



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Guidance for Good Practice

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



Contents

Introduction	2
Supporting Learning and Development through a Rights-Based Approach	4
Rights and agency	5
Global citizenship in early childhood	7
Supporting sustainability as global citizens	8
Supporting Learning and Development through Relationships and Interactions	10
Slow relational pedagogy	11
The key person approach	12
Friendships	13
The agentic educator	14
Supporting Learning and Development through Partnerships and Connections	16
Partnerships with families	17
Community connections	18
Supporting Learning and Development through Play	20
Prioritising play	21
The inclusive learning environment	24
Supporting Learning and Development through a Reflective Cycle of Planning and Assessing	26
Reflective cycle of planning and assessing	27
Meaningful assessment and documentation	34
Transitions	35
References	38

Introduction

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

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

The *Guidance for Good Practice* supports educators to understand and engage with the Vision, Principles and Themes in the updated Framework. Like the *Guidelines for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2009), the *Guidance* describes good practice and expands on some of the important ideas introduced in the updated Framework. The *Guidance* is presented under five areas:

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

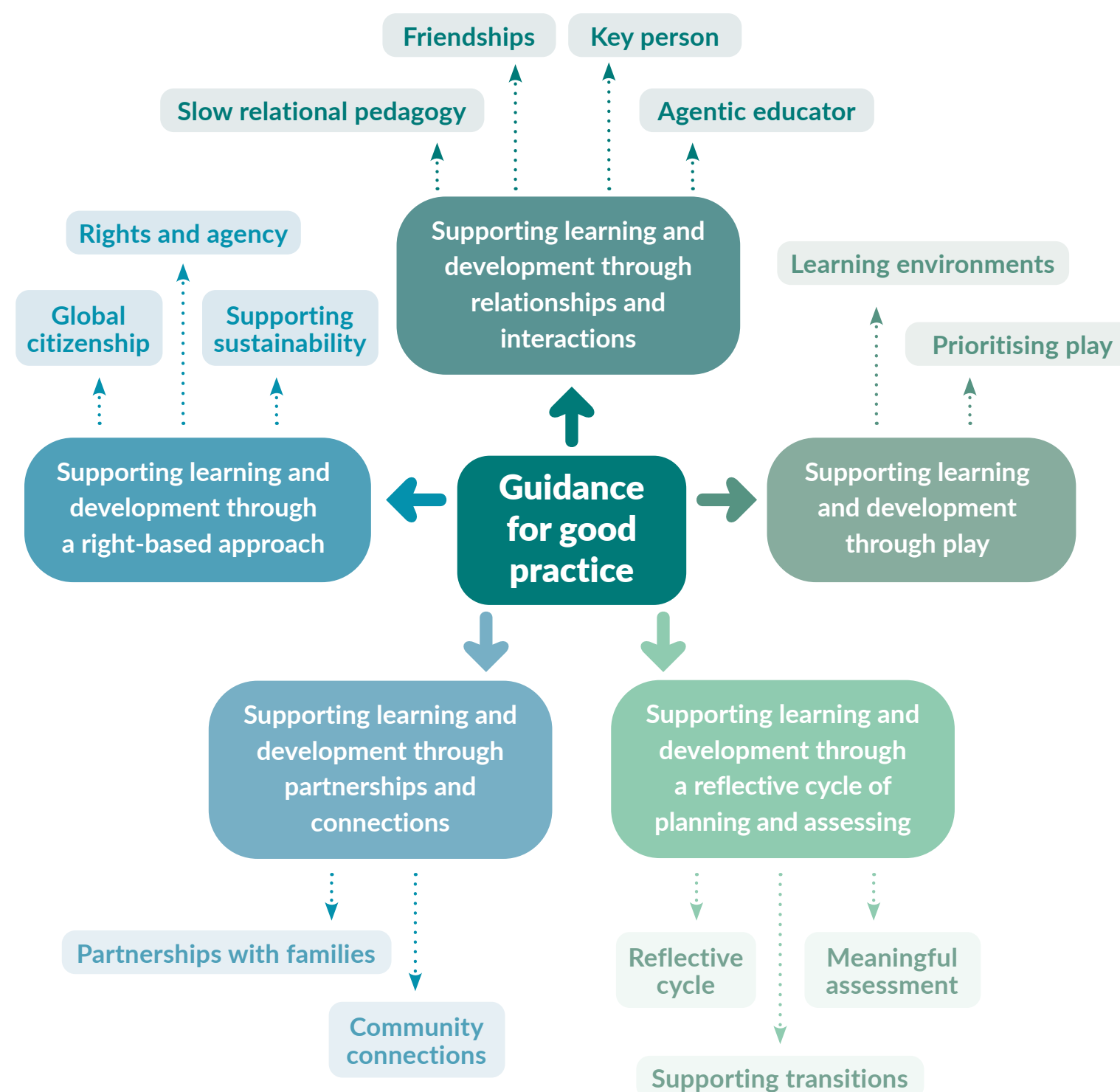


Figure 1: Contents of *Guidance for Good Practice*

Supporting Learning and Development through a Rights-Based Approach

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

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

Rights and agency

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

Global citizenship in early childhood

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

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

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

Supporting sustainability as global citizens

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

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

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



Supporting Learning and Development through Relationships and Interactions

Ní neart go cur le chéile
Together we are stronger

Slow relational pedagogy

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

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

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

Table 1: Features of a slow relational pedagogy

Features of a slow relational pedagogy include:

- Ensuring babies, toddlers and young children have the time, freedom and space to be and to show they are agentic, competent and confident.
- Being attuned to feelings, needs and rights. Being able to interpret cues and the many ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate to ensure their voice is heard and responded to.
- Being emotionally and physically present in the moment.
- Making time throughout the day for noticing, nurturing, responding and reflecting on each baby, toddler and young child's needs, interests, abilities and wants.
- Giving feedback (verbal and non-verbal), naming and affirming efforts, celebrating progress and achievements, taking a strengths-based approach, helping babies, toddlers and young children to learn from mistakes, setbacks and challenges, and to plan for, document and assess their learning.
- Enabling the development of an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, underpinned by play, that is built around each baby, toddler and young child's emerging interests, caring routines, cultural backgrounds, abilities, funds of knowledge and early friendships while also responding to the group.
- Supporting transitions every day, into and out of the learning environment and within their daily routines through individualised support based on the knowledge of and relationship with the baby, toddler and young child.
- Building partnerships with families in a mindful, respectful way, with cultural sensitivity to family values and parenting practices, which can then be respected and replicated within the setting, if appropriate.
- Developing and experiencing *meitheal* (a sense of community), and being aware of rights and emerging responsibilities in that community space.

The key person approach

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

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

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

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

Friendships

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

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



The agentic educator

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

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

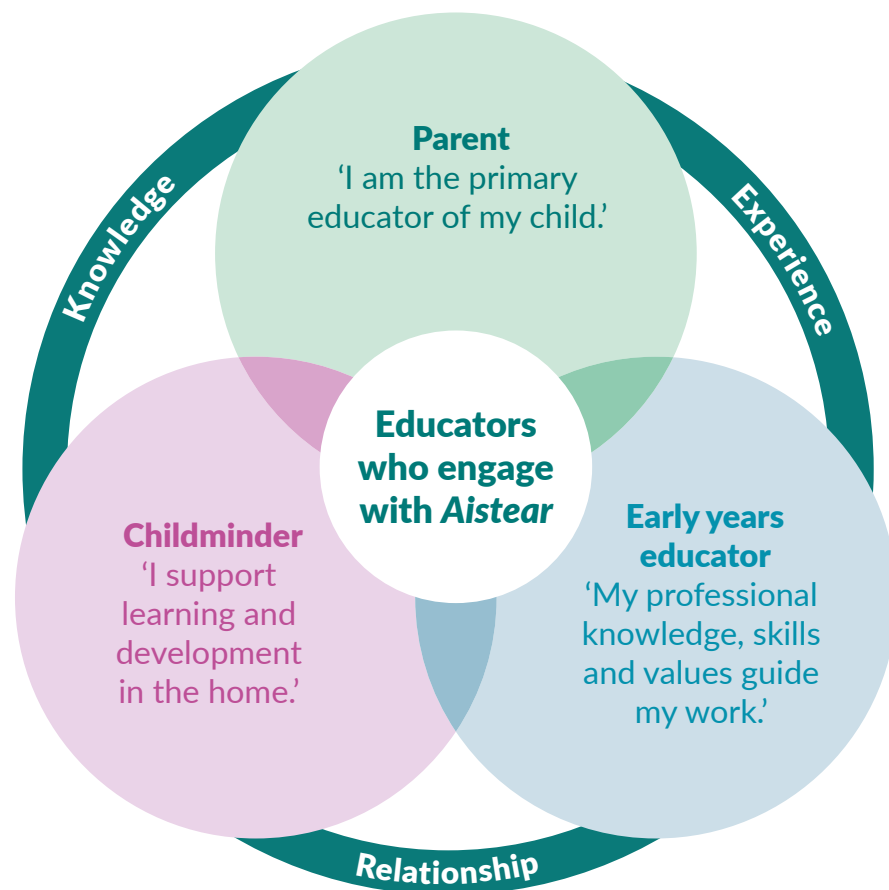


Figure 3: The educator in *Aistear*

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

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

Table 2: Being an agentic educator

Being an agentic educator involves:

- Interpreting *Aistear* to respond to the learning needs of my group.
- Using my knowledge and creativity to interpret the Principles and Themes.
- Making informed decisions to support learning and development.
- Facilitating connections with families and communities.
- Being an agent of change to promote ongoing development.
- Noticing what is important for babies, toddlers and young children.
- Knowing my role as duty-bearer to promote children's rights.
- Using my skills to develop a curriculum for my learning environment.

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

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

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

Supporting Learning and Development through Partnerships and Connections

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

Partnerships with families

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Partnership in action with families can:

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

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

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

Community connections

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

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



Supporting Learning and Development through Play



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

Prioritising play

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

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



Figure 4: Play and playful experiences

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



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

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

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

The inclusive learning environment

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

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

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

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

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



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

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



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

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

Reflective cycle of planning and assessing

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

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

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

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

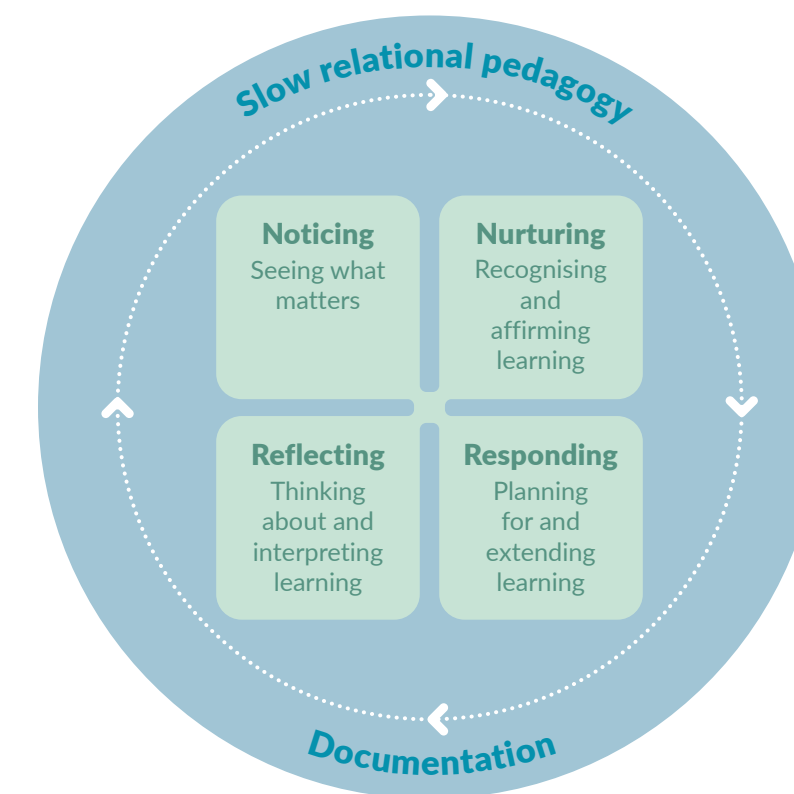


Figure 5: The reflective cycle of planning and assessing

Noticing

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

Noticing is seeing what matters.

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

Noticing in the home learning environment

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

Noticing in the early childhood setting

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

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

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

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

Nurturing

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

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

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

Nurturing in the home learning environment

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

Nurturing in the early childhood setting

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

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

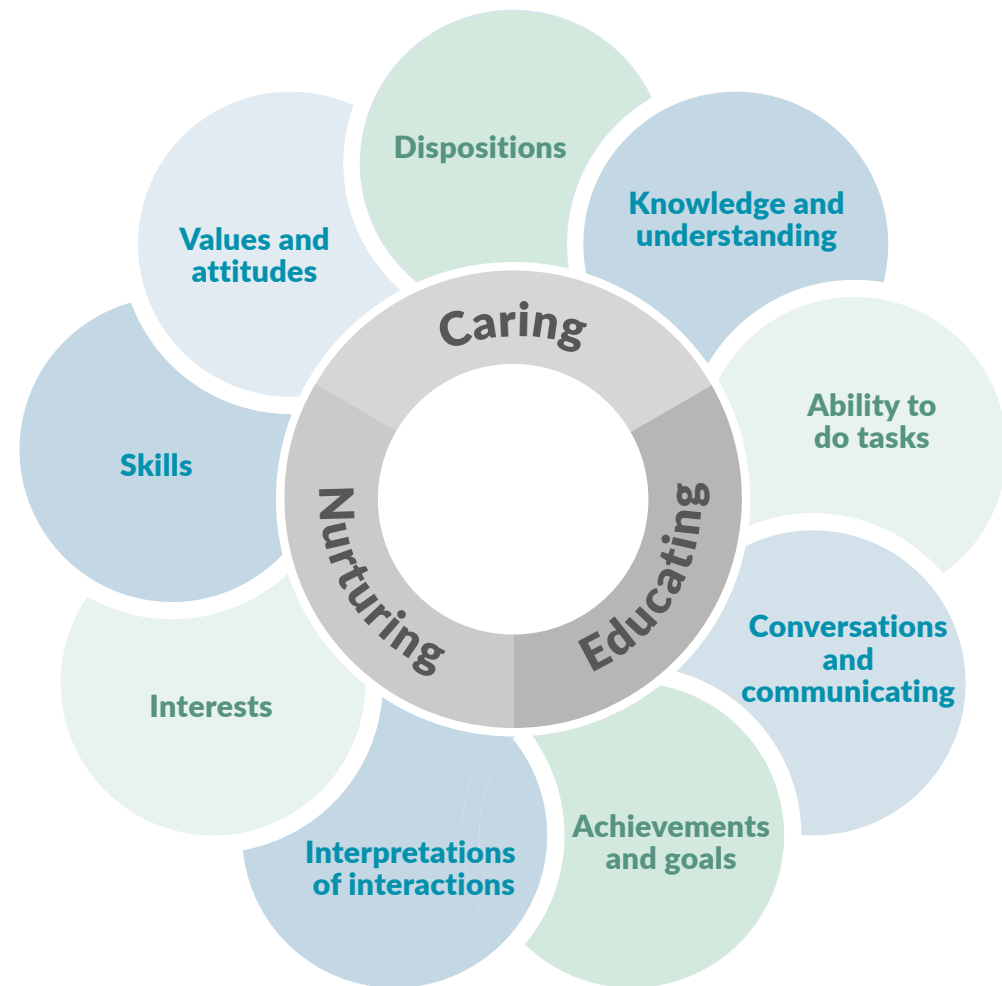


Figure 6: Nurturing babies, toddlers and young children

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

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

Responding

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

Responding is planning for and extending learning.

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

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

Responding in the home learning environment

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

Responding in the early childhood setting

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

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

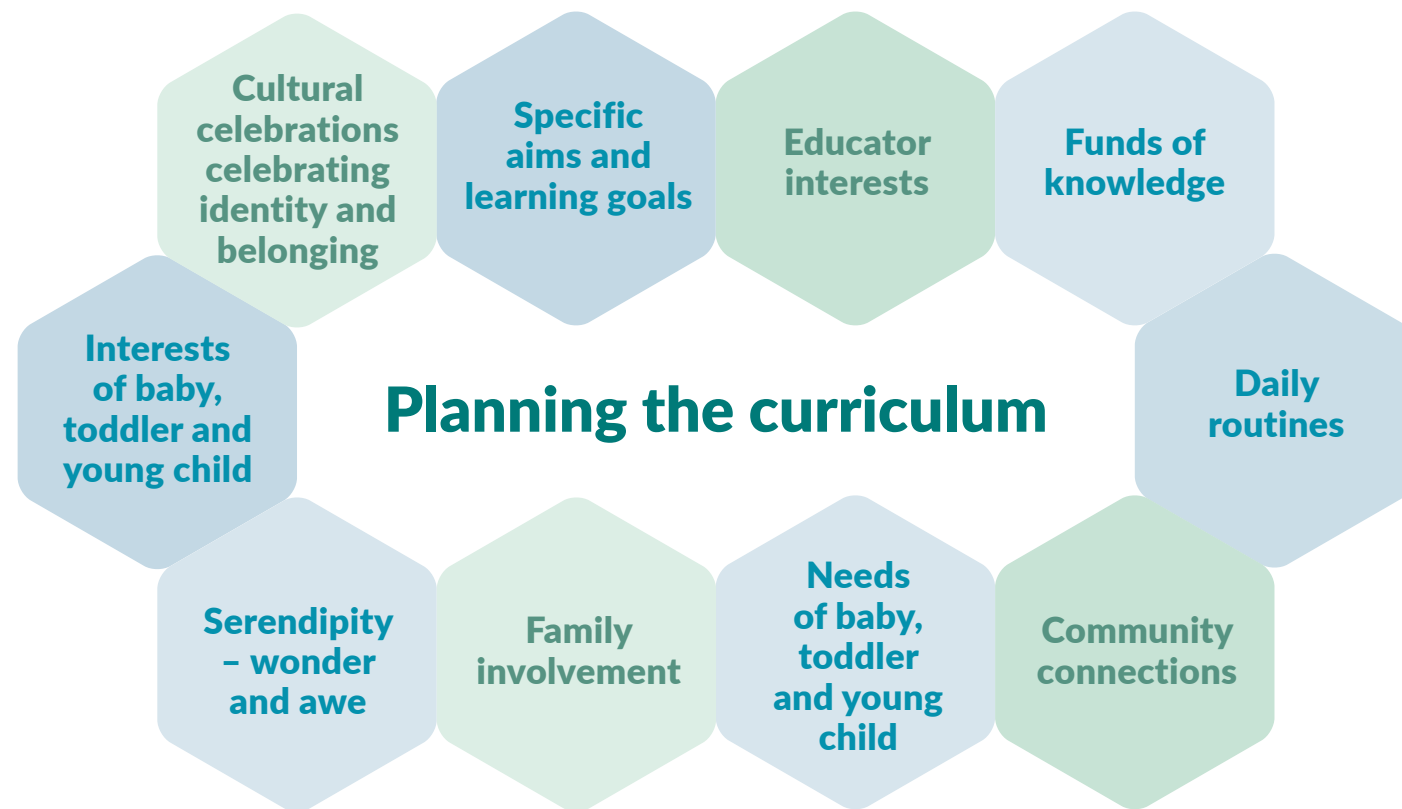


Figure 7: Planning the emergent and inquiry-based curriculum

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

Reflecting

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

Reflecting is thinking about and interpreting learning.

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

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

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

Reflecting in the home learning environment

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

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

Reflecting in the early childhood setting

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

Meaningful assessment and documentation

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Meaningful documentation might include but is not limited to:

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

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

Transitions

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

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

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

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

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

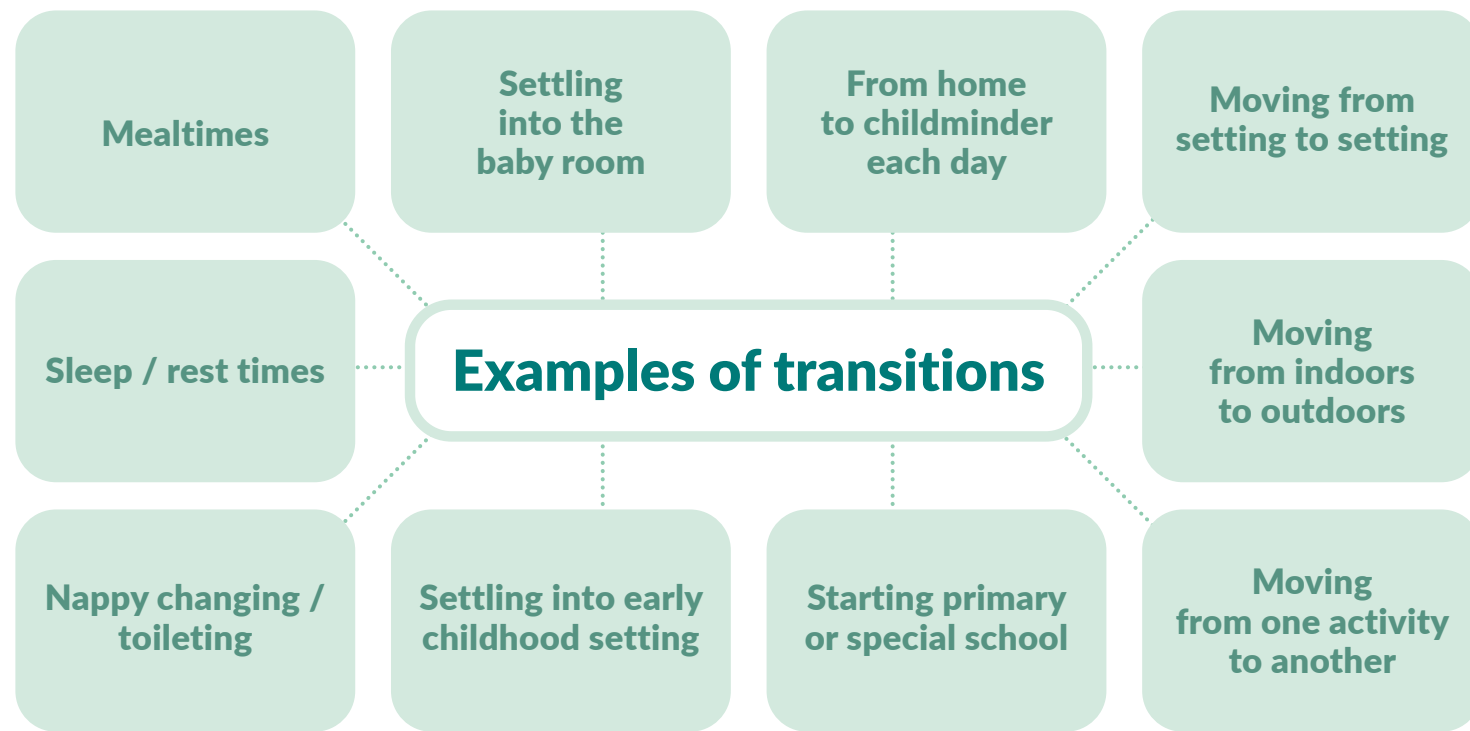


Figure 8: Examples of transitions

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

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

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

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

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

References

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

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





Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

