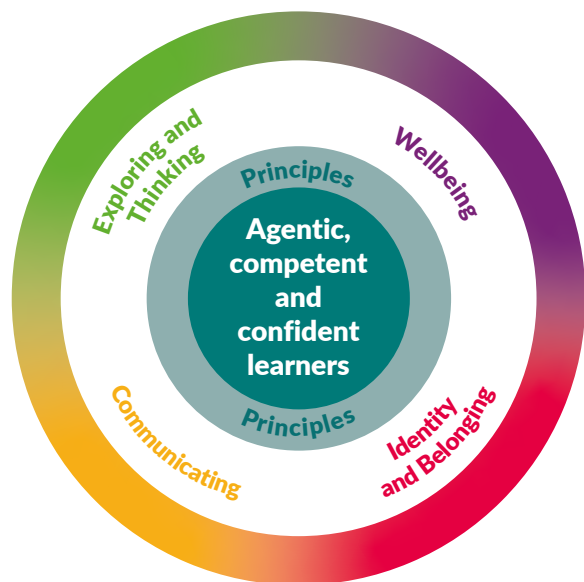


# Exploring Aistear's Theme of **Wellbeing** (2024)

*Research Foundations and  
Sample Learning Experiences*





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## Introduction

*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, originally published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in 2009, was updated by the NCCA in 2024. As part of the updating process a team of researchers from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, conducted a literature review entitled ***Literature Review to Support the Updating of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*** (French and McKenna, 2022) to provide a research base to inform the updating of *Aistear's* Themes (2009) of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking. Chapters on *Setting the Context* (French and McKenna, 2022) and *Addressing the invisibility of Babies and Toddlers in the Literature* (French in French and McKenna, 2022) were also included. The review provided key trends for consideration to enhance the four interconnected Themes of *Aistear* (2009) which describe important types of learning for babies, toddlers and young children, including dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge and understandings.

This booklet presents key findings from the Literature Review related to the Theme of Wellbeing for young children (ages 2.5 to 6 years), (French and Halligan in French and McKenna, 2022) and the additional emphasis on the focus on Wellbeing in Chapter 3, *Addressing the invisibility of Babies and Toddlers in the Literature* (French in French and McKenna, 2022). In alignment with the structure of the literature review, the booklet is presented under the four Aims of the Wellbeing Theme in *Aistear* (2009). It includes:

- a summary of the findings from the literature review in relation to the Theme of Wellbeing
- an update on the changes made to the Theme of Wellbeing in *Aistear* (2009) to that in *Aistear* (2024)
- sample learning experiences that illustrate what the updated Theme of Wellbeing might look like in the everyday lives of babies, toddlers and young children.

## References

Please note that the booklet does not include individual references of the empirical evidence that informed the Literature Review by French and Halligan in French and McKenna (2022) and French in French and McKenna (2022). For detailed source information, readers are encouraged to consult the original ***literature review***, where all references are comprehensively documented.

## Wellbeing

The review re-affirms the relevance of *Aistear's* Theme of Wellbeing and identifies areas to be updated. It highlights the importance of supporting babies, toddlers and young children's psychological and physical wellbeing from early infancy and throughout childhood. It states that it is important to maintain the dual focus on psychological wellbeing (including feeling and thinking) and physical wellbeing that was evident in *Aistear* (2009) in the updated version.

## **Aim 1: Children will be strong psychologically and socially**

### **Nurturing relationships**

The review highlights that every baby, toddler or young child is born with an attachment system that drives them to respond to the people that nurture and protect them. Early childhood relationships are central to their lives and affect later attachments and wellbeing. Just one nurturing person in a baby, toddler or young child's life can positively change the pathways of the brain to strengthen their ability to build relationships, adapt and learn. The review asserts that babies, toddlers and young children can flourish and reach their potential when greater attention is given to supporting those who nurture them.

### **Enabling attachments through a key person approach**

The review explains that the concept of the key person was developed to offset the negative impacts of abrupt changes in staff in out-of-home settings. Implementing a key person approach means assigning a dedicated educator to take special responsibility for a small number of babies, toddlers or young children. Ideally, the key person also engages with, and builds strong relationships with the family. A secondary or back up key person is available and all work collaboratively as part of a team. Enabling attachments through a key person approach contributes to the babies and toddlers and young children's sense of wellbeing.

### **Building relationships through a slow relational pedagogy**

The review highlights that the focus on relationships embedded in all of *Aistear's* Themes in 2009 should be maintained in the update with an added focus on slow relational pedagogy.

#### **Slow relationship pedagogy is about the key person:**

- building and nurturing trusting relationships between babies, toddlers, young children, their families, early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings, and other services in the community
- establishing routines and providing sensitive and responsive caregiving
- being physically and emotionally available and attuned
- slowing down and allowing time and opportunity to explore objects in a multi-sensorial way so that babies, toddlers and young children can smell, taste, hear, see, touch, reach, grasp, lift, and drop
- using all aspects of the daily routine to enhance a sense of wellbeing
- recognising the centrality of play
- supporting transitions
- respecting learning intentions and choices
- developing inclusive environments
- being a fun, interesting and interested companion.

*The review highlights the importance of recognising the physical and psychological vulnerability of babies, toddlers and young children in the update and the need for comfort, reassurance and affection while also acknowledging their confidence and competence.*

The review states that whilst *Aistear* (2009) focused on attachment, the process of building attachment could be strengthened in the update. Relationships and partnerships were other areas identified as requiring further consideration. The review highlights the importance of recognising the physical and psychological vulnerability of babies, toddlers and young children in the update and the need for comfort, reassurance and affection while also acknowledging their confidence and competence.

## Compassion, empathy and perspective taking through play

The review notes that Aistear (2009) recognised the value of play in developing friendships, knowledge, and understanding of the world. It expands on this by highlighting playful approaches and the educator's role in modelling democracy, perspective-taking, resilience, fairness, empathy, and compassion – key to nurturing babies, toddlers and young children's innate capacity for kindness.

Compassion, described as feeling for another, is seen as essential. While Aistear (2009) emphasised safe, secure environments where relationships thrive, the review suggests compassion should be made more visible in early childhood education. Understanding the person and context of an upsetting situation supports a compassionate response that can be tailored appropriately, such as a smile, kind word, or helping hand. Modelling compassion through social roles and drawing attention to opportunities for compassion (e.g. caring for a toy animal or defending a friend) are also encouraged.

The review defines empathy as the ability to understand another's point of view and highlights its role in fostering quality interactions, friendships and conflict resolution. Conversely, a lack of empathy can lead to aggression, bullying, emotional detachment and peer conflict. The review supports Aistear's (2009) existing emphasis on nurturing empathy in early learning and development.

*The review defines empathy as the ability to understand another's point of view and highlights its role in fostering quality interactions, friendships and conflict resolution.*

## Co-regulation to self-regulation

The review states that research has demonstrated that self-regulation is essential for developing and preserving health and wellbeing in childhood and across the lifespan. Self-regulation is the ability to regulate thoughts, feelings, and behaviour and it predicts future academic success, social and emotional wellbeing, occupational attainment, and risk-taking behaviour. The review clearly points out that self-regulation emerges from consistent co-regulation, where adults and babies, toddlers and young children work together, finding ways to resolve upsets and return to balance. Educators soothe babies, toddlers and young children when they are stressed. Over time they learn to self-soothe. As babies, toddlers and young children observe and interact with their peers, educators and other adults, they gradually move from the experience of being supported in managing their feelings, thoughts, and behaviour to developing the ability to regulate these more independently. Sensitive and skilful educators play a crucial role through observing and deciding when to step back and when to step in, to offer support, encouragement, guidance and protection. Other babies, toddlers and young children can help with co-regulation too. Ensuring babies, toddlers and young children feel respected, comforted and supported at all times including in times of stress is very important. Encouraging self-regulation skills through modelling, suggesting strategies, conflict resolution and providing frequent opportunities to practice these skills using play and playful approaches is vital. The review notes that the addition of a focus on co-regulation in the update of Aistear (2009) is important.

*The review clearly points out that self-regulation emerges from consistent co-regulation, where adults and babies, toddlers and young children work together, finding ways to resolve upsets and return to balance.*

## Transitions

The review signposts that babies, toddlers and young children experience many transitions, moving from home to setting (and home again at the end of the day), transitions during the day, room-to-room, and moving from one educational setting to another. It also indicates that a greater focus on transitions was needed in the update to better support babies, toddlers and young children through these changes.

A transition is a process of moving from one situation to another and taking time to adjust. During the day, routines that are consistent and calm help to alleviate the potential stress that exists for babies, toddlers and young children when faced with changes. They benefit from the security of knowing what comes next but also that the routine builds on their natural rhythms and can be flexible when required to suit them. Working in a slow, relaxed way supports transitions and emotional wellbeing.

*During the day, routines that are consistent and calm help to alleviate the potential stress that exists for babies, toddlers and young children when faced with changes.*

## Aim 2: Children will be as healthy and fit as they can be

### Environments that promote play and physical activity

The review emphasises that both emotional and physical health are crucial to wellbeing and clarifies the need to focus on both. The review states that:

- the physical environment is critical to promote participation, health and wellbeing
- educators and families must work together to support the physical wellbeing of babies, toddlers and young children. This includes their general health, rest, nutrition, resistance to infection, immunisations and physical activity
- not all ECEC settings provide for and encourage physical activity. Physical activity should be built into the daily routine for all babies, toddlers and young children
- movement and awareness of their bodies along with a sense of ownership and agency is at the heart of wellbeing, learning and development for babies, toddlers and young children
- outdoor experiences and play ensure babies, toddlers and young children can interact with nature and living things, which is key to their creativity and spirituality.
- babies, toddlers and young children need to engage in risky play experiences that are well-planned and exciting.

The review acknowledges that *Aistear* (2009) suggested various ways to enhance babies, toddlers and young children's physical activity and that this must be maintained and strengthened in the update, including through play and playful approaches.

*The review endorses the importance of the physical environment in promoting agency, wellbeing, participation and physical activity.*

The review endorses the importance of the physical environment in promoting agency, wellbeing, participation and physical activity. Agency refers to babies, toddlers and young children's capacity to actively participate in and influence their own learning by making choices, expressing preferences, and co-constructing knowledge through meaningful interactions and experiences. Indoor and outdoor learning environments should respect the needs and interests of babies, toddlers and young children, and support them in making their own decisions. The review stresses that physical accessibility, the design of materials and furniture, and the representation of babies, toddlers and young children in the environment facilitate participation and a sense of ownership. It also highlights that physical activities are higher in settings that offer free-flowing routines where babies, toddlers and young children can move indoors and outdoors freely throughout the day, compared with a structured routine where the educators determine access to the outdoors. Child-led, free-flowing routines offer greater quality, choice and independence, elements that contribute to sustained engagement and uninterrupted time. The review clearly indicates that outdoor play and natural world experiences provide unique opportunities for physical activity, collaboration and risk-taking. In particular, access to open-ended objects like tyres, planks, barrels, and water containers promote physical activity and gross motor co-ordination, collaboration and joint problem-solving. A key trend of the review is the importance of facilitating babies, toddlers and young children to experience ownership, agency and independence within these environments based on their interests and play preferences to enhance their sense of wellbeing.

## Risk and risky play

The review highlights the importance of enriching and enabling indoor and outdoor learning environments to support physical activity and risky play. It emphasises that babies, toddlers and young children benefit from opportunities to experience the thrill, joy, and excitement of risk and adventure. They need regular daily access to outdoor play experiences and risky play is an important aspect of this. The review explains that risky play is about exciting and challenging forms of play that can help develop self-confidence, resilience, independence, risk management skills, mastery, social competency and problem-solving skills. Physical strength and co-ordination can be enhanced too by risky play experiences. The review acknowledges Aistear (2009) promoted opportunities for taking risks. However, the review highlights that despite the recognised benefits, opportunities to experience risky play can be limited due to increasing access to passive digital experiences and from highly risk-averse societies. Yet, limited access to risky play experiences reduces opportunities to practice, master and refine physical control and co-ordination when balancing, climbing, moving at speed, using sharp tools, hiding and jumping.

The review notes that outdoor and risky play experiences for babies and toddlers and young children ultimately depends on the educators. They recognise and encourage the agency, competence and confident of each baby, toddler and young child, accept the literal ups and downs that ensue, and maintain a watchful eye and nurturing presence to ensure safety and inclusion. The review explains that safety concerns can be addressed by working collaboratively to develop a culture of positive choices, responsibility and good judgement. Babies, toddlers and young children can be helped to develop a healthy awareness of risk and good judgement with the support of knowledgeable educators, as well as physical boundaries and consistent emotional support. The review emphasises that engagement, participation and safety in risky play are supported and enhanced by educators with positive attitudes, who encourage babies, toddlers and young children to assess and manage risk to support their wellbeing.

*Risky play is about exciting and challenging forms of play that can help develop self-confidence, resilience, independence, risk management skills, mastery, social competency and problem-solving skills.*

## Feeding and nutrition

The review indicates that there is increasing recognition of the importance and long-term impact of health-promoting policies and practices in early childhood on outcomes for babies, toddlers and young children. The review acknowledges that *Aistear* (2009) aimed to promote positive attitudes to nutrition, hygiene, exercise and routines for babies, toddlers and young children. Early experiences with food and nutrition are recognised as highly important for present and long-term health. Recognising and responding to agency in terms of food preferences and choices, as well as recognising hunger and satiety cues is important. The review also highlighted the value of mealtimes as occasions for socialisation and learning. These important daily rituals can encourage relationships as well as promoting healthy eating practices for babies, toddlers and young children and their families. Increased opportunities to taste and explore vegetables resulted in increased consumption.

The review shows that ECEC settings have significant potential to influence positive lifelong food and nutrition habits through a curriculum that initiates greater awareness of nutrition, quality food and positive attitudes to food. Maintaining the focus on these issues in the update is suggested along with greater attention to the experience of eating and feeding. The findings also reveal that educators with positive attitudes towards supporting healthy food choices and preferences may sometimes lack confidence, professional development, and parental support to implement and sustain health-promoting environments and experiences. Therefore, additional training, support, information, and resources to encourage healthy food and nutrition routines may be required.

## Aim 3: Children will be creative and spiritual

### Creativity

The review highlights that *Aistear* (2009) provided a focus on wellbeing through supporting babies, toddlers and young children to express themselves creatively and to experience a spiritual dimension in life. The literature emphasises how creativity and its attributes, such as flexibility, curiosity, and spirituality, promote originality, deepen thinking, and support social and emotional wellbeing. The review underscores creativity as a valued competence in society, and that education systems worldwide are pursuing ways to foster creativity. Experiencing creativity allows babies, toddlers and young children the time and space to reflect on their creations, observe, and connect with the world around them in meaningful and thought-provoking ways.

In the context of babies, toddlers and young children slowing down, stopping and closely examining things that interest them, and marvelling at their discoveries in the company of attentive educators is central to creativity. As advocated in *Aistear* (2009) the review emphasises that babies, toddlers and young children must continue to be enabled to explore objects in a multi-sensorial way so that they can smell, taste, hear, see, touch, reach, grasp, lift, and drop objects and explore their immediate environment. The review notes that play, music and the arts are key ways to support creativity in early childhood. It indicates that exposure to music can build self-regulation, curiosity, independence and social skills. Music and movement can also increase a sense of wellbeing and joy of learning when play and fun are central elements. Music and the arts can inspire creativity, calm busy minds and are closely connected to feelings of wellbeing.

*In the context of babies, toddlers and young children slowing down, stopping and closely examining things that interest them, and marvelling at their discoveries in the company of attentive educators is central to creativity.*

The review states it is important that educators incorporate creativity as part of the daily routine. For example, creative arts like mark-making, painting, playing with open-ended materials can provide opportunities to explore and express thoughts and ideas. Drama can be a creative, shared, collaborative experience enabling the exploration of real and imagined experiences and facilitates learning about self, others and the world around. The literature reviewed validates *Aistear's* (2009) focus on experiencing the arts. However, the review shows that some early childhood educators would like support in implementing and fostering creativity, curiosity and learning interests to help babies, toddlers and young children to take the initiative, to explore and try, and to being willing to imagine and create.

## Spirituality

*Aistear* (2009) focused on experiencing a spiritual dimension in life and having a sense of wonder and awe to enhance wellbeing. The review indicates that spirituality is manifested through babies, toddlers and young children's natural openness and joyful embracing of life. It explains that spirituality is broader than religion and is found in marvelling, fascination, responses to human and natural beauty in the environment, pain and loss, accessing stillness and peace, living in the present, positive thinking and hope. The review states that spirituality is associated with feelings of belonging and connectedness, with people and surroundings. It emphasises that for babies, toddlers and young children spiritual experiences are part of everyday life, engaging in daily routines, feeling the fresh air on their faces and having the freedom to explore. The review suggests that emphasising spirituality in ECEC may allow for an environment of empowerment, acceptance, harmony, and a more authentic way of being together. The relationship between listening and silence is also highlighted as part of spirituality where being comfortable with silence allows for quiet pauses to connect with nature and cultivate the art of listening. The review acknowledges that *Aistear* (2009) recognised the importance of

*The review indicates that spirituality is manifested through babies, toddlers and young children's natural openness and joyful embracing of life.*

nurturing a sense of wonder and awe and the review reaffirms this important aspect of education. Appreciation of nature, reflection and pondering, meditation practices, yoga, opportunities for creative expression and free play, relationship building, and character development all nurture spirituality and a sense of wellbeing.

## Sustainability

The review highlights the deep connection between human wellbeing and the wellbeing of Earth's ecosystems, positioning sustainability as a vital and timely theme. It reinforces the idea that early childhood experiences can nurture compassion for the planet, its people, animals, and plants – supporting collective wellbeing and a more just, healthy world.

*Early childhood experiences can nurture compassion for the planet, its people, animals, and plants – supporting collective wellbeing and a more just, healthy world.*

Engagement with nature is shown to benefit emotional and physical wellbeing, foster environmental learning, and build a sense of stewardship. While *Aistear* (2009) encouraged environmental care, the review stresses that, in light of climate change as a lived reality, sustainability needs greater emphasis in the update.

Internationally, there is growing recognition of ECEC's role in promoting global citizenship and addressing fairness, social justice, and equity. The review notes that babies, toddlers and young children are competent problem-solvers who can engage with complex issues and contribute to positive change. Building relationships with the natural world is an important aspect of this.

The review also highlights the need for clearer articulation of agency and active roles in global change within the update, to better support sustainability goals. Starting with high quality ECEC, inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all over their lifetime, should be ensured. While *Aistear's* (2009) Wellbeing Learning Goals support reflective, flexible thinking, the review suggests enhancing them to include interdependence and compassion – helping babies, toddlers and young children understand their place in the world.

Although *Aistear* (2009) did not use the term ‘compassion’, it advocated for care of others and the environment. The review recommends further embedding environmental education and sustainability, positive, age/ stage appropriate experiences critical for developing concern for the environment and ensuring the planet’s sustainability. These aspects could be strengthened in the updated *Aistear* to enhance emotional and physical wellbeing and to empower babies, toddlers and young children to feel valued and to live sustainably as respectful, caring global citizens.

## **Aim 4: Children will have positive outlooks on learning and on life**

### **Values, social justice, and democratic citizenship**

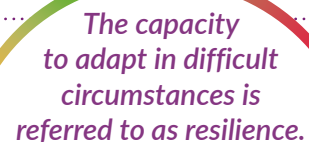
The review highlights that nearly all studies on Wellbeing emphasise the importance of rights-based approaches for babies, toddlers and young children. Central to this is agency—empowering children to make choices and decisions. Voice, choice, and decision-making are recognised rights and essential to wellbeing. The review suggests *Aistear* (2009) could be strengthened by making rights, influence, and agency more explicit in the Wellbeing Aims and Learning Goals. It notes that agency is absent from *Aistear*’s (2009) Principles and Themes and recommends addressing this gap.

There is growing focus on early childhood’s role in promoting global citizenship and addressing fairness, social justice, and equity. The review stresses that values, social justice, and democratic citizenship are key to fostering positive attitudes to learning and life. While often implicit, values are embedded in everyday practice—through language, actions, rules, materials, and relationships. When the rights of babies, toddlers and young children are upheld, recognition, respect, and awareness of their values are likely to have a positive impact on their wellbeing.

*Voice, choice, and decision-making are recognised rights and essential to wellbeing.*

Educators are encouraged to reflect critically on their values and views of the baby, toddler or young child through a rights-based lens. This includes considering how their beliefs may support or limit agency. How early childhood is valued and how the baby, toddler or young child is viewed by the educator, plays a crucial role in shaping their experiences and development. Relationships are central to values education, as are values like solidarity, justice, empathy, respect and hope. The review shows that social justice and citizenship emerged consistently in relation to wellbeing. Socially-just education promotes both equality and equity, where all babies, toddlers and young children are afforded the same access, opportunities, and support. Critically, extra support is provided where needed to ensure equity.

The review calls for deeper integration of social justice and citizenship in *Aistear*, positioning babies, toddlers and young children as active participants in decision making and advocating for self and others. While *Aistear* (2009) promoted participation, the review sees scope to enhance understanding and practice in relation to values, social justice, and democratic citizenship so that early experiences of active citizenship influence advocacy, leadership, participation and agency.



*The capacity to adapt in difficult circumstances is referred to as resilience.*

## Resilience

The review details how in the 1970s, research emerged that considered resilient children who developed well, despite experiences of adversity or risk. The capacity to adapt in difficult circumstances is referred to as resilience. The review emphasises that protective factors are central to being resilient and these factors can be social, biological, psychological, family or community based. These factors can reduce the harmful effect of adversity and trauma. The review states that individuals with capacity for resilience share common traits including self-efficacy, tolerance, self-acceptance, patience, optimism, and hope, with an ability to draw from personal resources to overcome challenge. Babies, toddlers and young children need protective factors like nurturing relationships, predictable and comforting routines, safe environments, and meaningful engagement to help them deal with challenges and to become resilient. The review emphasises that educators play an important role in promoting protective factors and adaptation skills that can buffer the effects of adversity and enhance the capacity for resilience in babies, toddlers and young children. It states that worthwhile strategies include warm, responsive relationships; encouragement of deep thinking and emotional intelligence; harnessing family and community supports; predictable routines; and hope and positive outlooks. The review suggests a number of strategies to foster resilience, for example:

- using books and stories to develop understanding of how others overcome challenges

- play, especially pretend play, along with games to support problem-solving and decision-making skills
- modelling, animal characters, and 'mindfulness' activities to engage babies, toddlers and children and their families.

Educators' awareness of families and wider communities as vital sources of support, resilience and strength – as well as potential contexts where challenges such as, mental health, addiction, poverty, neglect or trauma may arise – is also essential. The review suggests that in the update of *Aistear* (2009) further consideration be given to inhibiting factors that result in stress and adversity for babies, toddlers and young children, as well as support in the developing attributes that empower babies, toddlers and young children in drawing on their personal skills and wider support systems to promote resilience.

## Conclusion

The literature review commissioned by the NCCA to support the update of *Aistear* (2009) explores current international trends in the Theme of Wellbeing. It presents updated perspectives on physical and psychological wellbeing, alongside strategies that promote agency, participation, and meaningful engagement in early learning. Key trends include nurturing relationships, compassion, empathy, co-regulation and transitions.

Most studies reviewed highlight the importance of rights-based approaches to ensure meaningful and authentic participation of babies, toddlers and young children. The review stresses that recognising them as agentic beings is central to their wellbeing.

It recommends enhancing *Aistear* by making concepts of rights, influence, and agency more explicit in the Wellbeing Aims and Learning Goals. It also highlights the value of nurturing and responsive relationships that offer security and comfort, and the role of compassion and empathy in early social and emotional development.

Educators are seen as key in fostering perspective-taking, resilience, and kindness for babies, toddlers and young children through modelling and encouragement. The review also calls for greater attention to the physical and psychological vulnerability of babies, toddlers and young children, while still affirming their confidence and competence.

Enabling indoor and outdoor environments that support physical activity and risky play is highlighted as essential for promoting wellbeing, self-determination, physical development and problem-solving. Finally, the review suggests prioritising sustainability, noting that early experiences can foster compassion for the planet and its inhabitants, supporting collective wellbeing and a more just, healthy world.

## Updates to the Theme of Wellbeing

Like *Aistear* (2009), *Aistear* (2024) states that the Theme of Wellbeing is about babies, toddlers and young children being confident, *sona* (happy) and healthy. The findings of the review re-affirmed the relevance of *Aistear*'s existing Theme of Wellbeing and identified areas for updating, which have now been incorporated. The dual focus on psychological wellbeing (including feeling and thinking) and physical wellbeing – central to the original Framework – has been retained in the update. Strategies to foster agency, participation and meaningful engagement in early learning experiences have been embedded throughout.

A strengthened rights-based approach ensures meaningful and authentic participation of babies, toddlers and young children, supporting their growing awareness of themselves as agentic beings. Concepts such as rights, influence and agency are now more explicitly reflected in the Aims and Learning Goals. Additionally, the update draws attention to the value of embracing a slow relational pedagogy to help realise these concepts in practice.

Elements such as nurturing relationships; compassion; perspective-taking and empathy; co-regulation; and transitions have been newly incorporated or further strengthened. Naming these connections and interactions – between babies, toddlers, young children and educators – as learning experiences reflects the vision of *Aistear* (2024), which brings the image of the baby, toddler and young child to life through the Aims and Learning Goals.

Greater consideration has been given to acknowledging the physical and psychological vulnerability of babies, toddlers and young children, and to their need for comfort, reassurance and affection – while still affirming their confidence and competence. This brings together an understanding of protection, provision and participatory rights for babies, toddlers and young children in practice, and draws attention to the centrality of nurturing positive interactions and secure attachments. To support this, *Aistear* (2024) places a strengthened focus on the key person approach and on nurturing relationships that are responsive to babies, toddlers and young children in their unique contexts, offering them security, support and comfort.

The update also places greater emphasis on the importance of enriching and enabling indoor and outdoor learning environments to support physical activity and risky play. It highlights the value of experiencing the thrill, joy and excitement of risk and adventure in promoting wellbeing, self-determination, problem-solving, and physical development.

Positive lifelong food and nutrition habits are also prioritised. The update encourages greater awareness of nutrition, quality food, and positive attitudes toward eating, while also giving increased attention to the experience of eating and feeding.

The important role educators play in fostering perspective-taking, compassionate responses and resilience in babies, toddlers and young children is also emphasised. This is achieved through modelling and nurturing their innate capacity for kindness. These efforts align with an understanding of education for sustainability supporting babies, toddlers and young children in caring for themselves, for others and for the environment.

Prioritising sustainability has been further embedded in *Aistear* (2024). Early childhood experiences are recognised as having significant potential to foster compassion for the planet and for the plants, animals and people who inhabit it—supporting collective wellbeing and promoting a more just and healthy world.

## Transition from Early Childhood Education to Primary and Special Schools

The alignment between *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and the *Primary Curriculum Framework* plays an important role in ensuring continuity and progression in children's learning as they make the transition from early childhood education to primary and special schools.

This alignment is particularly evident in the Principles of Early Learning and Development in *Aistear* and the Principles of Learning, Teaching and Assessment in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*. Although developed for different sectors, both frameworks place the child at the centre of their learning and acknowledge the unique learning journey that each child is on.

The redeveloped Primary School Curriculum is intentionally grounded in the rich learning that begins in early childhood. *Aistear* provides the foundational principles, dispositions, and playful learning experiences that shape children's earliest encounters with curriculum, and these are explicitly recognised and built upon in the *Primary Curriculum Framework*.

Both frameworks share a strong pedagogical focus—particularly in their emphasis on play as a central approach to learning and teaching. The *Primary Curriculum Framework* reinforces the appropriateness and centrality of play and playful approaches in primary classrooms, strengthening the connection with children's earlier play and playful experiences in *Aistear*.

## Sample Learning Experiences for the Theme of Wellbeing

The following sample learning experiences offer a starting point of suggested ideas for educators on how to support babies, toddlers and young children's learning and development across the Aims and Learning Goals of Wellbeing. They are illustrative rather than exhaustive and some sample learning experiences are adaptable across all three age groups, while others are more suitable to a specific age group or stage of development. The sample learning experiences also offer guidance on how to support and progress learning across the three age groups, at a pace that is responsive to individual needs, rights, interests, abilities and wants of babies, toddlers and young children. This helps promote an inclusive learning environment where every baby, toddler or young child can participate meaningfully and reach their individual potential.

| <b>Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, the educator:</b>                                                                                                      | <b>Birth to 18 months</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>12 months to 3 years</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <b>2.5 to 6 years</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
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|                                                                                                                                                                                            | <i>For babies, the educator:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | <i>For toddlers, the educator:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <i>For young children, the educator:</i>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>implements a key person approach and enacts a slow relational pedagogy by making time and space to be present, and by engaging in a consistent, calm, caring and respectful manner.</b> | slows down interactions throughout the day and engages in one-to-one moments of connection. This includes offering eye contact, gentle touch, a calm tone of voice, cuddling, holding the baby on their lap, sitting together on the ground, tuning into the baby's gaze and vocalisations and responding without rushing.                                            | takes the time to provide emotional and physical support – a smile, a nod, something to grasp while learning to stand, a hand to hold as they navigate steps. Offers lots of hugs and reassurance. Listens attentively and responds positively to what they communicate through actions and words. Joins them at their level, waits and observes before stepping in and supports them to take the lead.                                      | makes space in the daily routine for unhurried times – tuning into stories, behaviours, questions and negotiations. Provides both emotional support – a smile, a high five, a word of encouragement or reassurance and physical support – keeping the bottom of the ladder steady as they climb up.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>establishes responsive relaxed routines for transitions.</b>                                                                                                                            | limits the number of transitions throughout the day and offers unhurried time for those that are necessary. Uses a calm tone of voice and gentle touch during feeding and care routines. Offers reassurance through predictable responses during feeding, toileting, sleeping, play experiences and change-over times, providing extra support for those who need it. | limits the number of transitions throughout the day and offers unhurried time for those transitions that are necessary. Has a free flow to the daily routine – indoors and outdoors. Provides a visual schedule with pictures, – story time, snack, play, nap. Uses this and verbal cues – words, songs, rhymes and animal walks (hop like a bunny, crawl like a crab) to support transitions. Provides extra support for those who need it. | limits the number of transitions throughout the day and offers unhurried time for those transitions that are necessary. Has a free flow to the daily routine, indoors and outdoors, with flexibility arounds eating times – rolling snack time. Uses visual daily routines so they can see what comes next and points to the schedule to remind them what is happening next. Provides extra support for those who need it. Gives 5-minute and 2-minute warnings before ending an experience. |

**ensures there is adequate time and space to build and strengthen relationships with key persons, other staff, peers, friends, siblings, cousins and with families.**

provides consistent, safe opportunities and unhurried time for connections with others. Plans tummy time with friends or siblings nearby. Organises shared sensory play – exploring rattles, textured fabrics, soft toys. Sings or says interactive songs and rhymes – clapping games, peek-a-boo with siblings or other babies. Facilitates family reading time by encouraging siblings to share picture books, looks at family booklets, sings lullabies together. Makes time to get to know families well. Regularly chats with them and share updates. Invites them to stay for a chat especially during settling in periods. Keeps a shared daily diary/learning journal.

sets up block play, puzzles, mark-making, art projects to be done side by side with peers or siblings. Sets up small group outdoor play – chasing bubbles, playing with sand and water. Facilitates family mealtimes where siblings/cousins can sit together. Supports play between friends, cousins and siblings. Organises trips to parks or local interest areas to play with others. Ensures there is plenty of child-led play so they can explore and bond with peers, friends and siblings. Chats regularly with families and invites them to share interests or about home experiences – toilet training strategies to ensure a consistent approach. Invites grandparents to share an interest – gardening.

organises co-operative games between peers, friends and siblings – group puzzles, building forts, age-appropriate board games. Encourages shared stories, songs and conversations. Sets up outdoor experiences – ball games, obstacle courses. Organises group projects – painting murals, making collages, building with large blocks. Ensures there is plenty of child-led play where they can freely explore and bond with staff, peers, friends, siblings, cousins. Invites families to contribute to a group project – bringing in photos or artefacts for a “My Community” display. Holds informal chats during drop-off and collection times to discuss learning. Organises regular parent-educator meetings to co-plan next steps for learning. Invites grandparents in to share an interest – bee keeping.

**empowers creativity through the arts – music, songs, mark-making, drama, dance, different types of play.**

ensures that they can explore materials, sounds, and movement in a multi-sensorial way at their own pace. Sings lullabies and nursery rhymes during routines (feeding, naptime), plays peek-a-boo, introduces puppets. Supports babies in mark-making with non-toxic paint and exploring sound-making objects – drums, xylophones, pots and pans. Sways to different types of music. Provides treasure baskets with different textures. Encourages dress-up using open-ended material – hats and scarves. Acts out familiar routines – feeding a doll, cooking pretend food.

encourages exploration with open-ended materials – fabric, natural objects. Creates a music corner with instruments. Helps them make shakers, rattles, homemade instruments – plastic bottles with rice. Dances with them to different types of music and introduces action songs. Provides a variety of paper, cardboard, chunky crayons, chalk, non-toxic paint and washable markers emphasising process over product. Encourages messy and construction play. Provides story baskets with props to support role and dramatic play.

supports a range of play experiences – small world play; acting out different roles, stories and situations. Provides a variety of mark-making materials. Introduces musical instruments with contrasting sounds (loud/soft, high/low). Listens to different types of music and dances; rocks, sways and bounces to various sounds; clapping and tapping to the beat or moving like animals – stomping like elephants, fluttering like butterflies. Encourages them to make up songs with their own lyrics to familiar tunes.

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| <p><b>facilitates lots of time in the outdoors, in nature and in the community, and ensures proper clothing and foot wear is provided during different weathers.</b></p> | <p>provides rich sensory experiences by spending time outdoors where babies can touch and explore materials – grass, stones, bark, petals, leaves. Encourages them to listen to sounds – birds, dogs, rustling leaves, wind, water, silence. Invites them to observe shadows, insects, other small creatures. Ensures there are safe spaces to move freely, crawl, explore at their own pace.</p>                                                                   | <p>supports exploration of plants, trees, insects, animals at their own pace. Encourages splashing in puddles and playing with open-ended natural materials – sticks, leaves, stones, pinecones. Supports them in building hideaways with natural elements. Provides spaces for messy play with water, sand, paint or for experiments in the mud kitchen. Incorporates regular visits to local places – the library, farmer’s market, community garden, farm, parks or wooded areas.</p> | <p>involves them in planting seeds and caring for flowers, vegetables, herbs and observing their growth over time. Explores animal tracks, insect trails and habitats through walks and nature hunts. Supports participation in community projects – Tidy Towns or gardening initiatives. Organises occasional visits to farms, petting zoos, parks, other places of interest in the community. Celebrates the seasons through different experiences – apple picking, pumpkin carving, participating in local outdoor festivals.</p> |
| <p><b>encourages and supports risk management and challenge in play and in everyday experiences.</b></p>                                                                 | <p>places them on a variety of safe surfaces – a blanket on grass, a soft mat, carpet and in different positions. Encourages them to crawl over or towards obstacles – small cushions, a toy just out of reach. Provides safe, sturdy furniture or low railings so they can pull themselves up and move along while holding on. Encourages them to try a new food or to engage with new people. Provides opportunities to look in the distance to support eyes.</p> | <p>sets up safe environments with manageable risks. Supports them to climb small structures – tree stumps, balance on low beams, walk along a painted line on the ground. Encourages them to take risks during messy play – pouring water, scooping sand, carrying small buckets. Supports them in being brave – waving goodbye to Daddy, making a new friend, trying something unfamiliar. Encourages the use of real glasses, cutlery and cooking utensils.</p>                        | <p>encourages rough and tumble play. Supports climbing higher, jumping from heights, rolling down hills, tree climbing, racing on bikes or scooters. Supports them to assess risks and consider consequences. Encourages the safe use of real tools under supervision – scissors, staplers, screwdrivers, hammers, drills. Encourages problem-solving during peer conflicts. Provides support (where appropriate) for complex construction challenges.</p>                                                                           |
| <p><b>encourages healthy eating and ensures provision of a healthy, balanced diet.</b></p>                                                                               | <p>supports breast feeding (where appropriate) and engages in baby-led weaning. Provides plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, locally grown where possible, and ensures access to healthy snack choices.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <p>offers healthy food choices with plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables, locally grown where possible. Supports toddlers to take part in food preparation – buttering toast, chopping bananas, picking strawberries.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>encourages them to grow fruit, herbs and vegetables. Supports participation in cooking and baking (where possible). Provides a variety of food choices to extend knowledge and experience of healthy food options from different cultures.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| <p><b>supports resistance to infection.</b></p>                                                                                                                          | <p>sterilises equipment, washes hands, gently wipes noses, giving advance warning. Helps build immunity through outdoor experiences. Checks immunisation records and provides information to families in line with HSE guidance.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <p>sterilises equipment, supports them in learning to wash their hands, blow their own noses, encouraging them to cover their mouths when coughing. Helps build immunity through outdoor experiences. Checks immunisation records and provides information to families in line with HSE guidance.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p>sterilises equipment, supports them in learning to wash their hands, disposing of tissues independently, covering their mouths when coughing. Helps build immunity through outdoor experiences, checks immunisation records and provides information to families in line with HSE guidance.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

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| <p><b>supports physical activity and fundamental movement skills.</b></p>                                                        | <p>ensures they have time and space to move freely including tummy time, sitting, crawling, bum shuffling, walking, running, climbing both indoors and outdoors.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | <p>provides many opportunities indoors and outdoors to strengthen muscles, refine skills and enhance hand-eye co-ordination – stretching, balancing, throwing and catching items, kicking a ball, using a climbing frame, jumping, running.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | <p>builds physical activities into the daily routine to increase activity levels and further enhance fundamental movement skills – running, jumping, skipping, kicking, striking, hopping, throwing, catching, balancing.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <p><b>supports the development of positive learning dispositions like independence, perseverance, curiosity, resilience.</b></p> | <p>supports them in feeding themselves, trying to stand up, sit, walk, explore. Acknowledges and encourages effort. Provides a variety of safe objects with different textures, shapes, and sounds for exploration. Follows their lead and facilitates them to experience minor frustrations – trying to fit a block into a shape sorter to support resilience while staying close and offering help or reassurance if, and when needed.</p>                                                                                                                          | <p>supports them in doing things for themselves – dressing, feeding, toileting, taking turns, setting the table, tidying up. Allows time for practice and repetition. Supports resilience and perseverance by encouraging them to try again. Offers words of encouragement but does not rush in to do it for them. Creates time and space for deep learning and engagement. Sets up interesting provocations to spark curiosity and asks open-ended questions, such <i>What happens if ...? Why did you....</i></p>                                                                                | <p>encourages them to do things for themselves and for others – using cutlery, making lunch, packing their bags, helping others. Notices interests, strengths and areas they find challenging. Asks open-ended questions and provides new resources and provocations to spark deeper learning. Models positive learning dispositions. Supports perseverance through encouragement – <i>Keep going – you are working it out!</i> Teaches coping strategies <i>It's okay to feel upset. Let's take a break and try again later.</i></p>                                                                                                     |
| <p><b>nurtures the spiritual dimension, fostering connection, compassion and respect.</b></p>                                    | <p>builds secure, loving relationships as core spiritual qualities. Introduces different music, rhythm, and voice – singing lullabies or calming songs, use rhythmic rocking or clapping. Introduces soft instrumental or cultural music. Respects religious beliefs and supports participation in rituals (blessings, celebrations) and festivals. Shows respect and reverence for all those with religious beliefs and those with none. Models kindness and compassion. Practices gratitude aloud – <i>Aren't we lucky to have such a lovely outdoor space?</i></p> | <p>supports connection and respect for their inner world and deepens relationships. Encourages participation in calm, mindful moments – listening to soft music, sitting on the ground smelling a flower. Celebrates festivals and includes them in spiritual practices and rituals – lighting a candle, being grateful. Encourages engaging with symbols and objects respectfully. Models empathy <i>Kai looks sad – how can we help him feel better.</i> Lives values through everyday interactions – showing respect and understanding for all. Reads stories about compassion and respect.</p> | <p>supports reflection and stillness – focusing on breathing. Uses stories, play, and creativity to explore values. Shares stories from different cultures and traditions. Discusses topics like kindness, courage, fairness, respect, compassion and honesty. Models honesty, patience, and respect in everyday routines and encourages appreciation of the world around them. Raises awareness about different religions and beliefs. Explores beliefs, traditions, and diversity respectfully using artefacts, books, and experiences. Creates a dedicated space for sharing special personal artefacts including religious items.</p> |

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| <p><b>nurtures a sense of wonder and awe.</b></p>                                                                        | <p>ensures there is time and space to discover the world. Supports multisensory experiences outdoors – exploring grass, stones, leaves, following a snail’s trail, watching a spider make a web, looking at a rainbow, watching baby birds learning to fly. Brings nature indoors with nature items placed in baskets or touching ice as it melts, feeling flower petals. Makes time to sit and just be still together – gently rocking or breathing calmly together.</p> | <p>makes time daily for nature exploration – looking at bugs, leaves, birds, clouds, touching bark, mud, water, stones. Reads wonder-inspiring books that focus on nature, space, science and magic. Plants fast-growing seeds – beans in a jar or sunflowers in pots and draws attention to how they sprout and stretch toward the sun. Makes time to respond to the world around them with curiosity, joy and a sense of marvel. Encourages a sense of gratitude for the world. Has a space for seasonal items and indoor flowers and plants.</p> | <p>supports deep engagement with the natural world. Discusses profound questions in a secure and reassuring manner – <i>Who made the sun? Why do people die?</i> Sets up a space for thinking and reflecting. Introduces relaxation strategies. Has a space for photos of people and pets who have passed.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <p><b>supports global citizenship through sustainability and fostering care of self, others and the environment.</b></p> | <p>encourages care for self, others and living things. Supports them in learning to be gentle. Provides natural, non-plastic toys and resources – wooden rattles, cloth books. Introduces recycled or repurposed materials – cardboard tubes and fabric scraps for sensory play. Minimises waste during mealtimes. Models turning off taps and lights. Shows respect to people and the environment.</p>                                                                   | <p>models and supports turn-taking, sharing, respect and gentle hands and mouths. Encourages empathy and affirms positive behaviour by putting words to actions.</p> <p>Involves them in recycling and encourages the use of reusable containers/water bottles/lunchboxes. Supports them in turning off taps and lights. Provides access to natural materials – sticks, shells, leaves, stones. Introduces them to gardening – watering plants, digging in soil, planting seeds.</p>                                                                | <p>discusses different topics – fairness, sharing, kindness, helping others, treating everyone with respect and compassion. Helps them to understand how others might feel, encouraging empathy and emotional awareness. Fosters problem-solving and conflict resolution and promotes group responsibility. Encourages gardening – sowing seeds, watering plants, harvesting. Organises nature walks. Involves them in collecting rubbish. Starts a compost bin or wormery. Provides recycled materials for exploration and play.</p> |
| <p><b>supports agency through facilitating choices and decisions and responds positively to responses.</b></p>           | <p>offers choices – what to wear, what to do, where to be, what to read, who to be with, what to eat or drink, while keeping their best interests in mind. Listens for their responses – pointing, reaching, gazing, turning away, vocalising – each a sign of preference. Acknowledges and responds with care and attention to their choices.</p>                                                                                                                        | <p>facilitates choices and decision-making in everyday routines – getting dressed, mealtimes, toileting, nappy changing, while keeping their best interests in mind. Supports play-based choices, including what to play, where to play and with whom. Encourages choices at story or song time and about where they want to be – inside, outside, alone or with others. Responds positively to initiatives and ideas, tuning into the many ways they communicate. Respects their decision to say <i>No</i> or <i>I do it!</i></p>                  | <p>supports decision-making on matters that impact them, within safe, respectful and supportive environments. Provides them with opportunities to decide what to do, when to do it and who to be with, while keeping their best interests in mind. Helps them vote or reach consensus on shared choices and problems – selecting a story, setting rules, agreeing behaviour expectations, daily routines, planning trips. Facilitates group discussions and encourages reflection on their choices and decisions.</p>                 |

**supports the development of self-help and self-care skills.**

supports them to be involved, to observe, and practice. Encourages them to hold wipes/nappy, to point to body parts. Encourages finger feeding (around 6 months), offers spoons, cups to hold, responds to hunger/fullness signals. Encourages them to push arms through sleeves, to put on their own hat.

supports them build competence and confidence through participation in simple everyday routines. Encourages them to wash hands, to help with toileting tasks, to use spoons and cups, to help with dressing themselves. Provides opportunities for them to take part in real life tasks – carrying bags, setting the table, tidying up. If needed breaks tasks into steps, gives extra time for those that need it, offers positive encouragement. Provides accessible storage to promote independence and introduces real-life props for role play.

supports them to actively take part in personal hygiene experiences – washing hands, brushing teeth, using tissues to wipe nose and disposing of them correctly. Helps them recognise when they need the toilet and supporting them to go independently. Encourages them to dress themselves – putting on and tying coats (zips, buttons, Velcro), putting on shoes and wellingtons independently. Encourages them to hang up coats and bags, to pack and unpack their own bag and to put their lunch away. Supports them to use knife and fork confidently and to pour drinks from a small jug. Helps them to take part in preparing snacks (spreading, cutting soft foods with child-safe tools) and to do real life tasks – tidying toys and learning areas, sweeping, vacuuming, washing up.

