.

Sometimes individual children like to play alone and sometimes they enjoy playing with others:

- **Solitary play** – The child plays alone.
- **Spectator play** – The child watches others playing without joining in.
- **Parallel play** – The child plays side by side with another child, often with similar materials, but without interacting.
- **Associative/partnership play** – Children begin to play together, developing interactions through doing the same activities or playing with similar equipment or by imitating.
- **Co-operative play** – Children interact, take turns, share and decide how and what to play. They collaborate, develop, and negotiate ideas for their play.

As babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop their play with others becomes increasingly intricate and complex.

Where do children play?

Children love to play inside and outside, and benefit from both. Some children will take part in activities more enthusiastically, and show greater confidence in the outdoor environment than inside. Ideally the outdoor play area should be directly connected to the indoor area providing ease of access throughout the day. Most of the things that can be done inside can also be done outside, for example reading stories, taking part in pretend play, doing group art projects, and playing with sand or water. In the outdoors, activities can also be provided on a larger and more expansive scale. Objects can be transported using wagons, trolleys or wheelbarrows; houses can be constructed using different sized cardboard boxes, old sheets or curtains; marks can be made using large pieces of chalk or buckets of water and large paint-brushes; gardening activities can be undertaken; and roads and dens for mini-beasts can be created.

Responding to the weather

Given the unpredictability of the Irish weather it is important to ensure children have wellies and waterproof jackets plus a change of clothes available in the setting so that they can play outside in all types of weather. It is also useful to have 'windy day' and 'rainy day' boxes ready to help adults and children respond spontaneously to changing weather conditions as they arise. A windy day box could include items such as streamers, chimes, windmills, a kite, bubbles, weather charts, and relevant picture books. A rainy day box could include umbrellas, sieves, toy boats, toy ducks, containers for measuring rainfall, funnels, charts for recording the level of rainfall, containers for gathering water to recycle (to water flowers and plants indoors, for example), tin foil (for making hats), tapes to measure the size of puddles, and relevant picture books. A covered area or lean-to type structure with a roof and open sides where children can play when it's raining or where they can play sheltered from the sun is also worth considering. More space means more freedom, and play outdoors provides an ideal environment for a range of exciting play experiences.

Thinking about my practice

1. *How can I take more account of children's home, social and cultural experiences when observing, thinking about, and planning for play?*
2. *How can I better support the different characteristics of play?*
3. *What types of play opportunities am I providing for the children inside and outside? What themes, aims and learning goals am I supporting through these?*
4. *Is there easy access between the indoor and outdoor areas? How can I give more opportunities to the children to use the outdoor environment?*
5. *Is there a variety of individual, pair and small group play activities available? Can children decide how long, with whom, and what to play?*

What is my role as the adult in play?

The adult provides children with the support, props, time, and space to develop their play. This role involves many dimensions such as when to intervene and when to stand back. The adult takes time to observe, consult, plan, and participate in play. He/she is clear on the great potential for learning that play offers (developing skills and abilities, providing opportunities to co-operate, developing friendships, taking turns, resolving conflicts and solving problems, and developing knowledge and understanding of the world). The adult understands the importance of play for all children. In order to make the most of the opportunities that play provides the adult needs to plan for, support and review play. (See Table 9.)

Table 9: Enriching and extending learning through play

Planning for play	Supporting play	Reviewing play
The adult creates an indoor and outdoor environment that provides a wide range of play possibilities. He/she ■ prepares, plans for and organises activities based on assessment information and the aims and learning goals in *Aistear's* four themes ■ provides for play experiences that are safe, challenging, inclusive, and enjoyable ■ structures the indoor and outdoor environment so that it reflects children's individual strengths, interests, abilities and needs ■ continually builds on, challenges and extends children's learning and development ■ provides children with choices about what to do and when.	The adult enhances and extends play based on his/her knowledge of individual children, *Aistear's* themes, and expertise in play methodology. He/she ■ talks to children about their play, recognises, respects, and supports children's play choices. (Sometimes there can be a tension between what the adult considers suitable and what children want to do, such as playing with guns. The adult discusses and agrees with colleagues how to deal with these tensions.) ■ is supportive without interfering, takes part in play when invited to or when he/she can make a positive contribution, helps children develop the skills for playing, and models play behaviours ■ is aware of and respectful of children's feelings, language, ability, background, and culture during play ■ helps all children to be players, supports interactions and acts as mediator ■ protects children from harm in play and intervenes in situations which could potentially be uncomfortable or harmful for children (physically or emotionally), such as when they are rejected or bullied ■ helps children deal with difficulties such as when they are disengaged or need help getting started.	The adult gathers information about children's play and uses this to extend their learning and development. He/she ■ observes, talks to and listens to children when they are playing ■ observes how the space and organisation of the indoor and outdoor environment is supporting or hindering play ■ identifies the types and quality of children's play, knows the style and pattern of each child's play and his/her preferences, interests and friendships ■ observes and documents through notes, photographs and video clips what is happening in the play ■ interprets what he/she sees and hears in the play ■ shares information with children and families about the play ■ uses the assessment information gathered in planning for future play.

How do I prepare the play environment?

The environment influences how and what children play. Well-resourced, well-planned and predictable indoor and outdoor spaces help children to see the opportunities that are available for play. There are two roles for the adult in preparing this environment: organising it and resourcing it.

Organising

- **Interest areas** – The adult arranges the space and furniture into child-sized areas rather than in a single large group space. He/she creates well-defined areas of interest that encourage a variety of types of play and helps children see and experience the choices on offer. For example, in out-of-home settings the adult might organise the indoor space into areas such as a messy/art/junk area, a pretend area, a library area, a music and movement area, and a construction area. Outdoors the area could be arranged so that there is a defined area for wheelie toys, a climbing area, a planting area, a wildlife area, feeders to attract birds and butterflies, a space to play with natural materials such as sand, water and mud, and a quiet area with seating. At home a pretend and book area could be set up in the bedroom or a corner of the kitchen, while outdoors a small planting area, a sand tray (an old baby bath that is covered when not in use), and a clear space for wheelie toys could be established.
- **Social and personal space** – The adult creates space for children to play with others and to play alone. Children have their own clearly identifiable personal space in out-of-home settings, such as a cubby-hole or a personal box or container. Children's personal belongings, items to be taken home, and portfolios can be kept here where they are easily accessible to children and parents. There might also be a quiet corner and a seating area inside and outside where a child can spend some time alone.
- **Outdoor/indoor space** – The adult ensures easy access between the inside and the outside and provides a clear view of the outdoors for all children when they are inside, for example using low level windows.
- **Displays** – The adult puts displays at children's level. Children's work shows their name and the date. Displays show positive real-life images that reflect the children in the setting and the wider community.
- **Celebrations** – The adult focuses on festivals relevant to the families in the setting before extending to other festivals. He/she works with parents to decide how these can be celebrated.
- **Storage** – The adult creates storage space inside and outside. Materials are in the same locations so that children can find and return them. Clean up times are held regularly to ensure that spaces don't become too cluttered. Children have time and space to pursue their own play ideas and can find, use and return materials which are of particular interest to them.

Resourcing

- **Diversity resources** – The environment, equipment, materials, and displays reflect the diversity of Irish society including ability, gender, ethnic diversity, and family structure.
- **Special resources** – Where necessary, materials and equipment inside and outside meet children's specific needs including physical, sensory and learning disabilities.
- **Literacy and numeracy resources** – Lots of books and displays are provided which show pictures, numbers and words (some in the home languages of the children for whom neither English nor Irish is a first language). There is a variety of mark-making and writing tools and different types of paper available for children to use. A range of mathematical tools are provided, for example calculators, measuring tapes, rulers, height charts, weighing scales, and phones.
- **Open-ended materials** – There is a wide variety of open-ended materials such as big and small blocks, play-dough, fabrics, re-cycled materials, paints, sand, water, clay, paper, and natural items such as stones, twigs and leaves available to promote creativity, exploration and imagination.
- **Sufficient resources** – There is a large variety and sufficient numbers of toys, equipment and materials available to support children when taking part in different types of play inside and outside.

- **Hands-on experiences** – Activities are available for children to touch, taste, smell, hear, and do. For example, children enjoy sweeping the floor, setting the table, hanging out the washing, touching different types of materials, preparing and tasting different types of food, feeling the wind, touching hail stones, digging, watering plants, and feeding animals. A range of real objects are provided, for example real saucepans in the pretend area, real coins to play shop, real shoes for dressing up, and real rolling pins for the play-dough.

As well as organising and resourcing the environment the adult changes his/her role to meet the needs of children of different ages and stages of development as outlined in Table 10.

Table 10: The adult's changing role in play during early childhood

Babies (birth to 18 months)	Toddlers (12 months to 3 years)	Young children (2½ to 6 years)
The adult ■ provides a secure base from which babies can play and explore inside and outside ■ provides safe, interesting objects and materials for babies to play with ■ introduces babies to other people and places ■ reads and responds to babies' body language ■ carries out care-giving routines, such as feeding and changing in a playful manner ■ talks to, names and describes things for babies ■ gives support to babies to try new things and also to practise and repeat activities ■ affirms babies' actions, feelings and behaviours.	The adult ■ continues to provide a secure base for toddlers to play and explore inside and outside ■ provides opportunities for toddlers to take risks, persevere, move, manipulate, create, pretend, and transport materials ■ changes the environment and the opportunities it offers as toddlers grow (This includes equipment and materials and also changes in levels such as ramps, slopes, steps, and curves.) ■ helps toddlers to experience a variety of types of play ■ provides opportunities for toddlers to play in pairs and small groups ■ is actively involved in playful, adventurous interactions with toddlers, for example active, physical play with them on the floor.	The adult ■ continues to provide a secure base and to encourage active exploration inside and outside ■ provides opportunities for young children to take part in a range of play activities, especially pretend play ■ provides supports for play, such as a range of materials and equipment and adequate space, time and choice ■ extends and changes the play props regularly, so that different scenarios can be created that reflect children's changing interests and experiences ■ provides materials to create dens and hidey holes ■ provides direct support such as showing the children ways to join in the play of others, setting up a play scenario, discussing and describing the scenario before, during or after play, supporting children in handling emotions and conflict situations, and helping children make the transition in and out of role ■ plays with children, exercising good judgement so that adult involvement does not threaten child autonomy or harm the 'flow' of the play.

Birth . . . . . 1 . . . . . 2 . . . . . 3 . . . . . 4 . . . . . 5 . . . . . 6 years

How do I help children who find it difficult to play?

Children's play develops over time and is enhanced when given the right kinds of supports. While all children have the potential to play some may require extra support from the adult in order to benefit from playing. For example, children who are impulsive or get into many conflicts, children who are withdrawn or isolated, children whose first language is neither English nor Irish, children who have speech delays, and children with sensory or physical impairments often need specialised and focused support from the adult.

Gauging the level of support needed for a group of children is not easy. Through assessment the adult builds a picture of each child's learning and plans activities based on this. The adult focuses on what each child can do and what may be impacting on his/her play, and then modifies the environment to help the child play. Some children need a little longer to make a choice, to solve a problem, or to remember where things are kept. They may not know how to start an activity, or when they start doing something they may need longer to practise. This is fine; one of the benefits of play is its flexibility and it can be adapted to suit each individual child. In helping all children to play, the adult might

- change the physical or social environment, for example alter the play materials so that all children can manipulate them or use a bell to help children with a visual impairment to know that an activity is going to change
- reflect on the quality and quantity of multi-sensory experiences that are available to children and increase or change them
- use co-operative learning to ensure that each child reaches his/her potential, for example have a buddy or mentor system
- simplify an activity by breaking it into smaller parts and limiting the number of directions given at one time
- use the child's preferred activity, material or person to encourage him/her to play, for example the Key Worker might introduce new things
- provide extra support by joining in the child's play or by modelling something several times
- use special or adaptive devices to help children participate
- have photographs of activities for children who can not use oral language, or have simple jigsaws with large sturdy pieces for children who find it hard to grasp things.

The adult provides the level and type of support needed to promote independence and to make play achievable and enjoyable for all children.

Thinking about my practice

1. *How do I organise and resource the spaces inside and outside? How would organising the space into distinct interest areas enhance children's play?*
2. *What activities, areas, toys, and materials do the children and I use most often in play inside and outside? Why?*
3. *What hands-on activities can I involve the children in?*
4. *How can I vary my role and modify the social and physical environment to ensure that all children benefit from play?*
5. *How can I encourage and support all children in their play – boys and girls, younger and older children, children from different backgrounds and cultures, and children with special educational needs?*

How can I use play across *Aistear's* four themes?

The adult uses different types of play to support children's early learning and development across the themes of *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking.* Pages 60 to 69 present four learning experiences in each theme, one for babies, one for toddlers and two for young children (one in a sessional service or full and part-time daycare, and one in the primary school).

Learning experience 41: Playful routines

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

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home and childminding

Charlie (10 months) has a special relationship with his daddy, Luca. During care routines Daddy interacts and plays with him. Charlie loves it when Daddy says and plays *This little piggy* with his toes when he is changing his nappy. He also loves to play *peek-a-boo* with him when Daddy hides behind the door and pops his head in and out, much to Charlie's delight. Charlie also likes it when Daddy pretends his spoon is an aeroplane when he is feeding him. Charlie especially loves when Daddy flies him up into the air pretending he is the aeroplane. His childminder Linda also interacts with Charlie in a playful way. Luca has told Linda about the games he plays at home with Charlie. Linda plays these games with him too, making the transitions between his home and her home a happy experience for Charlie. Linda gradually introduces new games and other playful routines to Charlie and she in turn shares these with Luca when he collects Charlie in the evenings.

? *Reflection: Do I know what playful routines children enjoy at home, and how can I use these to make their transitions between settings easier?*

Learning experience 42: Helping me join in the fun

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (special pre-school), and full and part-time daycare (nursery)

The toddlers in the nursery spend a lot of time outdoors all year round. Some of the children who are quite shy and timid inside become much more active and enthusiastic outside. They run, climb the ladder, go down the slide, kick football, play in the outdoor café, get fuel for their vehicles at the pumps, play with the water and sand, and cycle their tricycles. The staff members play *Hide and seek* with them, organise races, play football, join them for a latte in the café, and chat about what they are doing and learning. On cold days they all dress up warmly in their coats and hats before going outside, and on wet days they splash in the puddles in their wellies and listen to the rain fall on their tinfoil covered umbrellas.

Daniel (almost 3 years) attends a special pre-school three mornings a week. He joins the children in the toddler room in the nursery on the other two days. He can't move any of his limbs so is reliant on the staff to carry him outside. He squeals with delight when they lift him up in the air and when they put him on the slide. The staff talk to Daniel, building up and reinforcing his language, spatial awareness and physical skills, saying, for example, *Now Daniel, you are up, up, up … now down, down, down.* They place Daniel on the ground and put a ball beside his head. He gets great pleasure from moving the ball slowly with his head and getting it right under the bench. They say, *Well done Daniel … under, under the bench.* These physical experiences help Daniel's gross motor development and enable him to understand spatial concepts like over/under, up/down, and in/out. The other children regularly run over to Daniel and gently push the ball to him or wave at him. He smiles and giggles when they do this.

? *Reflection: Do all children in my setting have opportunities to get involved in and enjoy play?*

Learning experience 43: The spider's web

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

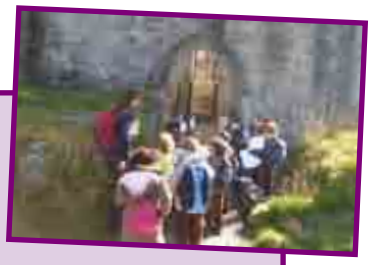
The children in the playgroup are outside on a frosty morning. Two boys, Fiachra and James, (both 4 years) discover a large spider's web. They call the playgroup assistant, Zola, over to have a look at it. They are fascinated by the different colours. Zola explains that it is the sun's reflection on the frost that is doing this. Zola is French and she tells them that the French word for spider's web is *toile d'araignée.* They laugh at each other's attempts to say it! She asks the boys if they would like to take a photograph of the web and they race inside to get the camera, each trying to go faster than the other. Zola uploads the photograph to the computer. The boys study it trying to work out how the spider made the web. The boys tell Zola that they want to make a web too. They assemble a range of materials including glue, paper, markers, string, knitting wool, and tinfoil. They spend a long time making their webs and proudly take photographs of them. *Ils sont magnifique, quelles couleurs (They are brilliant, what colours)*, Zola says.

After lunch the boys run out to see the web but have trouble finding it because the ice has melted. They are disappointed. During circle time the group have a discussion about how ice and snow melt and how the ice melting made it difficult for Fiachra and James to find their web. The following day another child brings in a DVD about a spider. They all watch it. Over the following weeks some children do projects on spiders while others investigate ice.

?

Reflection: How often do I encourage children to get involved in projects on things that interest them?

Learning experience 44: Recreating history



Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The junior infants live in a town where there is a large castle. They, along with their teacher and some parents, visited it a few weeks ago. The teacher and children took many digital photographs. The children saw and discussed the various features of the castle and learned about who lived there and the purposes of its different parts. One day shortly after the visit the teacher invites the children to make castles of their own. They are working in groups of four and can use whatever materials they like. Some choose blocks, others Lego, some recycled materials, while others draw pictures.

One group decides to make a model of the castle with recycled materials, including a sturdy cardboard box and small world people. Dylan (almost 5 years) who has spina bifida takes an active part. Lisa, his special needs assistant, has to make some modifications to the materials so that Dylan can take part as independently as possible. She makes sure the castle base has been securely taped to the table and some of the pieces of material already have double-sided tape on them for Dylan to use. As Dylan has some physical disabilities he often needs a little help from his class buddy, Liam, who is always eager to lend a hand. The group is very pleased with the finished article and spend much time playing with it.

Sometimes they take the castle outside at playtime. Dylan holds it on his lap in the wheelchair while one of the others pushes him. One day they forget to bring it back in and the children arrive the following morning to find a wet soggy castle! They see the impact of rain on cardboard but don't seem too upset. They decide to become the sentries and wild animals and they divide the playground into different areas of the castle. Dylan speeds around in his wheelchair fighting off the wild animals.

The castle theme is developed over the following days when the children learn more about the history of the castle and when they read books and watch a relevant TV programme. Their interest in castle life deepens and after many discussions and much research involving interviews with the local librarian the children make period costumes and armour which they model for other classes at assembly.

Reflection: To what extent do I encourage children to think of their individual strengths when they take on roles in their play?

Learning experience 45: Not quite yet please!

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

Age group: Babies

Setting: Childminding

Tess (14 months) is a shy little girl who is very sensitive to noise. She becomes upset easily and doesn't like to play with toys that pop up or that make music. She is also very apprehensive about being around other children. Her childminder, Anna, is aware of this and has made a cosy corner for Tess that is away from noise and bustle where she can play happily with books, blocks and soft toys. Gradually Anna introduces Tess to new, more interactive toys. If this upsets Tess Anna puts them away and reassures her. She also supports her in interacting with the other baby she looks after, 15-month old Amy. Sometimes Anna sits with Tess and Amy in the cosy corner. Anna introduces a teapot and cups to the girls and they pretend to have a tea party together. The girls pretend to drink from the cups and Anna gives Teddy some tea too. Tess imitates her and then offers her cup to Amy. Anna pours some more tea for the girls and she talks softly about what is happening. Sometimes Tess shows her enjoyment by smiling and displaying positive body language; at other times she begins to cry and indicates that she wants to play on her own.

Reflection: How can I help children who are shy or quiet to engage and play with others?

Learning experience 46: Fire, fire!

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (nursery)

Cáit (nearly 3 years) attends a nursery while her parents work. Cáit's daddy is a fireman and she often talks about him in the nursery. The room leader asks Cait's daddy, Mike, if it would be possible for the nine children in Cait's room to visit the fire station. Mike organises the visit and the children really enjoy the trip. They sit on the engine and get to hold the hosepipe.

The children discuss their visit on returning to the nursery. They talk about the fire engine, what colour it is, how many wheels it has, how it gets the water, and who drives it. During the course of the week they sing songs and read stories about fires and fire engines, and make siren noises and draw pictures of fire engines, fires and fire-fighters. They make models of the fire engine with play-dough. They sort red items to match the fire engine and they play with the small world figures and vehicles to create their own emergencies.

The room leader provides the group with a series of large boxes for them to make their own fire engine that they can sit in. She helps them to cut out windows and doors and to paint it. They love sitting in it, and make siren noises and dress up as fire-fighters. One day during the free play session some of the children decide that the room is on fire and they use the old mobile phone to call the fire brigade. The children are very familiar with what to do having undertaken a fire drill on many occasions. They ask

the room leader to get the register to make sure everyone is accounted for and they all move over to a corner of the room that is well away from the fire. Help comes quickly when two fire-fighters jump out of the fire engine with hard hats and a large hose pipe. The fire is quickly quenched and the room leader is firmly reprimanded for starting the fire!

Over the next few days the staff and children work together to display photographs and paintings and pictures of their trip, alongside their fire engine, for their parents to see.

?

Reflection: What trip can I organise in the coming weeks to support the children's learning and development?

Learning experience 47: No, it's my turn

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

A group of four young children (between 3 and 4 years) are playing outside with the bikes and tractors in the pre-school. A dispute arises. Two children approach Breda, a staff member. She talks to the group of four and asks them to tell her what the problem is. It's my turn to have a bike, Robert explains. And it's my turn to have the tractor, Jenny exclaims. No it's not, David shouts, I got it first. Claire sits solidly on her tractor without entering into the argument while Jenny tries to push her off. Breda realises from the children's comments that there aren't enough bikes and tractors for everyone. *So there aren't enough for all of you to have one each. I wonder what we can do about this,* Breda responds: *I'm trying to remember how we sorted the problem about taking turns at the computer last week. Can anyone think how?* The children start arguing again. Then Robert shouts: I know, the egg-timer. That's how. I'll get it. He returns a minute later with the large egg-timer to time the turns. After some discussion the four children agree to use the timer, and Robert takes charge of putting it on the step nearby so they can all see it.

Robert and Jenny set up a car wash while they are waiting. When the time is up they run over to tell the others that it is now their turn. Claire grudgingly gives the tractor to Jenny while David refuses to get off the bike. Jenny points to the egg-timer and tells David that his turn is over. He looks at Robert and hands the bike over. Breda keeps a watchful eye as the children manage to share the playthings as they agreed.

?

Reflection: Do I help children to solve problems and to resolve conflicts among themselves?

Eispéireas foghlama 48a: Margadh an fheirmeora

Téama: *Féiniúlacht agus Muintearas*, Aidhm 4 agus Sprioc foghlama 3

Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí

Suíomh: Rang naíonáin (bunscoil sa Ghaeltacht)

Le linn sraith ceachtanna drámaíochta bhunaigh grúpa leanaí i rang na naíonán sóisear agus sinsear, in éineacht le Múinteoir Síle, stallaí margaidh sa spás súgartha. Thugadh roinnt mhaith de na leanaí cuairt ar an margadh áitiúil feirmeora maidineacha Sathairn lena dtuismitheoirí agus bhí fhios ag na leanaí eile ina thaobh seo ó na hamanna roinnte nuachta. Fuair Múinteoir Síle frapaí súgartha, mar shampla ábhair scríbhneoireachta agus airgead, soithigh bhia fholmha, agus prócaí. Ghlan sí an bord taispeántais agus d'úsáid é mar chuntar. Ghlac na leanaí róil éagsúla agus thug cuireadh do Mhúinteoir Síle bheith ina custaiméir. Thar an gcéad chúpla lá eile thug siad boinn airgid 1, 2, 5, agus 10 cent isteach ar scoil chun

táirge a cheannach. D'fhorbair an súgradh le linn na seachtaine de réir mar a bhunaigh leanaí stallaí níos speisialaithe. Ag an bpointe sin bhí an spás sa seomra ranga le haghaidh na stallaí an-teoranta. Mhol Múinteoir Síle go bhféadaidís athshocrú a dhéanamh ar na boird agus na cathaoireacha chun spás a dhéanamh. Agus iad ar cipíní, chuidigh na leanaí léi é seo a dhéanamh. Bhí cead pleanála i bhfeidhm anois chun síneadh a chur leis an margadh! Thosaigh níos mó agus níos mó stallaí nua ag teacht ar an bhfód de réir mar a rinne leanaí nithe as taos súgartha agus de réir mar a thug siad cartáin fholmha ón mbaile. Bhunaigh siad stallaí áit a raibh a bpéintéireachta agus a mbláthanna féin á ndíol acu. Thug siad seanbhréagáin agus leabhair ón mbaile leo agus dhíol iad lena chéile. Bhídís ina gcustaiméirí agus ansin ina n-úinéirí stallaí. Chuidigh Múinteoir Síle leo comharthaí a dhéanamh le haghaidh na stallaí éagsúla. Rinne roinnt leanaí comharthaí a thaispeáin praghas a n-earraí.

Sheol Múinteoir Síle nóta abhaile ag insint do na tuismitheoirí céard a bhí ar siúl ag na leanaí agus thug cuireadh dóibh cuairt a thabhairt ar mhargadh na leanaí nuair a bhí siad ag fágáil na leanaí ar scoil nó á mbailiú. Rinne sí físteip de roinnt de na heipeasóid súgartha. Lá eile bhain sí úsáid as an margadh chun fadhb a chur faoi bhráid na leanaí, agus d'fhiafraigh sí di féin os ard ar chóir di na boinn airgid a bhí aici a úsáid chun íoc as planda a chosain 5c (naíonáin shóisearacha) nó 10c (naíonáin shinsearacha). De réir mar a rinne gach leanbh na fíorbhoinn airgid a láimhseáil (1c, 2c, 5c, agus 10c), spreag sí na leanaí le hiniúchadh a dhéanamh ar na meascáin éagsúla de bhoinn airgid a d'fhéadfaidís a úsáid le haghaidh na bplandaí.

Ábhar Machnaimh: Conas is féidir liom úsáid níos mó a bhaint as an súgradh samhlaíoch chun cur le forbairt scileanna litearthachta agus uimhearthachta na leanaí?

Learning experience 48b: The farmer's market

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school in the Gaeltacht)

During a series of drama lessons a group of children in junior and senior infants and their teacher, Múinteoir Síle, set up a market stall in the pretend play area. Many of the children visit the local farmer's market on Saturday mornings with their parents and mention it during news-time. Múinteoir Síle gets play props, including writing materials and money, empty food containers, and jars. She clears the display table and uses this as a counter. The children take on different roles and ask Múinteoir Síle to be a customer. Over the next few days they bring 1, 2, 5, and 10 cent coins to school for buying the produce. The play develops during the week as groups of children set up more specialised stalls. Space in the classroom for stalls begins to pose a problem. Múinteoir Síle suggests that they could rearrange the tables and chairs to make room. Excitedly, the children help her do this. Planning permission to extend the market is now in place! More and more stalls begin to appear as children make produce from play-dough and bring empty food cartons from home. They set up a stall selling their own paintings and the flowers they are growing. They bring old toys and books from home and sell them to each other. They take turns playing customers and stall owners. Múinteoir Síle helps them to make signs for the different stalls. Some children make signs that show the price of their merchandise.

Múinteoir Síle sends a note home telling parents what the children are doing and invites them to visit the children's market when they drop off or collect the children. She videos some of the play episodes. On another day she uses the market to pose a problem for the children; she wonders aloud how she can use the coins she has to pay for a 5c plant (junior infants) or a 10c plant (senior infants). With each child handling, observing and exploring real coins (1c, 2c, 5c, and 10c), she encourages the children to explore the combinations they could use to pay for the plants.

Reflection: How can I use pretend play to a greater extent to develop children's literacy and numeracy skills?

Learning experience 49: Valuing our languages

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 6

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Pema's mother Marta is keen that Pema (17 months) grows up able to speak both Polish and English. Pema's grandpa, Thomas, from Poland has come to stay with Marta and Pema for a month. As always, he brings some new books and toys for Pema. This time he brings a doll with long black hair. They name her Paula. Every afternoon Thomas, Pema and Paula sit together in the kitchen reading the new books. Thomas proudly points to the pictures and names them in Polish. Pema copies him and looks at him with delight as he smiles to affirm her efforts.

Pema attends the local crèche from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. three days a week while Marta works. This morning Thomas, Marta and Pema are walking together to the crèche. Pema and Paula are in the buggy. They have time to stop and point to interesting things along the way: a dog, an ambulance going by with its siren flashing, flower sellers, and the church. Thomas takes time to name the objects and describe them in Polish as Pema points and attempts some of his words. Thomas repeats the words, nods, and smiles to encourage Pema.

When they arrive at the crèche, Aveen, the practitioner greets the family with 'hello' in Polish. Marta proudly shows her father the family wall where there are photographs of all the families in the crèche and a welcome sign in the mother tongue of every child. Marta and Thomas give Pema a kiss and a hug and Aveen takes her to the window so she can wave bye-bye before they play with Paula.

? *Reflection: Can I do more to bring the children's home languages into the setting?*

Learning experience 50: I love to dance and sing

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (nursery)

Emily (2½ years) is a shy, quiet little girl. She attends the local nursery everyday while her ma, a lone parent, works. When she dances in the nursery Emily's whole expression changes and her sense of happiness and delight are clearly communicated. She particularly enjoys the songs, *I'm a dingle dangle scarecrow* and *Five fat sausages*. She also loves singing and doing the actions for *I'm a little teapot* and *Ring-a-ring a rosy*, particulary when they are sung in Latvian. She and her two special friends, Victoros and Seán, fall about the place laughing at the end. Victoros loves to hear his home language being used in the setting and starts to talk excitedly in Latvian when he hears it in the nursery rhymes.

Emily also enjoys it when the room leader suggests they take out the musical instruments. She loves marching around the room with her friends making lots of music and noise. She loves it, especially, when she gets the opportunity to do this outside. Máire, the room-leader often makes video recordings of the children's music making and dancing so that the children can share these experiences with their parents. Expressing herself in a variety of ways is important for Emily. Although her mastery of language is excellent she is quite reserved when interacting with other children, yet she loves to dance and move to music.

? *Reflection: How can I help children express themselves in a variety of ways?*

Learning experience 51: Re-enacting the match

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Brazil and Ireland are due to play a friendly soccer match. There are a number of children from Brazil in the playgroup so there is great excitement. Many of the children are wearing their team jerseys. During the morning they make banners and flags. Some of the children are going to watch the match that evening at home and some of their parents are actually going to the match in Dublin. The children and Liz, the playgroup leader, talk about what this will be like at circle time. Some of the children use Portuguese, the official language in Brazil, which promotes additional discussion and curiosity from other children. Liz listens to their stories about who is going to win and what players are the best. After the discussion the children draw pictures related to the football theme. As they draw, Liz listens to the stories about their drawings and writes a sentence beside each picture based on what the children say. She reads this with the children. Some of them join in and help her read their 'stories'.

Outside in the yard some of the children want to be the soccer players on the Irish and Brazilian teams. They make goalposts with their jackets. Liz encourages the other children to come and support the teams. She suggests they charge matchgoers for tickets. They use stones for money and leaves as tickets and Seán and Rianna run inside to get the banners and flags. Other children take chairs outside and organise the viewing stand. Olivia decides she wants to sell ice creams at the match and uses pieces of paper for ice creams. Again, stones are a great currency for making purchases!

Teams are chosen and the rules of the game are clearly outlined. Liz lends the referee, Ciara, a whistle. She blows it loudly and the match begins. The matchgoers scream when the goals are scored and shout words of encouragement when they are not. They wave their flags and banners enthusiastically. The referee blows the whistle a number of times to signal the end of the match, which finishes in a draw. Both sides shake hands and are affirmed by the crowd. Back inside, Liz organises a pretend microphone and she interviews the teams. She extends the conversation by commenting and asking questions.

Reflection: How can I provide opportunities to extend children's play outside as well as inside?

Learning experience 52: Going to the dentist

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

Ms Murphy, the junior and senior infant class teacher, uses the pretend play corner to support children's learning across *Aistear's* themes, as well as language, maths, SESE and SPHE in the *Primary School Curriculum*. Every fortnight or so the play focus changes. Children use the corner to pretend they are cooking and baking or minding babies, in the café, at the doctor's, at the local social welfare office, at the garage, at the library, in the garda station, fishing on a trawler, or going on holidays. This month due to the number of children expressing an interest in teeth, Ms Murphy and the children have decided to play *going to the dentist*. Several children have started to lose their baby teeth while others have gone on visits to the dentist themselves or with older siblings or parents.

The pretend play corner is used as the children arrive in school and at different times of the day and the week, depending on what activities the children are doing. Ms Murphy organises the pretend play corner so that it includes relevant play materials to support children's learning and development, including literacy and numeracy skills. For example, there is a telephone and computer for the dentist's

receptionist. There is also a notepad and pencil for making appointments and there are books and magazines in the waiting area.

The children are really excited about creating their own dentist's surgery. Over the next week they organise and reorganise the surgery expanding their patient list as they go. They make posters and price lists for the services on offer. Sometimes Ms Murphy plays with the children; at other times she observes the play from a distance. Occasionally she intervenes to extend the play, especially when it seems to become repetitive. She sometimes adds a new prop, introduces a new word or idea, makes a suggestion, helps resolve a conflict, or models a new role. During the course of the week, as well as playing in the pretend area, the children have conversations about their visits to the dentist. They listen to stories about the dentist and read relevant books in the library corner. They play with props such as goggles, mouthwash, dental picks, toothbrushes, toothpaste, white coats, drills, magnifying lenses, mirrors, and injections. They play games such as *I spy, Spot the difference, Pick the odd one out* using pictures and objects connected to the dentist. Most children are using lots of words associated with the dentist. On Friday the dental nurse from the local health clinic comes in. She uses a giant brush and teeth to explain how to brush your teeth. By the end of the week business is booming in the dental surgery with treatments such as making false teeth and fitting braces being offered.

?

Reflection: How regularly do I observe and listen to children in pretend play scenarios, and identify ways to extend their play?

Learning experience 53: Getting to know you

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

Age group: Babies

Setting: Home

Meagan (5 months) is lying near her cousin Doireann (8 months). The girls are on a mat which has lots of play objects attached to it, such as mirrors, crinkly materials, rattles, animal sounds, fabric flaps, and dangling animals. Meagan shows Doireann that she is enjoying her young cousin's company. She stretches out her hand and touches Doireann's leg. Both children smile and coo with delight. Meagan's mum, Niamh, shows the girls the different features of the mat. She lies beside the two children and presses buttons to hear the animal sounds. She encourages the girls to feel the different materials. She holds their hands to help them use the rattles. When the girls appear to lose interest she sings *Round and round the garden* using actions with each of the girls. The girls let her know they love the tickly feel of her finger doing a circular movement on their hands as she sings with them. Doireann holds her hand out many times signalling for more. After singing, Niamh points to their clothes and body parts and describes these. ***Doireann has white socks on, Meagan has blue ones. Doireann is touching Meagan's fingers nice and gently. Do you like that Meagan? I think you do.*** And so the exploring and talking continue.

?

Reflection: What can I do to help children interact with and learn more about each other through play?

Learning experience 54: We love horses so let's be friends

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

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Bernadette, a Traveller child (2 years and 10 months), is newly arrived to the playgroup in the middle of the year. Her family keep horses and travel to fairs all around the country. As part of their fortnightly team meeting the staff discuss what they can do to help Bernadette make the transition to the playgroup. They agree to source posters of horses and fairs to display on the walls. They also ask the local training centre to make a small trailer and a model halting site to add to the small world play area. They add more horses to the farm set.

Michael (3 years) who lives on a farm loves everything to do with farming—animals, tractors and books about farming. Michael spends long sessions every day setting up and playing with the farm. He arranges gates to keep the cattle in and makes sure all the animals have water. This play mirrors the real life things he loves to do with his Mam and Dad who both work on the farm. Michael is delighted with the addition of the new horses. Bernadette likes to stand nearby and watch Michael play. She often sits beside him, too, taking part in onlooker play. The staff observe this.

After a few days, with a little prompting from Nora, the playgroup leader, Bernadette decides to join Michael in playing with the horses. They start to form a friendship. Nora supports this by asking them to do things like tidying up in pairs and she encourages them to play together outside. They love to play horsey games. Bernadette really likes this as she often goes to watch her Dad, Johnny in sulky races with their own horse. Sometimes Michael pretends to be the horse and Bernadette pretends to be her Dad. Bernadette holds on to his jumper as he runs around. Bernadette tells him to giddy-up and slow down. Occasionally Bernadette uses 'cant' words while she is playing. Nora is interested in finding out more about this from Bernadette's parents. At the next team meeting she suggests to her colleagues that they learn and use some cant words to help Bernadette feel happier and more comfortable in the playgroup. This would also help the other children to learn more about Traveller life.

?

Reflection: Do the play props in my setting reflect the cultures and backgrounds of all the children?

Learning experience 55: The power of music and story

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Abi (almost 4 years) has Down syndrome and attends her local crèche. The staff use music a lot during the day. They sing a special chant to ease transitions from one activity to another and use upbeat songs to raise energy levels, especially during the afternoon. Mella, the room leader, notices that Abi responds very positively to music. Abi helps tidy up energetically when they sing the tidy up song. She loves it when they sing the welcome song, *Hello Abi, how are you today?* (going through the names of all the children). She smiles and takes a bow when her name is sung.

Abi especially loves it when they sing, *When you're happy and you know it*. She becomes very animated and responds enthusiastically. Mella also uses lots of language play to help Abi and other children with their language development. They play rhyming games and Abi laughs when her friends make up jokes and nonsense words. She also loves to listen to tongue twisters.

Mella uses creative storytelling to introduce the children to new words and ideas. She wears a special storytelling hat and cloak to help everyone get into the mood for stories. The children sit on beanbags. Mella sometimes uses music for her storytelling. She tries to match pieces of music to the stories. Abi loves this part.

With help from the children and their families Mella has developed a range of props which she places in a story bag to help bring stories to life. For example, in the bag (a colourful pillowcase) there might be four or five props that connect with the story. These might include small world people, transport and animal figures, pieces of fruit, pictures of characters with their names printed underneath like *The Gruffalo, Alfie* or *Spot the dog,* key words printed in large font like *Not I said the pig, not I said the duck* in the story of *The Little Red Hen*, masks displaying different feelings, pieces of cutlery, a baby doll or teddy bear, a hat, shoes, items of clothes, different types of food, a flash lamp, a stethoscope, keys, a mobile phone, coins, photographs, toys such as a puppet fox or a cardboard cut out for the *Gingerbread Man*, vegetables such as a turnip for the story, *The Enormous Turnip.* The list of props is endless! Mella also tries to include a factual book that relates to the story. It might be about the country that the story is set in, a book on gardening, a book on sports or animals. Mella's local librarian is a great help to her in sourcing all her books. Abi is always enthralled listening to the story and wonders what Mella will produce next!

? *Reflection: What play props can I use to bring stories to life?*

Learning experience 56: Story time

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The senior infant class of 28 boys are getting ready for story time. They make themselves comfortable on the mats on the floor at the back of the classroom near the library area. The teacher has his storytelling hat on and has a series of props ready to assist him in his telling of *Jack and the Beanstalk.* He reads the story with the help of some of the boys who have been chosen to take on the different roles in the story.

During discussion time Mr O'Donnell asks the boys to describe the different characters in the story. He also asks some questions such as: *Was it right for Jack's mother to send him off on his own to sell the cow? Was it okay for Jack to keep stealing things from the giant?* Some very interesting conversations ensue. Later that day the boys play word games with some key words from the story. They love doing this and especially like making up nonsense words.

The following day Mr O'Donnell revisits the story and asks them to think of alternative endings for it. Later during drama time the boys re-enact the story of *Jack and the Beanstalk.* They incorporate the new endings such as Jack and the giant becoming friends, Jack selling the cow for a lot of money, running away and not giving the money to his mother, the guards catching Jack walking along the road with the cow and taking him to the station, the principal of his school ringing his Mam to see why he isn't at school. The teacher builds on their ideas and helps them to develop their stories. Over the next two days, working in pairs, the boys write their own story of Jack. They use words from the whiteboard based on their various discussions and they use their own spelling for other words. The children add illustrations to their story. When Mr. O'Donnell suggests to them that they could staple the pages together to make little story books, some children decide to add their names as authors and illustrators. They add page numbers and some even add ISBN codes! The following week the boys visit the junior infants classroom to read to the children in small groups. Parents get a chance to read the books when they drop the boys off in the morning or when they are collecting them in the afternoon.

? *Reflection: How can I use storytelling to promote higher-order thinking skills?*

Conclusion

Play can be fun, challenging and enjoyable for both adults and children. By helping children to take part in different types of play on their own and with others, and by providing a well-resourced play environment inside and outside, adults can greatly enrich the learning opportunities that play provides.

Supporting learning and development through assessment

Introduction

Assessment is part of adults' day-to-day interactions with children. Adults continually make judgements about children's learning and development and use the information they gather to help children to progress. Children too make judgements about what they are good at, what they enjoy doing, what they can do now with a little help, and what they would like to be able to do in the future.

These guidelines describe what assessment is and show what it can look like in early childhood. At times, specific references are made to infant classes in primary schools where assessment practice is informed by legislation.

What is assessment? Why is it important?

Figure 3: Definition of assessment

Assessment is the ongoing process of **collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using** information to develop rich portraits of children as learners in order to support and enhance their future learning.

Assessment enables the adult to find out what children understand, how they think, what they are able to do, and what their dispositions and interests are. This information helps the adult to build rich stories of children as capable and competent learners in order to support further learning and development. In doing this, he/she uses the assessment information to give on-going feedback to children about how they are getting on in their learning, to provide challenging and enjoyable experiences for them, to choose appropriate supports for them, and to document, celebrate and plan the next steps in their learning.

Put simply, the adult considers the following questions when thinking about assessment.

Table 11: Thinking about assessment

Element	Questions
Making a judgement	What aspects of children's learning and development do I want to focus on in my assessment? Who will make the judgement – me, the children, or both of us?
Recording	How will I record the judgement—as a mental note, as a written note, as a comment or story, as a drawing, as a photograph or video-recording, on a checklist? How will I ensure that, over time, I am building up rich portraits of children's learning and development? Will I give children opportunities to record their own judgements? How?
Sharing	What do I want to say to children about their learning and development? What do I want to share with children's parents? How will I share the assessment information?

Assessment for Learning and **Assessment of Learning** are two approaches to assessment. The two differ in **how** the adult uses the information he/she collects. The main purpose of Assessment of Learning is to inform others, like parents and professionals, such as therapists, about children's achievement. Assessment for Learning focuses on using assessment information to help children with the next steps in their learning and development. While both approaches are important, these guidelines focus on the adult using assessment on a daily basis to help children progress in their learning and development across *Aistear's* four themes. This is Assessment for Learning.

'Doing' assessment

The four assessment actions — **collecting, documenting, reflecting on,** and **using** information — overlap and often happen at the same time. At times the adult uses all four actions at once and at other times undertakes just one or two. On occasions the adult assesses within a few seconds or minutes, but often assessment takes place over a number of days or weeks. Sometimes the adult assesses without even planning to. At other times, he/she plans to focus on particular aspects of learning and development across *Aistear's* themes. Table 12 summarises some key features of good assessment practice.

Table 12: Features of good assessment practice

Assessment	The adult
Benefits children	■ gives feedback to children on their learning and development as part of his/her daily interactions with them ■ makes decisions that build on past experiences and support new learning and development
Involves children	■ talks with children to understand their learning and development ■ gives children opportunities to think about what they did, said, made, and learned, and helps them plan what they will do next
Makes sense for children	■ assesses as part of everyday activities, events, routines, and interactions, and uses objects, places and people which are familiar and interesting to children
Involves children's families	■ provides parents with insights into their children's learning and gives suggestions for how they might support learning at home ■ gives parents opportunities to share information about their children's learning and development
Uses many methods	■ uses methods such as self-assessment, conversations, observations, tasks, and tests ■ uses methods in a way that is appropriate, given children's ages, backgrounds and stages of learning and development
Happens over time	■ collects and uses information on a daily basis ■ over time, builds a rich portrait of each child as a learner
Celebrates the breadth and depth of children's learning and development.	■ provides evidence of children's learning and development across the dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding as set out in *Aistear*'s themes.

What do I assess and when?

In assessing, the adult looks for evidence of children's progress across *Aistear's* themes:

- **dispositions:** for example curiosity, concentration, resilience, and perseverance
- **skills:** for example walking, cutting, writing, and problem-solving
- **attitudes and values:** for example respect for themselves and others, care for the environment, and positive attitudes to learning and to life
- **knowledge and understanding:** for example classifying objects using colour and size, learning 'rules' for interacting with others, finding out about people in their community, and understanding that words have meaning.

The adult focuses on what children do, make and say. For example, he/she might observe babies watching each other and initiating communication through a hand-touch or a screech, or toddlers working collaboratively to move and build a mound of stones, or young children investigating sounds as they create instruments from objects of different materials, shapes and sizes. The adult uses the aims and learning goals in *Aistear's* themes to interpret and build on these experiences. Collecting information over time is especially important with children from birth to six years as their learning and development does not follow neat patterns or happen at the same rate for each child.

Children also have developmental milestones, which health professionals check at certain times during early childhood. In addition, diagnostic assessments play an important role in helping to identify children with special educational needs. Although most practitioners do not carry out diagnostic assessments, they often notice early signs of potential difficulties and can bring their concerns to parents and help them get in touch with relevant professionals.

What information do I document, why and how?

Documentation provides a record of children's learning and development. This record helps to tell the story of children's journeys as capable and competent learners. The adult documents important points about what children understand, can do, and how they approach learning. He/she also sometimes records in more detail children's involvement in particular events or activities in order to create a fuller picture of the richness and complexity of their learning and development. This **storytelling approach** is especially useful in early childhood.

Documentation can include written notes, stories, photographs, video footage, and samples of what children make, do and say, such as models, sculptures, pictures, paintings, projects, scribed comments, responses, or statements. Adults and children use this evidence of learning to celebrate progress and achievement, and to plan the next steps in learning. Documentation also enables the adult and/or children to share information with parents. This can help parents to build on children's out-of-home experiences while at home, and so make learning more enjoyable and successful. In the case of some children, documentation provides critical information in helping to identify special educational needs, in putting appropriate supports in place, and in reviewing the impact of these interventions.

Deciding what to document

It is neither practical nor useful to record everything that the adult hears, sees and finds out. He/she decides what information is particularly helpful in showing and understanding children's progress in developing dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding. The adult documents information on all children. In the case of some children, for example those who may have a learning difficulty or for whom the adult needs additional information to build a fuller picture of a specific aspect of learning, he/she records information more frequently. Sometimes, the adult records detailed information and at other times less detailed information. Drawing on professional expertise, he/she decides how much and how often. The important point is that documentation informs the adult's work with all children in the setting in a manageable way.

Deciding how to document

Table 13 describes different types of documentation. Examples are included in *learning experiences* 57-74.

Table 13: Documenting children's learning and development

Documentation type	Resources, method and age group
Samples of children's work	*Resources:* children's work *Method:* The adult stores samples of children's work. Sometimes the children choose the samples, sometimes the adult decides what is chosen, and, at other times, the children and adult choose together. *Age group:* six months to six years
Notes	*Resources*: notebook, post-its, computer with word-processing package *Method*: The adult makes brief notes, often consisting of just key words, about a particular event, activity or task. Sometimes the notes may be longer, giving details about a particular aspect of the child's learning. The notes may focus on an individual child or a group of children. Over time, the notes tell a story of what the children do, say and understand. *Age group:* birth to six years
ICT: photographs and video or audio records	*Resources:* camera, video recorder, audio recorder, tapes *Method:* The adult uses the camera or video or audio recorder to capture moments in children's learning and development. Each photograph and video or audio clip helps tell a story. A collection created over time can show the children's progress and achievements. A series of photographs can be taken on one day to show the child's progress in a particular activity. *Age group:* birth to six years (with written prior parental consent)
Stories	*Resources:* notebook, post-its, computer with word-processing package *Method:* The adult makes brief notes about children's involvement in a particular event, activity or task. The notes may focus on an individual child's contribution or the contributions of a group of children. In contrast to notes, this type of documentation gives more detailed information about children's interactions with others, as well as the relevant objects and places, in sequence. These stories help the adult to see and understand better the progress children are making in relation to *Aistear's* dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge, and understanding. Samples of children's work and photographs can enrich the stories. *Age group:* birth to six years
Daily diaries or records of care	*Resources:* notebook, folder, computer with word-processing package *Method:* The adult (often the Key Worker) makes brief notes each day about a child's routines and responses, for example what the child ate, how much he/she slept, his/her nappy changes, and different interactions and activities. Based on behaviour, body language and verbal feedback from children, the adult may also note particular things the child likes, prefers and achieves. The diary or record is shared with parents by sending it home. Parents can be invited to comment and provide information on things that their children enjoy as well as things they find difficult. *Age group:* birth to three years, and up to six years for children with special educational needs

Checklists	*Resources:* pre-prepared checklists *Method:* The adult uses checklists to record information about particular aspects of children's learning, usually at the end of a given period of time. The adult makes judgements against predetermined descriptions. These might focus, for example, on physical interaction or early literacy skills. The adult usually ticks a heading which best describes the children's progress to date. *Age group:* birth to six years
Reports	*Resources:* templates for reports *Method:* The adult uses information from a range of assessment methods and documentation to develop reports on children's learning and development. He/she shares these reports with parents. As the reports focus on a summary of children's progress and achievement, they are developed at particular times in the year, for example in the summer when the child has completed a year in the setting. In the case of some children, the adult may receive a report from another professional, such as a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, a play therapist, or a physiotherapist. The adult uses these reports to further inform his/her work with the children. *Age group:* birth to six years (Reports are usually used for children with special educational needs and for children at primary school.)

How do I store assessment information and for how long?

Assessment information can be stored in children's learning portfolios, in a practitioner's files, and in central files[3].

Children's learning portfolios

A portfolio is a helpful way of compiling information about children's learning and development. The portfolio can take the form of a folder, a scrapbook, a shoe, cereal or pizza box, or something similar in which objects made by the children, photographs, stories, notes, records of care, checklists, and test scores (where relevant), are kept. This collection tells the story of each child's learning journey—his/her efforts, progress and achievement over time.

Portfolios can help give children a sense of pride in and ownership of their own learning and development. For example, children can select work samples and photographs for their portfolios, reflect on these, and, with the adult's help, plan ahead. This experience can make learning more enjoyable and interesting for them.

Practitioner's file

Practitioners working in out-of-home settings can keep a file which includes a record for each child in their group or class. This record might include details of observations, conversations with children and their parents, events, and incidents as they occur in the setting. The practitioner adds to this record as necessary. In this way, it is a 'running record'.

Central files

Certain information about children needs to be kept in a central file in out-of-home settings. This might include parents' names and contact details, medical information, reports and information from other professionals such as therapists, and so on. In the case of settings in which there are a number of practitioners, it might be especially important for this type of information to be accessible in a central

[3] See standard 15 in *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006), which states that 'being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded'. In the case of infant teachers in primary schools, further information on recording and storing assessment information is available in the document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (2007).

location. Where children attend a setting for more than one year, the adult can transfer important points of information about children's learning and development from the practitioner's file to this central file at the end of a year or other period of time.

Assessment information gathered within the setting and by other professionals (for example, reports received from a therapist) should be stored safely and used only by those concerned with children's learning and development. It is also important that the information is used only for the purpose for which it was collected and documented. Information can be stored using a structured, manual filing system, and/or electronically. Where electronic records are kept, the adult can include photographs of items made by children.

Each setting decides for how long assessment information will be stored. In the case of primary schools, it is advisable to store relevant information until children reach their twenty-first birthday[4].

How do I use the information I collect and document?

Thinking about what to do, how to do it and why, and then judging how well it went is part of any professional's work. The reflective adult uses information about children's learning and development to think about his/her practice, and to identify how to improve it. He/she may do this in partnership with colleagues and/or other professionals. This reflection may result in the adult changing the way he/she interacts with children and their parents, re-organising the room, changing routines, planning particular activities, and providing specific materials and objects. The adult also shares assessment information with the children and their parents and uses the information to plan for children's progress.

Supporting children with special educational needs

Assessment information can alert the adult to potential difficulties experienced by children. By bringing concerns to the attention of parents and other professionals, the adult plays a critical role in helping to access appropriate supports to enable children to progress in their learning and to limit the potential impact of the disability or difficulty on future learning and development. The supports may include putting a specific learning programme in place for a child. This might be based on an Individual Education Plan (IEP)[5].

The IEP is a comprehensive working document setting out prioritised learning needs, goals and strategies to support a child's learning and to map his/her progress. The plan is usually developed by the practitioner and the child's parents. Therapists and Special Educational Needs Organisers often contribute too. Detailed information on how to develop and use IEPs is provided by the National Council for Special Education at www.ncse.ie.

With whom do I share information and how?

By talking regularly to children about their learning and development, they can decide with the adult what they should do next and how. Sharing information with parents is equally important[6], so that they can support their children at home and, where necessary, work with the setting to organise additional supports for their children. In some cases, where a concern exists about learning and development, the adult may advise parents to get a referral letter from their doctor in order to have the child assessed. In the case of some children, and with parental consent, the adult shares assessment information with others such as therapists, Special Educational Needs Organisers and inspectors in order to access specific supports and/or resources.

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4 Assessment information can be requested from schools by parents, or by children themselves on reaching their eighteenth birthday under the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003).

5 The use of IEPs as outlined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004) is not yet enacted, and is therefore not currently a requirement of educational settings.

6 In the case of primary school settings, the Education Act (1998) and the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003) outline parents' rights to regular information on their children's progress and achievement.

Much information is shared between settings and parents informally and regularly, for example when parents are dropping and collecting children from the setting. It is also important to give parents specific time to discuss how their children are getting on. This can be done by meeting parents at times that suit them. Different arrangements work for different settings and parents. This meeting can be especially important for children whose parents don't bring them to and from the setting. At other times, it can be helpful to meet parents as a group, for example before children join the setting and a short time after they have joined. Other events, at which information can be shared, include open days, children's shows and concerts, and arrangements for parents to spend time in the setting to support activities such as arts, music and reading stories (see the guidelines, *Building partnerships between parents and practitioners*). Some settings may have a staff member with responsibility for liaising with parents. This work might involve keeping in contact through regular phone calls and home visits, as well as meetings in the setting.

It is also helpful to give parents information in writing. For example, parents might get a *daily diary* or *record of care* for their child. This can be especially useful in the case of babies and toddlers, and young children with special educational needs. Practitioners might also give a report to parents at specific times in the year, such as Christmas and/or summer[7]. (See **www.ncca.ie/primary/assessment** for a range of report card templates for use in primary schools.) The report usually summarises the child's progress and achievement in learning over a particular period of time. Children can play a role in creating the report. If they are to be useful to parents, reports should be written in language that is easily understood. It may be helpful for staff to develop a guide to sharing information with parents. The guide could offer advice and suggestions about when to hold meetings, how much time to give to them, what information to share, what terminology to use, and tips for supporting parents in their role as educators[8]. Talking to parents about what types of information might be helpful to them, and how they would like this given to them, can also be useful to staff when making decisions about sharing written information with parents.

What information should I gather from parents?

Just as it is important to share assessment information with parents, it is also important that parents share information with practitioners[9]. Some parents may need assistance with this, for example parents whose first language is neither English nor Irish, or parents who may not feel confident in meeting practitioners, or who, perhaps, may feel uncomfortable with the idea of assessment, given the young age of their children. It is important to help parents understand what assessment in early childhood is, its role in building rich stories of what and how their children learn and develop, and its use in helping them to progress. This can help parents to see the important part they can play in helping their children to learn and develop.

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7 Primary school teachers report assessment information twice during each school year. One of these should include a written report, preferably at the end of the school year. The other can include a meeting or a meeting and a written report (NCCA, 2007). Outside these meetings, teachers may also meet parents informally.

8 The NCCA developed a DVD for parents on the *Primary School Curriculum*. This DVD, *The What, Why and How of children's learning in primary school* (2006) contains information on early learning and on learning in junior and senior infants. The DVD, together with information leaflets and tip sheets for parents, is available on the NCCA website at **www.ncca.ie**.

9 See the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 Explanatory Note: Regulation 13, which sets out the minimum information that must be kept regarding children attending a pre-school service.

Information might be shared during a telephone conversation or at a meeting between the parents and the practitioner before the child starts in a setting. Alternatively, parents might be asked to complete a form. Whatever strategy is used, the practitioner invites the parents to share information about the child's

- family – name, address, place in family, number of siblings, mother tongue
- medical history – gestation period, complications at birth, illnesses, vaccinations, allergies, medication[10], disabilities, areas of concern
- early learning and developmental milestones – at what age children sat, said first words and sentences, crawled, walked, were toilet trained
- personality – likes and dislikes, strengths and challenges
- special comfort items, for example a blanket or a teddy
- special names for family or familiar items, for example what they call parents, their soother and so on
- social interactions and relationships
- previous experiences in out-of-home settings
- any other information that may be relevant.

When an adult is concerned about a child's progress it may be necessary to gather more information from the parents, for example the family history in language or social development.

Thinking about my practice

1. *How do I collect information on children's learning and development across Aistear's four themes? To what extent is my practice giving me rich portraits of each child's learning?*
2. *What do I do with assessment information? Is the information I document proving useful? How can I make it more useful?*
3. *How frequently do I talk to children about the progress they are making?*
4. *How frequently do I share information with parents? How and when do I do this?*
5. *How do I balance information on children's successes and achievements with things they find challenging when I'm talking to parents?*
6. *What strategies could I use to involve parents more in contributing to the portrait of their child's learning?*

How do I collect assessment information?

The adult uses different methods to collect information about the progress children are making in their learning and development. He/she decides which method is appropriate depending on the child who is being assessed, and what aspects of learning and development are being focused on and why. In choosing methods, the adult is mindful of children's backgrounds, cultures, family contexts and values, languages, abilities, interests, and areas requiring extra support. He/she builds a good relationship with the children and watches for signs that might suggest that the assessment should stop for now, and recommence possibly tomorrow or in a few days.

[10] Parents are asked to sign indemnity forms where children are to be given medication in out-of-home settings.

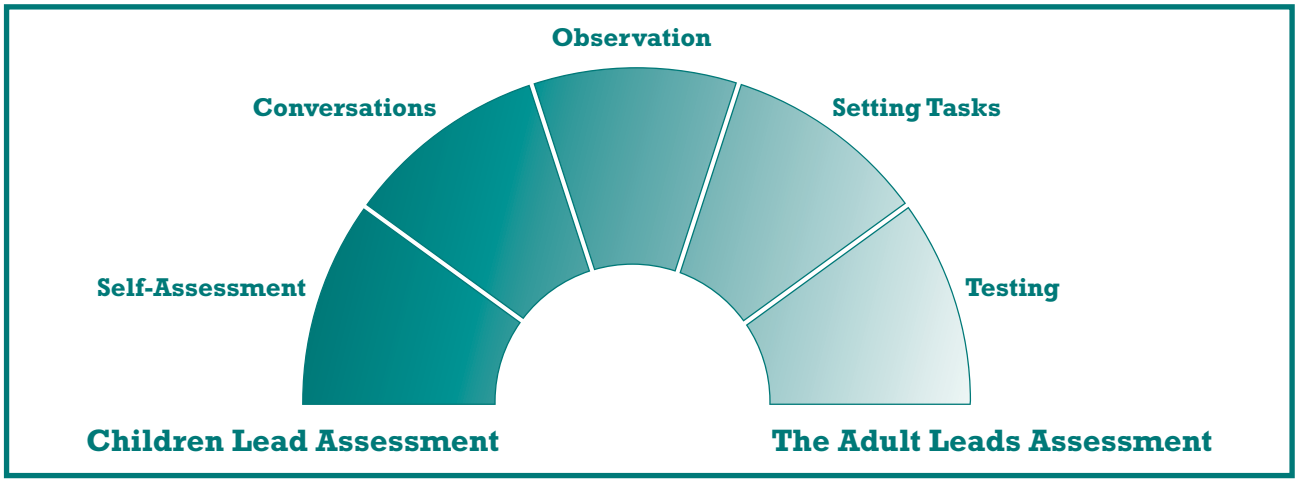
Ethical considerations

Assessment, perhaps more than any other part of early childhood practice, highlights the importance of ethics. Given the young age of the children, the adult has a responsibility to be open to the messages children are giving through their facial expressions, body movements, vocalisations, and words. He/she needs to give plenty of time to assessment in order to capture the breadth and depth of children's learning and development. An increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population of children in out-of-home settings means that, in many cases, practitioners and children may have different cultural perspectives. In addition, for many children the language of the setting may not be the language spoken in their home. In these instances the adult uses his/her knowledge of how children learn first and second languages, and how these experiences shape how they learn to think, in order to make judgements about children's progress. For these children, it is especially important that their parents have opportunities to share information with the setting so that the children's portraits as young learners accurately reflect their strengths, interests and needs.

Five assessment methods

Figure 4 presents five methods[11]. These include self-assessment and conversations in which children take the lead in making judgements about their own progress as learners. Observations, setting tasks, and testing involve the adult leading the assessment[12]. While these guidelines present the methods individually, each method often involves using other methods too. A combination of methods helps the adult build richer and more authentic portraits of children as learners.

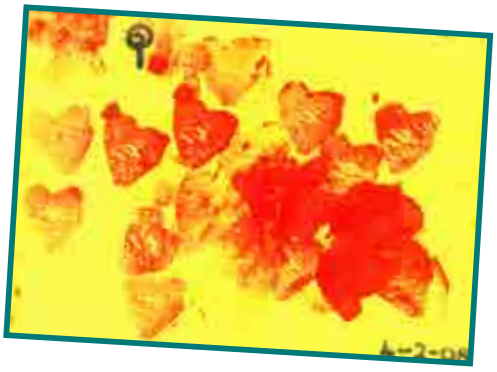
Figure 4: Assessment methods



Pages 81 to 101 describe each method by answering three questions:

- What is this method?
- How do I use it?
- With what age group of children can I use it?

Learning experiences 57-74 show the methods in action across different types of settings and with children of different ages.



[11] Rather than presenting assessment methods in order of frequency of use starting with observations and conversations, the guidelines use a sequence which reflects sociocultural theory. This sequence prioritises children having opportunities to lead the assessment process.

[12] The guidelines highlight these five methods given their usefulness in assessing early learning and development. By comparison, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007) presents eight assessment methods. Some of the 'extra' three methods are subsumed within the five presented in these guidelines.

Self-assessment

What is self-assessment?

Self-assessment involves children thinking about their own learning and development. Children do this as part of how they learn, and often they are the best assessors of what they have done and achieved. Over time, they are better able to think about what they did, said or made, and to make decisions about how they might do better next time. This helps them to set personal goals and to work towards these goals together as a group or individually.

How do I help children to self-assess?

Children need time to develop self-assessment skills. The adult plays a key role by spending time with them individually, in pairs or in groups, and revisiting the activities and events they were involved in. Using prompts, the adult guides children's thinking as they talk about their experiences. Helpful prompts include:

- *What did you do when …?*
- *How did you do that? What did you use?*
- *What happened then? Why do you think it happened?*
- *I wonder what would have happened if …*
- *I wonder how we could …*
- *What would you like to do next (time)? How will you do that?*
- *You might like to do it with Trevor.*
- *I'm wondering what you were thinking when …?*
- *What was easy about this work?*
- *What was difficult about the work?*
- *Are you happy with …?*
- *What did you learn from that?*
- *What would you do differently if you were doing it again?*
- *What would help you to do better …?*

At other times, the adult might invite children to talk about samples of their work. These might include constructions, drawings, dressing-up outfits, paintings, puzzles, sculptures, or writing. Alternatively, the adult might use photographs of these to start a discussion. As part of the discussion the adult might provide words and phrases to help children develop a language which they can use when talking about what they did, said or made, felt, and learned.

Collections of things children have made and/or photographs can help them connect past learning and new learning. This in turn can help them identify what they are good at, where they can improve, and what new learning they would like to do. This is the basis for setting learning goals for themselves.

With what age group of children can I use self-assessment?

Self-assessment can be used with toddlers and young children. Babies too can sometimes use it as can be seen in the next learning experience.

Learning experience 57: Look Mia, I did it too!

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Mia (13 months) and Josh (11 months) are playing side by side on the floor. Taking turns, they lift objects including wooden spoons, colanders and lids, show them to each other, and screech with glee. Mia notices a small chair close by and speedily crawls to it. Pulling herself to her feet she grabs the back of the chair and pulls herself onto the seat. She smiles, screeches and claps her hands in delight at her accomplishment. Not wanting to be left out, Josh slides on his bottom to the chair. Wanting a turn at sitting on the chair, he shouts loudly at Mia and waves his arms. The two babies become upset—Mia not wanting to leave the chair and Josh wanting to sit on it. Their shouting gets louder. Deirdre, their Key Worker, has been observing from a distance and joins them. She places a second chair close to Mia's. Josh makes his way to it and grabbing the back of the chair, pulls himself to his feet and tries to get onto the seat. He falls back to the floor. He pulls himself to his feet again only to fall once more. Deirdre observes from a distance and offers gentle encouragement to Josh: *You can do it, I know you can.* Screeching a little, he pulls himself to his feet a third time. He looks carefully at the seat and noticing the handles, grasps these and pulls himself onto the seat. Delighted, he looks towards Deirdre and Mia screeching loudly and bouncing on his seat.

?

Reflection: Do I give children opportunities to set and pursue their own learning goals?

Learning experience 58: The winning tower

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Patrick, Zyta and Johnny (each almost 3 years) are making a big tower. They talk to Aileen, the playgroup leader, about it and occasionally invite her to add a block or two to their construction while warning her to be careful! Johnny explains that they made it because he and Patrick (cousins) stayed in a big hotel on their holidays that was like a tower. It's 'normous (enormous) tower, isn't it, and we made it all by ourselves, Patrick notes looking at Aileen. Zyta draws Aileen's attention to the coloured blocks they used in the tower and comments: It's got loads o' (of) colours like red and green and orange and … and it could win a big medal. Johnny adds, We did good job. Aileen suggests she could photograph the children with their tower. Using the digital camera, computer and printer, Aileen makes three copies of the photograph, and offers the children the opportunity to include them in their portfolios. Alongside the photograph, she writes each child's comment about the tower. The children tell Aileen that they'd like to add the photographs and comments to their learning portfolios. Meanwhile, Aileen makes some notes in her practitioner's file about each child's concentration to detail in building the tower and their ability to work together.

Through previous observations and conversations with Zyta, Aileen knows she is competitive and likes to be 'the best'. While Zyta's reference to getting a medal here reinforces this assessment, Aileen records how working collaboratively with Patrick and Johnny seemed to lessen her wish for Aileen to comment on how 'good' the tower was and what a great job she had done in building it. Aileen makes a note on her weekly plan to create more opportunities for co-operative learning for Zyta.

?

Reflection: Do I create a climate in which children feel confident to make decisions about what should go in their learning portfolios?

Learning experience 59: Autumn pictures

Theme: *Exploring and thinking*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 4

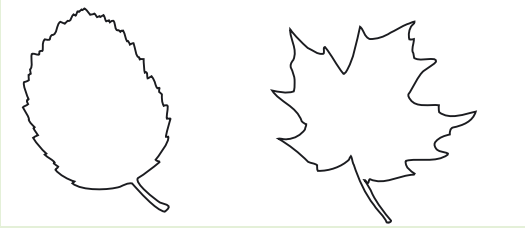
Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

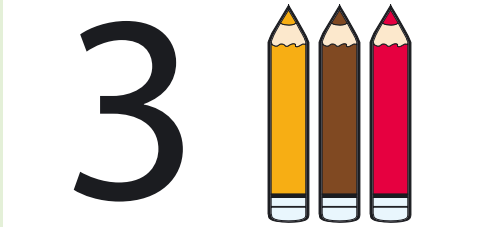
Ms. O'Connor, the senior infant teacher, notes that Val (5 years and 9 months) tends to contribute to class or group discussions only very occasionally. He has a stammer and his teacher is concerned that he may be becoming increasingly self-conscious about speaking in front of his peers.

As part of their work on autumn, the children are making pictures using leaf rubbings. Ms. O'Connor and the children talk about WILFs (What I am looking for) for their pictures which Ms. O'Connor writes on the blackboard. She draws pictures beside them to help the children read the WILF.

I did two leaf rubbings.



I used three autumn colours in my picture.



Since September, Ms. O'Connor has met with Val's parents on two occasions to talk about the approaches they use to help Val with his speech. They put her in touch with his speech therapist. Using strategies suggested by the therapist, she tries to give a few minutes of one-to-one attention to Val each day. One of the strategies she uses is to speak slowly to him while she acts as a role model helping him to slow his speech down. This helps Val in overcoming his stammer.

Today, while the children are doing their leaf rubbings, Ms. O'Connor kneels at Val's group and talks to him and the other children in the group about their pictures. She asks Val what he found easy and difficult in the activity, and what he is happy with in his picture. She comments on the colours he has used and the shapes of the leaves. She notes that asking Val questions seems to make him anxious, and in turn his stammer becomes more pronounced. He seems more comfortable when she uses a conversational approach, making comments to which Val can respond if he likes. Noticing this, she asks few questions and instead uses phrases and comments which invite Val to talk to her about his work using key words and phrases, such as autumn colours, reds and oranges, jagged edges, and gives Val's lots of opportunities to use these. The children want to use their leaf rubbings to create a large autumn picture outside their classroom door for their parents and the principal to see. As part of this, Ms. O'Connor plans to model using the autumn words and phrases for Val again and to give him small group opportunities to use these.

Ms. O'Connor makes the following notes in Val's record in her practitioner's file.

Val	30/09/08	Uses good pronunciation of autumn words and phrases when he speaks slowly and in small groups.
	Next steps	Comment on what Val is doing as a way of inviting him to talk.

?

Reflection: Am I open to 'messages' from children about how best to support them in their learning?

Conversations

What are conversations?

Adults and children, and children and children, talk to each other about what they are doing and thinking. These conversations complement all other assessment methods. For example, observations can alert the adult to a particular aspect of children's learning and development while follow-on conversations can give the adult a better understanding of what children can do or understand. Most conversations just happen while some are planned.

How do I use conversations for assessment?

The adult uses a variety of strategies to invite children into conversations. These include

- thinking aloud, for example, *I think I'll have to find another way to…*
- talking about what children are thinking, for example, *Have you any ideas?*
- reflecting back to children what they say or do
- responding to what children say by making comments, for example, *I love the seaside too*
- remaining silent while children think and then make a response
- agreeing or disagreeing
- expressing an opinion
- asking a question.

The adult uses a combination of these on a daily basis to find out what children are doing and why, to encourage them to share what they are thinking and feeling, and to help them to think imaginatively and creatively. He/she can use a photograph, a video-clip, a play moment, or samples of work to focus children. Using their responses, the adult gives feedback to the children and guides them in their learning. Children can also use these strategies. For example, they may question each other and/or the adult. The adult can help them to use questions to support their own learning by modelling good questioning and by giving them time and opportunities to ask questions.

The adult uses two types of questions:

- **Open questions** can have many answers which can be short or long. These questions can often consist of just one or two words such as *why? who?* and *what for?* The adult can use these questions to invite children to think about reasons, possibilities, opportunities, and solutions. Open questions can encourage children to be imaginative and creative in their thinking and to use more complex language.
- **Closed questions** usually require one short answer. Sometimes these questions have a single correct answer such as, *What did Jasper have for his breakfast?* and at other times they have a yes or no answer such as, *Did you like digging the tunnel?* The adult can use closed questions to find out what children have understood after taking part in an activity or event to help children recall and sequence events, or as a stimulus for discussion.

For more information on using questions, see *Assisting children's thinking* in the guidelines, *Learning and developing through interactions.*

With what age group of children can I use conversations?

Conversations can be used with babies, toddlers and young children. If children are not yet able to communicate effectively with language the adult interprets their attempts to talk and their non-verbal reactions.

Learning experience 60: Number chats

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Babies, toddlers and young children

Setting: Childminding

Bernie, a childminder, looks after Jack (16 months), Sorcha (3 years) and Rhiannon (5 years) in her home. Bernie plans lots of activities for the week to build on some of what Sorcha has been doing in playgroup, and Rhiannon in school.

On Monday they all go for a walk to the shops. On the way they count the red cars parked along the street; Rhiannon and Sorcha look for 1, 2 and 3 on car number plates (Rhiannon does this for 4, 5 and 6 too). Rhiannon spots numbers on houses and shop doors. They identify these and Bernie explains their purpose. They reach the post box. Sorcha and Rhiannon each take a letter for posting and Rhiannon notices a 5 on the stamp. They ask Bernie what the number is and she explains about the cost of the stamp. Bernie makes sure Jack is included by drawing his attention to things. From time to time she kneels beside Jack in his pushchair and points to and describes things around him.

On Wednesday Bernie bakes with the children. Jack sits at the table in his highchair and the girls sit on chairs in their aprons. They are making top hats. Bernie gives Jack a dish of softened fruit and a spoon for him to mix and eat while she and the girls count out bun cases, making sure there is one for each person and their mam, dad and siblings. How do we make these buns, Bernie?, enquires Rhiannon. Bernie explains. She adds the melted chocolate and the girls put a marshmallow in each case followed by a small strawberry, which they picked in Bernie's garden that morning.

On other days they look for numbers in the kitchen, for example on the washing machine dials, on food packets, and in story books. 2! What that for?, asks Sorcha as she and Rhiannon help Bernie load clothes in the washing machine and set the correct cycle. Bernie describes these experiences to Jack and involves him in the conversations. The children also help Bernie in her day-to-day activities in caring for the house and Bernie talks to them about how and what they are learning through these hands-on experiences.

?

Reflection: Do I encourage children to ask me questions as part of their conversations with me?

Learning experience 61: Afraid of the dark

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

Age group: Toddlers

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Kathleen, the playgroup leader, reads the story of *Can't You Sleep Little Bear* (Martin Waddell) to the nine children in the group (between 2½ and 3 years). Kathleen talks to them about the story. She uses a number of strategies to encourage them to talk, including thinking aloud with them. Kathleen notices that Killian who is usually talkative is quiet. After the discussion she talks to him. Killian becomes teary-eyed. She gently encourages him to share why he is feeling sad: ***I see you're sad at the moment Killian. I wonder why.*** Kathleen learns that he is worried about Little Bear in the story because he might be afraid again the next night.

Killian: I no like dark. It scary.

Kathleen: (Offers comfort and a listening ear.) ***It can be scary yes. That's why Big Bear put a big light in Little Bear's room, and then showed him the moonlight. Does your ma or da do something like that for you?***

Killian: I have light in my room but still scary.

Kathleen: ***Remember what Little Bear did when he was scared in the story? He told his daddy. Perhaps, if you feel scared you could tell your ma or da. Would that be a good idea?***

Killian nods in agreement.

The following day, using the story, *Can't You Sleep Little Bear,* Kathleen explores the feeling of being scared with the children. She asks them to think about times when they felt a little bit frightened. Many of the children tell stories about getting lost in the shop, losing their favourite toy and thinking they might not find it again, and hearing a scary noise. Killian shares his story of being scared in the dark like Little Bear. Other children agree about the dark making them feel frightened. They talk about things they can do to help when they feel scared, such as telling a parent or grandparent, keeping a flash lamp under the bed in case the electricity doesn't work, and words they can use to help them describe how they feel. Later, they learn about animals who love the dark. A few weeks later Killian informs Kathleen, I love dark now!

Kathleen makes notes in her file about Killian's fear of the dark and the progress he makes over the coming weeks in exploring this emotion. She does likewise for the other children.

Reflection: How can I help children share their experiences and feelings in a way that is appropriate for their stage of development?

Learning experience 62: Tapping into an interest

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

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

The junior infant children have been on a trip to an open farm. They have lots of photographs and Mr Shaw their teacher is using these to help them recall the experience, and to find out what they enjoyed and what they learned. He is working with a group of twelve children, while six children are playing in the farm corner and the other six are building a veterinary practice using small world toys and play-dough. The children talk about sitting beside their friends on the bus, eating lunch outside, wearing their wellies, feeding the lambs, holding fluffy chicks, and seeing the baby calves drinking from their mothers' udders. Then one child notes: The man told us that the donkey pulls a cart. Another child adds: That's 'cos *(because)* they don't have much tractors on that farm and that's what you do if you can't get a tractor. My granda told me that. Another comments: The man at the farm said there are not many donkeys left but my granda has hundreds. Mr Shaw encourages and assists the children to move beyond description and to hypothesise, imagine and speculate. He does this by using phrases such as, ***I wonder what was on the carts the donkey pulled. Suppose the farmer needed to plant more crops, I'm not sure how he would do that if he didn't have tractors. I wonder how the donkey might feel after his work on the farm.*** The children enter into a conversation about what life on a farm might have been like for their grandparents. When Mr Shaw poses the question, ***How could we find out?***, one little girl suggests asking them. This conversation heralds a class project on farm life when my granny and granda were young. In engaging with the project the children interview grandparents, look at old photographs, see, touch and find out about 'old' farm implements, learn farm songs, and build an 'old' farm with small world and construction toys. Throughout the project, the children learn new farm language and how farm life has changed since their grandparents were young, which helps them develop a sense of time.

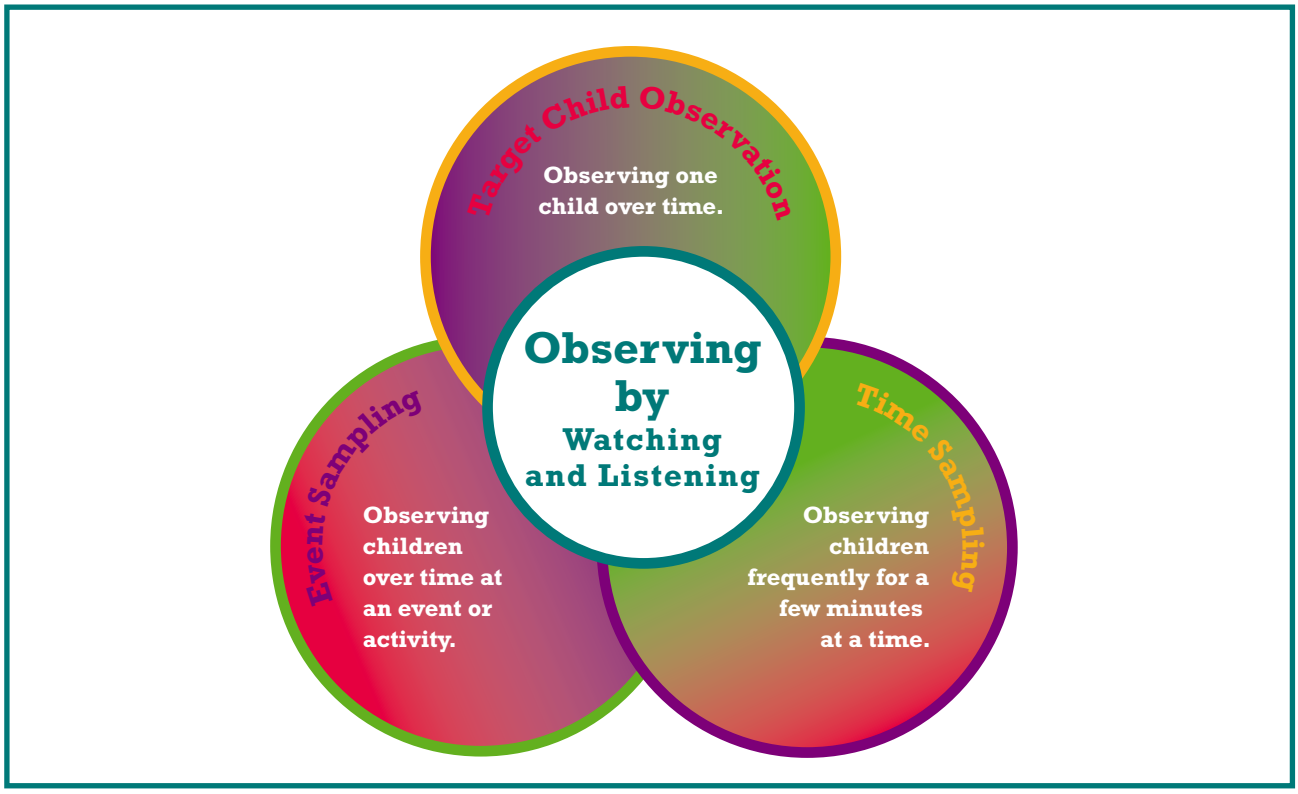
Reflection: Are children's conversations and interests a focus for further learning in my setting?

Observation

What is observation?

Observation involves watching and listening to children and using the information gathered through this to enhance their learning and development. The adult may use different types of observations depending on what he/she wants to find out. (See Figure 5.) Like conversations, observations can be planned or spontaneous and are best carried out by an adult who knows the children well.

Figure 5: Types of observation



How do I carry out observations?

Most observations are unplanned and happen during routines, discussions, activities, and events in the setting. While spontaneous observations can provide the adult with valuable information, planned observations can add more detail about what and how children are learning.

Through planned observations the adult focuses on children's facial expressions, gestures, body language, vocalisations, spoken words, actions, and their creations such as art, dance, music and song, pictures, and writing. Recording everything that the adult sees and hears is neither possible nor necessary. He/she decides what information is most important at any particular time in building a portrait of children's learning, and records this. Sometimes the adult makes short notes. At other times, he/she may make more detailed notes which can be used to tell the story of the involvement of an individual child or a group of children in a particular activity, task or play scenario. (See learning experience 65.) In the case of on-the-spot observations, often called anecdotal snapshots, the adult can, perhaps, write key words or phrases in a notebook, or on a piece of paper or stick-it, and, later, at a quiet time can use these to make notes in the children's portfolios. He/she may also take a photograph or make a short video-clip as a record. When working with children under six years of age it is important that the adult gives time and space to children to 'show' their learning and development.

With what age group of children can I use observation?

Observation can be used with babies, toddlers and young children. It is especially helpful with children who rely on non-verbal or preverbal communication.

Learning experience 63: I want that cube

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Babies

Setting: Full and part-time daycare (crèche)

Miriam, the crèche room leader, is encouraging Liam (10 months) to crawl. She knows he can do it as his mum has told Miriam about him crawling at home. For some reason he rarely crawls while in the crèche. Miriam places the sorting cube, that Liam loves to play with, out of his reach. It is near him although he will have to move closer to get it. Within a few seconds he shows his frustration as he yells and shakes his hands. He looks at Miriam as he yells louder. Miriam crawls to the toy and encourages him to crawl too: *Let's crawl together, will we?* She places the cube a little closer to him, all the time modelling crawling and encouraging Liam to have a go. He loses interest and picks up a spoon close by and bangs the floor with it. After lunch, as Miriam plays with another baby in the room, she observes Liam making one or two false starts at crawling. She moves a little closer so she can observe him better. He moves onto all fours and reaches forward while balancing himself with the other hand to grab the cube. Eventually, he makes it and Miriam claps her hands as he reaches the cube. Meanwhile, Lisa, the room assistant, recorded the achievement on video while Miriam observed and stayed ready to assist Liam if necessary. Miriam claps hands and congratulates Liam on his achievement. Liam claps too and laughs loudly. He proceeds to play with the cube. Miriam shares the footage on the video recorder with Liam's parents that evening and notes his achievement in his Record of Care. Over the coming days Miriam provides lots of opportunities that encourage Liam to crawl, and by the end of the following week he is delighted with his new mobility and the options for exploration that it brings!

?

Reflection: How can I use observations to greater effect in supporting and encouraging children to set their own learning goals?

Learning experience 64: Pilots are boys!

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

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Amy, Fionnán, Colm, and Róisín (between 2 years and 11 months and 4 years and 3 months) are playing outside. They are pretending they are going to France on an aeroplane. The playgroup leader, Joan, is recording their play using the video camera. Áine, the playgroup assistant, is playing with some of the other children and also keeping an eye on the play that is developing between Colm and the others. The children have arranged a number of props to set up the plane and now they are deciding roles. Colm is very clear that he is going to be the pilot and Fionnán is to be his assistant in the cockpit. Colm explains that the two girls can be air-hostesses, giving out the drinks and showing people what to do in an emergency.

Amy and Róisín are not happy with the roles they have been given. Amy wants to be a pilot too.

Colm: Girls can't be pilots!

Róisín and Amy: Yes they can.

Colm: You are the air-hostess and you help the people on the plane. Right? Pilots are boys. So, me and Fionnán have to be the pilots who fly. (Fionnán nods his head in agreement.)

Amy: We can be girl pilots. I'm not playing.

Amy storms off.

Róisín: Girls can be pilots if they want. Róisín pushes Colm and he pushes her back. Both children start to cry. Observing at a distance, Áine joins them and asks the children what happened. Amy notices this and comes back to join the group.

Róisín: Colm says girls can't be pilots.

Colm: Pilots are boys and she pushed me.

Róisín: He pushed me too.

Áine: ***Now guys you know there's no hurting each other here, don't you? I get really upset when I hear you are being unkind to each other. Let's see if we can sort out this problem. You all want to be pilots, is that right?***

Amy, Fionnán, Colm, and Róisín nod their heads in agreement.

Áine: ***I went on my holidays to America last year and the pilot was a girl so I know that girls can be pilots too. We know that boys and girls can do lots of different jobs. Remember the story about Rosie the truck driver who took her truck to buy food for her neighbour's cows? Or what about Bert the nurse who looked after Neena when she broke her leg and had to go to the A and E? So I don't think that only boys can be pilots. Now let's see how we can sort this problem. Have you any ideas on what we can do?***

Róisín: Me and Amy could be the pilots and the boys could be in the plane.

Colm: Not fair, I want to be a pilot too.

Áine: Could there be two planes?

Amy: Yeah. You and Fionnán be the boy pilots in that plane. And me and Róisín will be pilots on the girl plane.

Colm: Yeah, and we'll fly to France together. Me and Fionnán will go in front and you can follow us.

Fionnán: Yeah.

Róisin: And we'll park the planes beside each other in the plane park and go shopping. We'll give you money.

Áine: ***That sounds like a good plan.***

The four children busy themselves building the second plane and soon all four pilots are in the air on their way to France.

When the children go home Áine and Joan look at the video footage. They take four photographs from it and use these to record a story of the children's learning experience. They make a copy of the story for each child. The children show and tell their story to their parents, and then add it to their learning portfolios. In their practitioner's file, Áine and Joan make a note of the children's ideas about what boys and girls can and can't do. They plan to get more posters and stories of males and females in non-stereotypical roles and to discuss these with the children. They also plan to develop some play scenarios in which children's ideas about gender stereotyping are challenged.

?

Reflection: How can I show respect for children's play and their ideas while helping them to work through a problem to find a solution which works for everyone?

Learning experience 65: Look, the ball spins!

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

Mary, the pre-school leader, creates the following story to document Claire's, Robert's and Kyle's learning through an activity at the water table.

Photo 1
Twins Claire and Robert (4 years) and their friend Kyle (nearly 3 years) are playing at the water tray. They are filling and emptying containers and pouring water into waterwheels and watching them turn.

Photo 2
The children experiment placing different objects such as balls and cubes in the waterwheels. Claire likes to use the teapot to pour water. Robert joins her in doing this. He uses the small watering can from the vegetable patch to put water over the blocks he has placed in the waterwheel. Kyle watches, quietly choosing not to do any pouring at the waterwheel.

Photo 3
Claire picks up an orange ball and puts it on top of the waterwheel. Robert and Kyle watch as she pours water from the teapot. The ball begins to rotate at the top of the waterwheel. Mary, come quick. Look what happens, she shouts excitedly. Mary kneels down to see what is happening. Kyle kneels too. Mary asks Claire to pour more water. They all watch carefully as the ball rotates. ***My goodness, look at that,*** responds Mary. Robert pours more water on top of his cubes. Mine don't spin. That's not fair, he concludes. ***Maybe try a ball like Claire did,*** Mary suggests. Robert takes out the cubes and inserts the ball he has been holding in his hand. He pours water over it with the watering can and it begins to spin too. Yes, shouts Robert in delight. Kyle smiles. He visits the water tray again by himself later in the day and tries out the spinning balls.

Mary shares the story and the photographs with the children the next day. They put the story on display on the pre-school wall. Over the next few days Mary and the children investigate further why the cube wouldn't spin while the balls did.

?

Reflection: How can I make time to document some of children's learning and development using the storytelling approach?

Learning experience 66: Including others

Theme: *Identity and Belonging*, Aim 3 and Learning goal 5

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

Five of the nine girls from senior infants are playing in a group outside at lunchtime. Miss Davison is on yard duty. She overhears another girl, Louise, trying to join them. Louise's best friend Síle is absent today. The girls tell Louise that they don't want to play with her. Miss Davison immediately goes to Louise and acknowledges her hurt: *Louise, I can see that you are feeling sad and lonely. I need someone to help me mind everyone in the yard. Would you like to help me please?* Miss Davison and Louise keep each other company for the remaining few minutes of lunchtime. After lunch Miss Davison tells Louise's teacher about the incident in the yard. Later that day the teacher organises the children for circle time. She replaces her planned work with the discussion: *What do we do if someone wants to join in our play and we already have enough people?* She introduces the discussion using Ruby the class life-sized doll. Ruby tells the children about having to sit by herself one day on a school trip. She describes feeling very upset and wishing she was at home with her Mam and Gran. The teacher asks the children what Ruby's school-mates could have done to help her feel better. They suggest strategies such as taking turns to sit with her, singing songs together so that everyone was involved even if someone was sitting on his/her own, or taking a teddy to sit with. The teacher and children develop this conversation further over the following days.

The teacher notes in her planner to check how Louise copes socially on future days, and especially when Síle is absent. She also makes a note in her practitioner's file.

?

Reflection: How can I make greater on-the-spot use of assessment information I gather through watching and listening to children?

Eispéireas foghlama 67a: Mothúcháin a chur in iúl

Téama: *Cumarsáid*, Aidhm 1 agus Sprioc foghlama 1

Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí

Suíomh: Seisiún naíonra

Freastalaíonn Caoimhín (3 bliana d'aois) ar naíonra. Is breá leis ceol. Phléigh a thuismitheoirí leis an stiúrthóir, Eimear, an chaoi a bhfuil sé deacair air a mhothúcháin a chur in iúl i gceart agus an chaoi a gcuireann sé sin as dó. Le cúpla seachtain anuas bhí Eimear ag múineadh amhrán do Chaoimhín agus do na leanaí eile sa ghrúpa i dtaobh mothúcháin éagsúla. Bhí úsáid á baint acu as uirlisí ceoil freisin fad is a bhí na hamhráin á gcanadh acu agus bhí siad ag bogadh leis an gceol chun cuidiú leo mothúcháin éagsúla a chur in iúl. Lena linn seo go léir, agus le linn am súgartha, bhí Eimear ag breathnú ar Chaoimhín chun a fháil amach conas a chuir sé é féin in iúl. Ghlac sí nótaí mionsonraithe mar gheall ar a eispéiris foghlama. Léirigh na nótaí sin go raibh dul chun cinn á dhéanamh ag Caoimhín ag léiriú do na leanaí eile conas a bhraith sé. Chuir Eimear an t-eolas seo in iúl dá mhamaí agus dá dhaidí an chéad uair eile a bhuail sí leo.

Samplaí de nótaí Eimear ina comhad cleachtóra.

Dé Luain 18 Feabhra, 12.10 i.n. Súgradh lasmuigh
Bhí Caoimhín ag súgradh ina aonar sa chlais ghainimh. Rinne sé an gaineamh a chur isteach i dtrucail. Tháinig Anraí agus Sorcha sall chun cuidiú leis. Dúirt Caoimhín, "Ná déan" agus rinne buicéad eile in aice leis a thairiscint dóibh.

Dé Céadaoin 27 Feabhra, 9.40 r.n. Súgradh laistigh
Bhí Caoimhín, Eoin, Niamh, agus Amy ag imirt le foireann taeghréithe. Thug Eoin cupán tae do Chaoimhín. D'fhiafraigh Amy de Eoin an bhféadfadh sí roinnt tae a bheith aici. Rinne Eoin neamhaird den iarratas seo agus d'éirigh Amy corraithe. Rinne Caoimhín a chupán tae a thairiscint di.

Ábhar Machnaimh: An gcuirim am ar leataobh chun athbhreithniú a dhéanamh ar mo bhreathnadóireachtaí ar eispéiris foghlama na leanaí mar bhealach le feiceáil cén dul chun cinn atá ar siúl acu?

Learning experience 67b: Sharing emotions

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

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (naíonra)

Caoimhín (3 years) attends a naíonra. He enjoys responding to music. His parents have discussed with Eimear, the stiurthóir (playgroup leader), how he finds it difficult to express his emotions clearly and how this frustrates him. Over recent weeks Eimear has taught Caoimhín and the other children action songs about different emotions. They have also been using instruments while singing the songs and moving to different pieces of music, in order to help them express different feelings. Throughout these experiences, and during play, Eimear has been observing Caoimhín to see how he expresses himself. She makes detailed notes about some of his learning experiences. This documentation shows the progress Caoimhín is making in showing his peers how he feels. Eimear shares this information with his mammy and daddy the next time she is talking to one of them.

Examples of Eimear's notes in her practitioner's file.

Monday 18 February, 12.10 p.m. Outside play
Caoimhín plays by himself in the sand pit. He shovels sand into a play truck. Anraí and Sorcha come over and try to help him. Caoimhín says, Ná déan (don't) and offers them a spare bucket beside him.

Wednesday 27 February, 9.40 a.m. Indoor play
Caoimhín, Eoin, Niamh, and Amy are playing with the tea set. Eoin serves Caoimhín tea. Amy asks Eoin can she have some tea, Eoin ignores the request and Amy gets upset. Caoimhín offers her his cup of tea.

? *Reflection: Do I take time to review my detailed observations of children's learning experiences as a way of seeing the progress they are making?*

Setting tasks

What does setting tasks involve?

Children learn by doing things. Setting tasks for assessment purposes involves the adult in designing activities to gather information on a specific aspect of learning and development. Sometimes the adult might set tasks at the end of a particular period of time or after a piece of work or project on a topic has been done.

How do I set tasks?

The adult decides what information he/she wants to gather about children's learning and development. Knowing this, the adult designs tasks which capture children's interests and excite them, and which involve children using familiar materials and objects. The adult explains the tasks to the children. While the children are completing the tasks the adult watches and listens to what they say and do. All the time, he/she answers questions the children may have and encourages them.

With what age group of children can I use tasks?

Tasks can be used with babies, toddlers and young children.

Learning experience 68: What's inside the feely bag?

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking*, Aim 4 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Babies and young children

Setting: Childminding

Mary looks after Chris (14 months), who has Down syndrome, and his sister Tamzin (nearly 4 years) in her own home. Chris is sitting on the carpet in the living room propped up by cushions. Mary sits on the floor beside him and invites Tamzin to join them. Mary has a *Feely Bag* with lots of items inside which she collected around the house.

Mary: ***Chris and Tamzin look,*** (giving the bag a shake), ***what do you think is inside?***

Tamzin: Let me see Mary.

Mary: ***Okay, now eyes closed as you pop your hand in and feel something. Can you think what it is?***

Tamzin: (Shuts her eyes and feels inside the bag.) OOOH! I feel something fluffy and furry. Is it a cat?

Mary: ***I'm not sure. Could it be a cat?***

Tamzin: I don't know. (Takes the object out of the bag.) It's a glove. Silly me. (Hands the glove to Chris.)

Chris stretches forward excitedly and takes the glove with the soft fur trim from Tamzin. He touches the fur tentatively, gurgles noisily, and hands the glove to Mary as he turns his attention back to Tamzin and the bag.

Mary: ***Let's give Chris a go now shall we?***

Chris eagerly dips his hand into the bag and takes out the lid of a biscuit tin. Turning the lid over he catches his reflection and stares at it before handing the lid back to Mary.

Mary: ***Who is that?*** (Offers the lid back to Chris and holds it so he can see himself.)

Tamzin: Let me see too. Look it's you Chris, look. And it's me. (Leans in close to Chris so they can both see themselves in the lid.)

Tamzin then hits the lid with her hand making a loud noise. Chris looks startled and whimpers. Mary takes the lid and taps it again slightly quieter and explains to Chris what she is doing. Chris shows he is not interested in the lid. Instead, he returns to the bag and takes out a sealed plastic cup containing dried pasta. He gives the cup a shake and, hearing the noise that the pasta makes, he smiles and does it again and again. This continues until Chris and Tamzin have removed all the items from the *Feely Bag*. Tamzin then proceeds to put each item back in the bag, and begins the activity again.

In Chris' daily record Mary notes.

- *Excited and curious about the Feely Bag.*
- *Sat up well with support from the cushions.*
- *Was apprehensive of loud noise.*

Mary sends the daily record home, and also refers to the experience with the Feely Bag when she talks to Chris' dad on Friday about what Chris and Tamzin have been doing that week when he collects the children. Chris' dad uses this information to update the physiotherapist on Chris' progress.

?

Reflection: Do I use objects and activities that interest children and capture their curiosity when setting tasks to gather information about how well they are getting on?

Learning experience 69: A fun outdoor challenge on camera

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Toddlers and young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

Liam and Jean, two of the pre-school staff, and the sixteen toddlers and young children (between 2½ and 4 years) are playing outside. Liam surprises the children with new, large, soft balls. The children are delighted with the balls, grabbing one each and beginning to throw, kick and roll them. The balls are available to the children each day when they're outside. Liam sets tasks on occasion to provide focused opportunities for the children to develop hand-eye co-ordination skills, and for him to build up a picture of their progress in these skills and how he can help the children.

Outside on Monday, Liam and Jean explain to the children that they are going to play some rolling games. They will roll their soft ball in front of them, to the side, and to each other. Dividing the group in two, Liam asks the group of eight children working with him, ***I wonder how many balls we will need?*** Five. No, three. Five Liam, come the responses. ***Let's get five and see if we have enough,*** he responds. Two children count out five and bring them to Liam. In turn, he invites each child to take one. Realising there aren't enough, the children ask him to get more! They talk about needing one for each person. A similar conversation takes place in Jean's group.

Sorted with the balls, the children spend the next few minutes rolling their balls. Laughter breaks out as balls hit people's feet and go off in lots of directions. This instantly sends the children running. Some children show frustration when their balls don't go in the direction they want. Liam and Jean empathise with them and offer support. They model rolling.

Over the coming weeks Liam and Jean plan a number of rolling activities, and then move to throwing in order to develop the children's co-ordination skills. They use a variety of objects such as beanbags, balls of different sizes, and soft toys. They record the children on video in the first week and again four months later. They show the video footage to the children and talk to them about how well they have learned to roll and throw. The children love seeing the footage and comment: Look at my throw! That was 'normous *(enormous).* My brover *(brother)* can't do it.

?

Reflection: How can I make better use of video footage to help me extend children's learning and to show the children the progress they are making?

Learning experience 70: A rainbow of colours

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (playgroup)

Ten children (between 3 years and 4 years and 4 months) attend the playgroup. Eilis, the playgroup leader, noted the children's excitement and interest the day they saw a rainbow in the garden. She immediately brought crayons and paper outside and the children each drew their own rainbow as they observed it in the sky. She noted their interest in some of the names of the colours, especially indigo and violet. Over the next few weeks Eilis plans a number of experiences designed to help the children learn more about colours.

With Eilis' assistance the children talk about and name colours as they walk in the nearby park, do various painting and play-dough activities, sort vegetables and fruit in the play supermarket, and make costumes for Cinderella's ball. They also experiment with mixing colours, and declare that they have done 'magic' when they generate, under Eilis' guidance, green from a mixture of blue and yellow, and orange from a mixture of red and yellow. As the month progresses Eilís sets up colour areas in the room. Each area features a character such as Blue Bird and Red the Fire Engine, as well as objects in the matching colours. During the following weeks she uses a variety of tasks to assess the children's ability to match, name and select individual colours. One of these involves a sock shop which the children enjoy. Each day she asks two children to play the shopkeeper role. The customers (including Eilís) ask for particular colours of socks. Eilís observes how each shopkeeper fills the customer orders. As the days progress, she notices that some children begin to request socks with particular patterns and combinations of colours and, not content with the range on offer in the shop, bring socks from home to the playgroup! A busy shop selling multicoloured socks and socks with exotic designs is soon trading in the playgroup. News spreads, and the children's parents and minders visit to make purchases as they drop off and collect the children. Building on this, Eilís shares stories with the children that include references to patterns, and she introduces them to factual books which illustrate patterns on animals' coats.

In her practitioner's file Eilís makes a checklist to record her observations in the sock shop during the course of the week, and uses this information to plan further colour and pattern experiences.

Exploring and Thinking, Aim 1 and Learning goal 1, Sock shop

	Date - Oct	red	orange	yellow	violet	green	blue	purple	brown	black	while	stripey	spotty
Fion	15	√	√	√							√		√
Deirdre	15	√				√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Sasha	16	√	√	√	√	√	√		√	√			√
Billy	16	√					√						
Yussef	17	√	√	√		√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
George	17		√	√		√	√						√
Alisha	18												
Cara	18												
Leon	19												
Aesha	19												

Reflection: Do I set tasks which capture the children's interest and imagination?

Eispéireas foghlama 71a: Forbairt scríbhneoireachta

Téama: *Cumarsáid*, Aidhm 2 agus Sprioc foghlama 4

Aoisghrúpa: Leanaí

Suíomh: Rang naíonáin (Gaelscoil)

Tá rang naíonáin á mhúineadh ag Iníon Uí Mhurchú i nGaelscoil. An tseachtain seo bhí sí féin agus an rang ag léamh agus ag plé an scéil, *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Mar chuid de seo bhí plé ann i dtaobh céard a dhéanfadh na trí bhéar dá mbeadh fhios acu cá raibh cónaí ar Goldilocks. Chuir siad tuairimí in iúl maidir lena dtarlódh agus ceann de na moltaí ná go ndéanfadh na béir praiseach de theach Goldilocks. Thug Iníon Uí Mhurchú tasc do na leanaí agus d'iarr orthu scéalta a scríobh faoi *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar*. Thug sí tascanna éagsúla do leanaí éagsúla sa rang. Do roinnt de na leanaí thug sí sé phictiúr chun iad a chur in ord an scéil agus chun an focal cuí a roghnú ó liosta focal le cur faoin ngrianghraf cuí. Scríobh grúpa eile leanaí an scéal ina bhfocail féin ina leabhair – leabhair a raibh cruth teachín tuaithe orthu. Scríobh an tríú grúpa leanaí an scéal ina bhfocail féin agus rinne iarracht a shamhlú conas mar a bheadh an scéal dá dtabharfadh na béir cuairt ar theach Goldilocks. Chuir an múinteoir na príomhfhocail agus na priomhfhrásaí ar fáil bunaithe ar phlé an ranga.

D'imigh Iníon Uí Mhurchú ó ghrúpa go grúpa de réir mar a d'oibrigh na scríbhneoirí óga ar a scéalta. Spreag sí iad le litriú a úsáid nuair nach raibh an focal a bhí á lorg acu ar an gclár bán. Uaireanta bhí sí ag smaoineamh os ard in éineacht leo chun cuidiú leo deireadh an scéil a phleanáil: ***Chuir Goldilocks glaoch ar a mamaí nuair a chonaic sí an praiseach a bhí déanta!*** Gach lá ag am inste scéil thug sí an deis do sheisear a scéalta a léamh, ag léiriú a gcuid leabhar nó na pictiúir a chuir siad in ord an scéil. Gach tráthnóna nuair a bhí na leanaí imithe abhaile scríobh sí cuntas gearr ar scríbhneoireacht na sé leanbh agus chuir leis an eolas a bhí ar taifead aici cheana féin faoina scileanna scríbhneoireachta. Chuir sí freisin cóip d'obair na leanaí ina bhfillteáin oibre.

Sampla de nótaí Iníon Uí Mhurchú ar scéal Mheadbh ina comhad cleachtóra.

> *10 Márta 2009: Choinnigh sí na buncharachtair mar an gcéanna; thug sí isteach carachtar amháin nua (mamaí Goldilocks) ar bhealach loighciúil. D'úsáid sí a litriú féin ag léiriú feasacht mhaith fóineolaíochta. Chuir sí ceithre abairt nua sa bhreis leis chun deireadh eile a chur leis an scéal. Dul chun cinn an-mhaith.*

Ábhar Machnaimh: Conas a bhainfidh mé úsáid níos fearr as eolas measúnaithe chun tascanna éagsúla a thabhairt do leanaí éagsúla agus ar an gcaoi seo cuidiú leo lena bhfoghlaim agus a bhforbairt?

Learning experience 71b: Emergent writing

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 4

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (Gaelscoil)

Iníon Uí Mhurchú is a senior infant teacher in a Gaelscoil. This week she and her class have been reading and discussing the story, *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar.* Part of this has involved the children speculating about what the three bears might do if they knew where Goldilocks lived. They predict many actions for her some of which involve a messy ending for her house. Iníon Uí Mhurchú sets the children a task that involves them in writing stories about *Goldilocks agus na trí bhéar.* She differentiates the task for the class. Some children are given six pictures to sequence the story and to write the relevant word for each from a list. Another group of children write the story in their own words in their books, shaped like a cottage. A third group of children write the story in their own words, including how they imagine the story might end with the bears visiting Goldilocks' house. The teacher provides key words and phrases based on the class discussions.

Iníon Uí Mhurchú moves from group to group as the young writers work on their stories. She encourages them to try spellings when their words are not on the whiteboard. She sometimes thinks aloud with them to help them plan their story ending: ***Goldilocks rings her mammy when she sees all the fuss!*** Each day at story time she invites six children to read their stories, showing their books or sequenced pictures. Each afternoon when the children have gone home she adds a comment on the writing of the six children to the information she has already recorded about their writing skills. She also adds a copy of the children's work to their learning portfolios.

Example of Iníon Uí Mhurchú's notes on Meadbh's story recorded in her practitioner's file.

> *10th March 2009: Retained original characters; introduced new one (Goldilocks' mammy) in logical way. Used her own spellings showing good phonological awareness. Added four sentences for new story ending. Great progress.*

Reflection: How can I make better use of assessment information to differentiate for children's learning and development?

Testing

What is testing?

Ongoing observations and conversations with children provide the adult with rich information on children's progress and achievements as young learners. Testing, another assessment method, can help to confirm this information.

Testing in early childhood usually involves using a commercially produced set of tasks and/or questions to collect information about specific aspects of children's learning and development, such as motor and social skills, behaviour, oral language, and understanding. Some of the tests are known as standardised tests and are usually used in primary schools or for children with special educational needs. These tests are used, scored and interpreted in the same way across all settings that use them. The test scores compare children's learning and development with that of other children of the same age. It is important to remember that test scores for young children can be unreliable. It is also important to remember that, as tests are standardised for particular populations of children, the results for children who may have a different first language, for example, should be interpreted and used with care.

Together with information from other assessment methods, test scores can help identify children who might experience learning difficulties now or in the future. This is called screening[13]. Other tests, known as diagnostic tests, may be used with individual children (with parental permission) to help identify a specific difficulty and to provide supports and resources to minimise the potential impact of this on their learning and development.

How do I carry out testing?

Standardised and diagnostic tests may be used by professionals such as a speech and language therapist or psychologist when there are concerns about a child's learning and development. Primary school teachers working with junior and senior infants use tests for early literacy, numeracy and developmental skills, while special educational needs teachers use diagnostic tests. Many other adults working in out-of-home settings may not use tests.

Each test is designed for a particular purpose and should only be used for that purpose. When selecting tests for young children teachers need to choose those that are meaningful, interesting and inviting to children. The teacher also needs to be confident that all children can fully understand the language used in the test.

With what age group of children can I use tests?

Testing is used mainly with young children. Each test is designed for a particular age range of children.

Learning experience 72: Screening in senior infants

Theme: *Communicating*, Aim 2 and Learning goal 1

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (primary school)

Ms Clarke teaches 29 senior infant boys. As part of the school's assessment policy Ms Clarke uses a literacy screening test with the whole class in late January. When correcting the tests she identifies six boys who score below the test threshold. Through observations and conversations, she has been carefully monitoring these boys as she knows they sometimes find letter sounds challenging, and two require ongoing support in developing listening skills. She considers the possibility that their low scores on the test may be attributable to factors other than difficulties in literacy. She takes account of particular factors, such as the language, the complexity of the instructions, and the anxiety that the testing situation can create for some children. Having talked with the boys' parents, Ms Clarke refers them to the Learning-support teacher, Mrs Fitzgerald. After establishing a good relationship with the children this teacher carries out individual diagnostic tests.

Having considered all the available information, Mrs Fitzgerald invites the parents of the six boys to take part in an early intervention programme for 6-8 weeks, in order to assist them in supporting specific aspects of their children's learning. Ms Clarke and Mrs Fitzgerald also agree on some additional learning activities that Ms Clarke can use to work with the boys on both an individual and group basis.

At the end of the early intervention programme the six children are re-tested. Five now score well. While the sixth child has made some progress, Ms Clarke plans to continue to give one-to-one support to him in class. He will also have further diagnostic assessment and support with Mrs Fitzgerald.

Reflection: Does my school have a screening policy in place to help identify children who may need extra and/or specialised support?

[13] For information on screening in primary schools see page 78 in the document, *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007). This document states that schools should implement a screening policy in the second school year, preferably by February of the second term.

Learning experience 73: Supporting learning and development through an IEP

Theme: *Well-being*, Aim 1 and Learning goal 2

Age group: Young children

Setting: Sessional service (pre-school)

Eoin (3½ years) is attending the local pre-school. Eoin was recently diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Louise, the pre-school leader and Emily (Eoin's SNA), spend September gathering information on Eoin through direct observations while he takes part in various daily activities, routines and interactions with peers and adults. At the end of the month they meet to discuss how best to support Eoin's learning and development. They focus, in particular, on the challenges he experiences while playing and working with his peers.

Following this Louise and Emily meet with Eoin's parents. Eoin's mum outlines the treatments and therapies Eoin is receiving. An Individual Education Plan (IEP) is developed for the first term, with help from the Early Intervention Team in the local Health Service Executive office. Helping Eoin to interact with others is one of their goals. Louise designs a programme of activities with short-term objectives for Eoin that will enable him achieve them. These include using pictures to help Eoin understand different facial expressions and using social stories to support Eoin in coping with social situations. Louise and Emily identify a buddy for Eoin from among his peers who will join him in pair activities and play dates. Eoin's progress in interacting with others is documented and reviewed in January when some new short-term objectives will be developed in the IEP to help him interact with others.

? *Reflection: How can I use the information gathered from my observations to feed into the IEP and therefore help children with SEN to progress in their learning in a way which is most appropriate for them at a particular point in time?*

Learning experience 74: Working in a special education setting

Theme: Aims and Learning goals across the four themes

Age group: Young children

Setting: Infant class (special primary school)

Stephen (6 years) attends a special school. He has muscular dystrophy and mild general learning disabilities. His parents tell his teacher Linda that he loves his cat, Tabby and dislikes noise. Based on assessments of Stephen's learning and development, Linda and the team of therapists working in the school devise a programme of learning experiences for him.

Linda focuses on Stephen's language, his challenging behaviour, his motor skills, and his early reading. She observes, assesses and records his speech and language: he shows delayed expressive language, for example calling a train a choo choo. He also finds sentence structure challenging and experiences articulation difficulties, for example calling a doggy a goggy and substituting *t* for *s* and *ch*. Linda shares this information with the speech therapist Nora who carries out further testing and, using the information from this, designs a daily language and speech programme for Stephen.

Based on Kate's (Special Needs Assistant) and her own observations of Stephen's challenging behaviours, Linda changes Stephen's afternoon routine. She refers him to Joan the physiotherapist who takes Stephen to the clinic's hydrotherapy pool for two afternoons per week, and to Gill the occupational therapist who takes Stephen to the Snoozaleen Relaxation Room on two other afternoons.

To support the development of Stephen's motor skills Joan provides Linda with suitable physical exercises, which include altering the time he spends sitting and standing. To make it easier for Stephen to move around the classroom Gill investigates the possibility of accessing an electric wheelchair for him. She also organises a range of aids to help him overcome some of the difficulties he is experiencing with fine motor skills. These aids include a pencil-grip and a modified computer keyboard.

Finally, Linda's assessment of Stephen's early reading skills shows his sight-word recognition is confined to his own name. Various tests have shown that he also experiences challenges with visual discrimination, sequential memory, and auditory sequencing. Considering this information, Gill suggests that Linda would arrange for Stephen to have sensory integration sessions.

? *Reflection: How can I continually build the practice of interdisciplinary work in order to provide children, where necessary, with specialised support to help them progress in their learning and development?*

? **Thinking about my practice**

1. *Am I gathering information on children's learning and development using a range of methods?*
2. *How am I using this information to extend and enrich learning for each child?*

The challenges and strengths of assessment methods

As noted earlier, using a combination of assessment methods provides a detailed account of each child's learning and development. Table 14 sets out some of the challenges and strengths of self-assessment, conversations, observation, setting tasks, and standardised testing.

Table 14: Challenges and strengths

Method	Challenges	Strengths
Self-assessment	■ Can place too much emphasis on what children make or do without looking at why. ■ Children need time to develop skills to think about their learning.	■ Helps children develop an understanding of themselves as learners. ■ Encourages children to feel a sense of pride and achievement in themselves. ■ Enables children to take greater responsibility for their learning. ■ Makes learning more enjoyable and motivating.
Conversations	■ Children's developing ability to communicate influences what information they can share and how. ■ The adult needs to listen carefully to how and what children communicate. ■ The adult requires time to develop skills to encourage and enable children to share insights on their learning and development through talking. ■ Can be time-consuming. ■ Can be difficult to do with a large group.	■ Gives children opportunities to talk about their work, experiences, family, likes, and dislikes. ■ Provides information about why children reacted in a particular way, about what they did and said, or how they made things.
Observation	■ Planned observations and especially target child observations require time. ■ The adult requires time to develop skills in recording key pieces of information. ■ The adult needs to be aware of what information he/she is looking for, and to be mindful of how that influences the observations.	■ Can be spontaneous or planned, and can be carried out in a few seconds or minutes. ■ Provides information about the context in which children's learning and development takes place. ■ Gives immediate information about how and what children are learning and experiencing.
Setting tasks	■ Often requires particular resources. ■ The adult needs time to observe children taking part in the tasks, and where helpful, to talk to them.	■ Can provide samples of children's work as evidence of their learning and development. ■ Provides information about children's learning in activities which interest them.
Testing	■ Test scores can be unreliable. ■ Tasks and questions can lack meaning and relevance for children and may be culturally inappropriate. ■ Can be time-consuming.	■ Helps to identify children who may have learning difficulties. ■ Indicates specific learning difficulties.

Conclusion

Children, like adults, are natural assessors of their own progress and achievements. The adult can enrich and extend children's learning through assessment by identifying learning and development, feeding information back to children, celebrating their progress and achievement with them, and adapting practice and planning for further learning. In this way, assessment helps the adult create portraits which show the richness of children's learning and development. In doing this, assessment also guides the journeys children make as they go.

Appendix 1: Resources for play

There are lots of toys and equipment that can be used for play, and arranging and resourcing a quality play environment need not be expensive. Many of the most useful play props are low-cost, can be found in the natural environment, or can be recycled from homes and businesses. Open-ended materials such as junk, recyclables and boxes allow for great scope in children's play. Many of them cost very little, and provide children with endless opportunities to use their imaginations. Parents and children can be asked to contribute to building up play resources as can local businesses, who often throw out materials which could be very useful to children in their play. Local charity shops and school and community jumble sales are another possible source of materials. This list of resources is not intended to be exhaustive; it is provided to give some ideas to get you thinking. As always, children's safety is a priority so keep this in mind when choosing resources. Also, remember that play props and materials should reflect a variety of backgrounds, cultures, abilities, genders, and family structures.

Table A: Play resources

Type of play	Babies	Toddlers	Young children
Creative play	■ See other sections. Many of the items listed can be used in creative play.	■ See other sections. Many of the items listed can be used in creative play.	■ See other sections. Many of the items listed can be used in creative play.
Games with rules	■ interactive games – *Peek-a-boo, Hide and seek,* making faces, singing, story telling, nursery rhymes	■ word games ■ card games like picture snap ■ matching games ■ pictures of rhyming words – cat, mat, house, mouse, etc. ■ pretend props as all imaginary play has rules of behaviour (See resources listed below.) ■ games like *Row, row, row your boat* ■ social games, welcome songs, sharing games ■ games like *Simon says, I spy* or *Follow the leader*	■ computer games ■ bingo, lotto games ■ board games – snakes and ladders, dominoes, drafts, playing cards ■ word and number games and puzzles – building words and making nonsense sentences with cardboard letters ■ *Hide and seek*, chase ■ skittles, football ■ giant snakes and ladders, hop scotch to play outdoors (These could be painted on the ground.)
Language play	■ picture books (wipeable) with pictures of real things, or with very short stories, books with different textures, bath books ■ a CD player and a variety of CDs ■ puppets ■ books with songs, rhymes, jingles, skipping, clapping rhymes ■ CDs with songs, chants, rhymes	■ all kinds of books, especially ones on first experiences – going to the doctor, the dentist, the hospital, going on an aeroplane, moving house, getting a new baby, losing a loved one ■ tapes or CDs ■ toy phones or microphones or old real ones ■ CDs that compare and explore sounds in the	■ all types of books, books with no words that can prompt the child to make up the story, books that represent the interests of children – tractors, pets, occupations, friends, travel, books written in the home languages of the children ■ books about feelings ■ multicultural puppets with realistic features ■ materials to make own books about themselves, their families,

Type of play	Babies	Toddlers	Young children
Language play ***(continued)***		home, environment – dogs barking, child laughing, water running, phone ringing ■ materials, props to dramatise stories/things that happen	their interests, their friends, their skills, and their abilities ■ families of rhyming words ■ story boards (large pieces of cardboard painted with open-ended landscapes) with small props (small world figures and animals) that can be used to develop different stories/scenarios ■ pretend play props (see below.) ■ street games, rhymes – *Ring-a-ring-a rosy, Red rover* ■ story bags (pillow cases, coloured drawstring bags) with books (one fiction and a related non-fiction one in each) along with supporting materials – puppets, pictures, photos, related games, activities, paper, colours
Physical play	■ balls, blocks, hollow cubes, strongly strung beads ■ bath toys, jugs/ containers for pouring ■ ride on and push and pull along toys, empty boxes and cartons with string attached that can be pulled along ■ push up/pop up toys, activity centres, mobiles to hang over cots ■ soft play mats ■ musical instruments, musical activity toys ■ tunnels, tents, large cardboard boxes ■ shakers, rattles, teethers, mouthing toys ■ floor level safety mirror with hand rail ■ things to smell, taste, touch and listen to ■ opportunities to sit, crawl, shuffle, stretch, experience cause and effect ■ cornflour, gloop, play-dough, water ■ dancing, going for walks, swings, swimming ■ activity mats/circles/ gyms	■ construction toys (tool set, milk cartons, shoe boxes, hard hats, dumper trucks, measuring tapes, interlocking toys, large and small blocks, bricks) ■ a variety of physical features – slopes, steps, low walls ■ balls, stacking toys, large threading beads ■ ride-on toys, tricycles, pull and push toys, small climbing frames, slides, carts, buggies, trailers and containers to transport materials ■ inset boards, jigsaws, simple puzzles ■ activity centres, spinning tops ■ chunky crayons, writing and mark-making materials, books, aprons, chalk, sand, water, paint (non-toxic), various kinds of paper, old magazines, large brushes, markers, glue, scraps of coloured material, blackboard and chalk, play-dough, lentils, pasta, safety scissors, clay, wood, twigs, leaves, stones, seashells, skin tone paints and pencils,	■ sand, water, stones, leaves, twigs, lentils, cornflower, pasta, flowers, grass, feathers, clay, dough, wood, pebbles ■ hoops, bean bags, balls, balancing beams, blocks, boxes, wheeled toys, tractors, bicycles, roller skates, slides, climbing frames, a basket ball hoop, skittles and other throwing games, relay games/ races, access to wide open spaces, traditional street games like skipping with a rope, hop scotch ■ model making equipment, sewing materials, sewing cards, peg boards, lacing materials, threading beads, empty spools, large and small construction materials, a real measuring tape, zips, buttons, paper clips, bottle caps, table top activities, sorting sets, interlocking bricks, matching games ■ jig-saws and play figures depicting a variety of positive images ■ laminated pictures of the children cut up and stuck on to cardboard to make jigsaws ■ science materials/sets, microscope, magnifying glass, magnets, old clocks ■ variety of paints, brushes, sponges, straws, pencils, textured materials like felt, cloth, seeds, velvet, corrugated paper, crayons/paints

Type of play	Babies	Toddlers	Young children
Physical play ***(continued)***	■ nesting/stacking toys ■ treasure baskets ■ shape sorters ■ chunky crayons, paper, chubby paint brushes and non toxic paints	mirrors for portrait painting ■ musical instruments and musical toys ■ a toy hammer and pegs ■ tunnels/barrels for climbing through, pop up tents, large empty cardboard boxes, slopes, steps, curves, structures for climbing on/over/under, opportunities to run, jump, climb, a traffic sign set, road markings ■ nests of shapes/hollow blocks ■ sand and water trays (or a basin/bath), a selection of sand equipment (baking tins, moulds, cutters, jugs, measuring spoons, spades, cups, sand and water wheels, buckets, colanders), water equipment (watering cans, balls, boats, plastic cars and trucks, washable dolls, tea sets, funnels, things that float/sink, plastic bottles, empty liquid soap bottles, bubbles) ■ different smelling materials and bottles ■ sound boxes (cereal boxes filled with different sounding things – pebbles, pasta) ■ matching games	that match children's skin tones, pencils, junk materials, stories, books, cardboard, old magazines, old wrapping paper, end lines of wall paper, paper plates, clay, chalk, dough, a variety of paper of different colours, sizes and textures, safety scissors (left and right handed), ink pads and stamps, sellotape ■ sand/water trays, an outside tap, hoses, plastic piping/tubing, gardening equipment, shovels,rakes, wheelbarrows, watering cans, seeds, a bird feeder/table, equipment to pour, measure, cut, manipulate, scoop, fill, pretend with, build with, make shapes with, containers of the same and different sizes/shapes ■ musical instruments, items that make noise (babies' rattles, wind chimes, bells), materials to make their own musical instruments (plastic bottles, pebbles, biscuit tins) ■ old machinery, wheels, old clocks, piping ■ computers, digital cameras ■ cooking ingredients, baking trays, spatulas, wooden spoons
Pretend play	■ soft toys, dolls, puppets (finger- and hand-held) ■ household items – pots, pans, wooden spoons, measuring cups, jugs, whisks, spoons, colanders, teapots ■ cardboard boxes ■ bunches of keys, empty containers with lids ■ wind up musical toys ■ tea sets, hats, shawls, blankets, buggies, beds, hammers	■ clothes, hats and other props, old curtains or sheets ■ small versions of real life kitchen equipment – pots, pans, utensils, toddler sized cookers and sinks, mirrors, a table, chairs, a sofa ■ tea sets, dressing up models of animals, vehicles, people, houses, farm sets, halting sites (representative of local communities)	■ culturally diverse cooking utensils, food packages, clothes, home props reflective of children's family experiences (real kitchen equipment, weighing scales, teapots, colanders, baking trays, woks, chopsticks, table and chairs, a sofa, an old hairdryer, a kettle, a toaster with the flex cut off), purses, empty food containers reflective of what children see their families using ■ restaurant, flower shop, office props, post office, travel agents, hospital, doctor, dentist, vet,

Type of play	Babies	Toddlers	Young children
Pretend play ***(continued)***	■ cars, tractors, trains, aeroplanes ■ safety mirrors	■ small brushes, mops, a real dustpan and brush ■ play houses, cubby/hidey holes ■ cuddly toys ■ sorting and posting boxes ■ a large safety mirror ■ old mobile phones, toy and real telephones, old computer keyboard ■ large cardboard boxes ■ fire station and shop props	chipper, pizzeria, social welfare office props ■ small tables, chairs, sofas, sinks ■ a picnic table, garden seat ■ a cash register, toy money ■ dressing up clothes that reflect children's experiences, old shoes, handbags, old mobile phones, old spectacles, cameras, saris, everyday clothes, hats, a clothes rail, a mirror, a dressing table, an iron and ironing board ■ a bench with pegs and a hammer, a drill, a hard hat, overalls ■ dolls with a variety of clothes ■ boy and girl dolls with a range of skin tones and hair types and realistic multicultural racial features, dolls that reflect children with SEN ■ a puppet theatre and puppets ■ buggies, cots, a doll/baby bath plus accessories, microphones, tape recorders, digital cameras ■ puppets, soft toys ■ small world materials – people, cars, animals, train sets, farm sets, a garage, road mat sets, a doll's house and furniture, dinosaurs, small world figures including people from different cultures and different disabilities including people in wheelchairs, with glasses, hearing aids, crutches ■ tree houses, dens, a playhouse inside and outside.

Appendix 2: Legislation, regulation and assessment

Legislation and regulations impact on assessment in out-of-home settings. At the **time of publication**, the following should be considered in relation to assessment:

- The Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1998)
- The Equal Status Act (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000)
- The Data Protection (Amendment) Act (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2003)
- The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Department of Education and Science, 2004)
- The Disability Act (Department of Health and Children, 2005)
- Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 2006).

The relevant aspects of each of these are outlined below.[14]

Education Act (1998)

In relation to young children attending primary schools, the Education Act (1998) requires principals and teachers to regularly evaluate students and to periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents. The implications of this requirement for teachers and schools include

- developing assessment procedures which provide an accurate account of children's progress and achievement
- creating and maintaining records of children's progress and achievement while they are attending the school
- providing parents with assessment reports which contain accurate and clearly accessible information about their children's progress and achievement

(NCCA, 2007, p. 95).

Equal Status Act (2000)

The Equal Status Act (2000) has implications for the assessment policy in settings. In particular, it requires settings to be aware of the effects of context, culture and language in assessing children's learning and development.

Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003)

Assessment information gathered and stored in an early childhood setting is subject to the terms of the Data Protection (Amendment) Act (2003). Parents have a right to information about their children which is stored. After the age of eighteen, children themselves have a right to the information. The setting needs to have procedures in place to ensure that assessment information is stored securely with limited access to it, and for an agreed period of time. When information is stored electronically, it should be backed up.

Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004)

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN) (2004) requires that where a child has or may have special educational needs an assessment of those needs should be carried out. With children not attending formal schooling this is the responsibility of the relevant health board. The Act requires

[14] For a fuller discussion of the implications of legislation for assessment practice in infant classes see Appendix C in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007).

primary schools to identify when a child is not benefiting from the education programme on offer and to investigate the reasons behind this. The school, or in the case of a child not at school the relevant health board, is mandated to ensure that an individual education plan (IEP) appropriate to the child is drawn up in consultation with the child's parents[15]. The Act outlines the statutory requirements for educational planning for children with special educational needs (SEN). It requires that a multidisciplinary assessment be carried out in situations where it is considered that the child may have special educational needs. An IEP must then be prepared for each child identified as having such needs. Discussion and agreement regarding the abilities, skills and talents, as well as the nature and degree of the child's special educational needs, together with an analysis of how these needs affect the child's learning and development is required. The plan must include these and must also specify goals for learning and development for the child over a period not exceeding one year. It must also specify the supports that need to be put in place to enable the child to participate in and benefit from education.

Disability Act (2005)

The Disability Act (2005) provides for the assessment of health and education needs for persons with disabilities, arising from their situation. The Act provides for access for people with disabilities to health and education services. In relation to educational needs, Part 2 Section 8 (9) states that where an assessment is applied for it must be carried out by or at the request of an assessment officer. For children in school the matter is referred to the principal. For children in other settings the National Council for Special Education deal with the matter.

Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations (2006)

The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations (2006) set out the regulations and requirements pertaining to all aspects of the operation of pre-school settings. Regulation 5 explicitly requires that:

> *A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and state of development of the child and the child's cultural context.*

To fulfil this requirement it is necessary for adults to engage in making important judgements about children's learning and development and how best to extend and enrich it. By implication this involves the adult in assessing learning and development. Indeed, the explanatory guide directs adults to *be pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's individual needs with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services* (p. 39).

[15] The use of IEPs as outlined in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN, 2004) is not yet enacted, and is therefore not currently a requirement of educational settings.

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