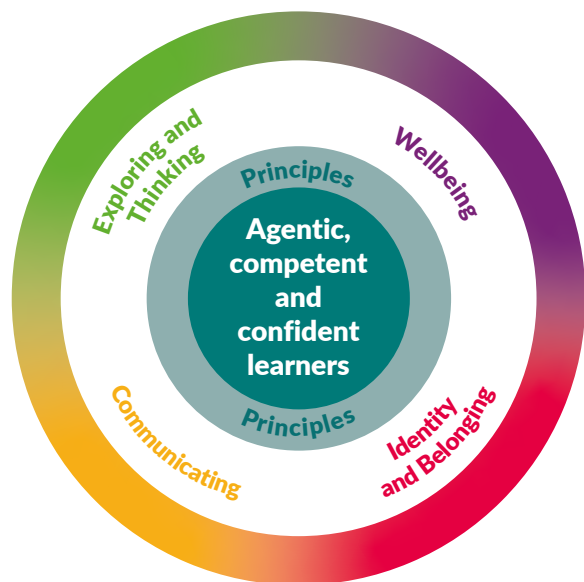




**Exploring
Aistear's
Theme of
Communicating
(2024)**

*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 Communicating for young children (ages 2.5 to 6 years) (Concannon-Gibney, Giblin, Lake, Ní Dhiorbháin, Ní Láimhín in French and McKenna, 2022) and the additional emphasis on the focus on Communicating in Chapter 3, *Addressing the invisibility of Babies and Toddlers in the Literature* concerning babies and toddlers (birth to 3 years) (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 Communicating Theme in *Aistear* (2009). It includes:

- a summary of the findings from the literature review in relation to the Theme of Communicating
- an update on the changes made to the Theme of Communicating in *Aistear* (2009) to that in *Aistear* (2024)
- sample learning experiences that illustrate what the updated Theme of Communicating 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 Concannon-Gibney, Giblin, Lake, Ní Dhiorbháin and Ní Láimhín 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.

Communicating

The review re-affirms the relevance of *Aistear's* Theme of Communicating and identifies areas for updating. It calls for the update to continue to recognise the multiple ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate. The review highlights the importance of enriching and accessible language environments and responsive relationships that present opportunities to develop communication and social skills, including support for emergent literacy experiences, arts-based and playful activities, the joy of books and shared reading experiences.

Aim 1: Children will use non-verbal communication skills

The review notes that *Aistear's* Communicating Theme (2009) referred to non-verbal communication skills. It goes on to note the term 'non-verbal' does not align with broader conceptualisations of communication which is understood as multimodal. The review argues that describing communication as 'non-verbal' or 'verbal' detracts from the importance of the variety of early communicative intentions, inhibiting educator sensitivity to the powerful communication tools of gesture, posture, expression, tone and eye-gaze that signal babies, toddlers and young children's interest, engagement and communicative intent. Instead, the report notes that emphasising multimodality is inclusive of all modes and supports agency in communicating.

Multimodality is inclusive of all modes and supports agency in communicating.

Supporting additional language acquisition

The review suggests that attunement to the many different ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate is important especially for those learning a second language in early childhood settings. The review stresses that a key consideration in second language acquisition is an awareness of listening and receptive language skills as they take time to observe, listen and learn the new language. The review notes that this has become known as the silent period but goes on to argue that the term can be detrimental. Instead, second language learners need to experience positive, inclusive environments that embrace their home language and provide opportunities to communicate using multiple modes. The report asserts that their existing funds of knowledge be harnessed so that babies, toddlers and young children feel valued and agentic in their native tongue. In Ireland, the report notes this is also true for those learning Irish in an immersion setting. The report recommends that the

updated *Aistear* further recognise and support multimodal communication skills and to highlight the importance of babies, toddlers and young children interpreting and responding to the intentions, signals and social communication of others, as these are important skills in social development and communicative development.

A key consideration in second language acquisition is an awareness of listening and receptive language skills as they take time to observe, listen and learn the new language.

Children's agency and influence

The review argues that certain pedagogical approaches facilitate social communication including environments that promote independence, choice and personal contribution along with interactions with peers and joint activities. The review clarifies that babies, toddlers and young children show agency when deciding whether to accept or reject inter-personal communication and interaction. It goes on to explain that early childhood settings can support or inhibit a sense of communicative agency. The review emphasises the importance of allowing time and space for educators to notice, listen and understand what is being communicated as babies, toddlers and young children use gesture, gaze, grasp, movement, expressions to communicate and create meaning. Their bodies, emotions and brains work together as they pursue their actions and communicate. The review reinforces the need for educators to be attuned to preferences and communicative intent. The review suggests that the updated *Aistear* could make more explicit the importance of communicative agency, ensuring that babies, toddlers and young children's multiple ways of being, knowing and communicating are noticed and responded to.

Early childhood settings can support or inhibit a sense of communicative agency.

Social interactions and everyday experiences

The review suggests that interactions and positive relationships strongly affect social competence and communication. Babies, toddlers and young children have a more agentic or active role in interactions than was previously understood. Everyday experiences and routines are important for supporting social interactions and communication. The review suggests that mealtimes are an excellent example of a daily routine that offers opportunities for communication. Babies, toddlers and young children bring important funds of knowledge in terms of mealtimes, and their responses to taste, sounds, and smells create opportunities for gesture, expression and signalling that supports expression and interpretation of these experiences to others. The review notes there is increasing evidence that social interactions can be influenced and, in some cases, enhanced through digital technologies. It goes on to say that digital play can afford opportunities for language development and learning and there are opportunities to harness existing funds of knowledge, interest and engagement with digital technologies to promote turn-taking and collaboration in early childhood settings.

The review also highlights the importance and value of play-based approaches in supporting social communication and interaction. It notes that the relationship between play and language is well-established. The review notes that while *Aistear* (2009) was a play-based curriculum, it also recognised the educators' important role in supporting, guiding, and sometimes leading learning experiences. It states that when educators play alongside babies, toddlers and young children, they can promote communication if the educator acts as a play partner. Indeed, just having the educator nearby during play can positively affect communication with peer-to-peer responses being more sustained when the educator is nearby. The review stresses that educator collaboration in play can promote participation, engagement and joint activity, supporting interactions and communication. However, the review highlights the need for educator attunement to expressions, gestures, gaze and engagement to understand communicative agency and understanding. It requires sensitivity to communicative intent and preferred ways of communicating and is particularly important for babies and toddlers, and for young children who have speech and language delay or are second and additional language learners. Finally, the review highlights the importance of guided play and suggests it merits further consideration in the update of *Aistear*.

The relationship between play and language is well-established.

Aim 2: Children will use language

The review emphasises that early experiences of oral language are foundational for later language and literacy skills. It goes on to suggest that educators have unique opportunities to promote linguistic experiences that spark joy, excitement, engagement and interest. The review notes that *Aistear's* (2009) promotion of interacting with others to give and receive information, and to become confident and positive about their home language and the languages of others is endorsed in the literature. Across the Theme of Communicating (2009) the review notes the term language focuses on the linguistic mode of communication along with a focus on social interactions, exploring sounds and oral language that is facilitated by enriching environments and play. The review suggests that *Aistear's* (2009) social context for communicating provided opportunities to play with language, to learn from others and to use new vocabulary. It details the importance of play in communication and language acquisition and in particular the role of co-operative and guided play with peers and educators and socio-dramatic play experiences.

Early experiences of oral language are foundational for later language and literacy skills.

Play-based experiences to support language and literacy

The review highlights the importance of play as it supports babies, toddlers and young children to use their imagination, create, negotiate and interact with others. The review highlights the important role of the educator as collaborator and play partner, in providing literacy-rich guided play, in storytelling, reading and dramatisation, introducing new vocabulary, and raising phonological awareness for older children. It highlights the value of intentional pedagogies while also recognising the innate capacity of babies, toddlers and young children to collaborate and create. When young children are encouraged by educators to engage in story-telling and socio-dramatic play, they show improvements in comprehension, print and vocabulary awareness

and social competence. The review notes that educators play an important role in intentionally planning and preparing play-based experiences that promote early literacy skills. It highlights the importance of this role, particularly for those experiencing language delays. The review draws attention to the fact that while many studies focus on guided and intentional play experiences, there is also an established body of evidence to support the benefits of child-led, free play experiences in supporting oral language and communication skills.

Educators play an important role in intentionally planning and preparing play-based experiences that promote early literacy skills.

Promoting language use and development

The review advocates for the sharing of books not only to support early learning, but also for the enjoyment they provide in and of themselves. Sharing books can positively impact language learning and related literacy skills including vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print concepts skills. The review notes that motivation to read is equally important in developing language and literacy abilities and the active participation of listeners, where they are encouraged to respond, question, express an opinion is important. Acting out stories can support comprehension but the way books are shared and the experiences that follow are important. It also states that every baby, toddler and young child must have the opportunity to participate in frequent, sustained, language-rich interactions with their educators through shared reading experiences that allow for sustained dialogue so that listeners can interact and ask questions to clarify thinking. Shared reading and dialogic multi-media reading are also effective in developing the language skills of young EAL learners and for learning Irish as a second language when carefully scaffolded by the educator.

Sharing books can positively impact language learning and related literacy skills including vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print concepts skills.

The review notes the importance of assessing opportunities for language development and suggests learning stories as a means of documenting learning. When these are shared babies, toddlers and young children can discuss their experiences leading to more complex speech and longer conversational turns. The review is very clear in stating that the role of the educator in supporting language development is not contested.

Learning other languages

The review notes that Aistear (2009) acknowledged that babies, toddlers and young children become proficient users of at least one language and have an awareness and appreciation of other languages. It goes on to highlight the importance of recognising the foundational nature of language for learning, communication, and belongingness and the need to value and support all languages. In doing so, the family's role and involvement in language development are highlighted by the review. It explains that to learn a new language, it needs to be understandable for the learner and that movement, gestures, and facial expressions can make new vocabulary and language structures relatable. The review calls for positive plurilingual (welcoming all languages) environments to explore languages as a process for meaning-making which encourages a value-added perspective toward additional language learners and emphasises skills and agency rather than deficit assumptions. Therefore, EAL learners' funds of knowledge should be valued. The review notes that the use of peer interaction in early writing practices where home languages were valued had a positive effect on EAL learners' literacy development. It also notes that sociodramatic play presents an ideal forum to interact with peers and explore innovative meaning-making language practices and learner agency with them using their plurilingualism (switching between languages) in play, to gain access, to negotiate or to create fictional stories or roles. This enables EAL learners to move through the stages

Sociodramatic play presents an ideal forum to interact with peers and explore innovative meaning-making language practices and learner agency with them using their plurilingualism (switching between languages) in play, to gain access, to negotiate or to create fictional stories or roles.

of language acquisition in an appropriate manner. The review also notes the importance of repetition in learning a language. Opportunities to encounter vocabulary on multiple occasions is an important aspect as are gestures, pictures, visuals props, and nursery rhymes. The review notes there is potential scope in the update of *Aistear* to include references to native speakers of Irish, with differentiated pedagogies to support first-language speakers – those exposed to Irish from birth – and second-language learners. The review notes that Aim 2 of the Theme of Communicating (2009) emphasises linguistic experiences that spark joy, excitement, engagement and interest to foster the rich oral language development. This focus is endorsed in the review.

Aim 3: Children will broaden their understanding of the world by making sense of experiences through language

The review notes the importance of babies, toddlers and young children making sense through various literacies as they combine verbal, visual and physical modes to make meaning with their funds of knowledge. The review sets out the importance of educators understanding the different ways they communicate and make meaning-making so that their preferred ways are noticed, nurtured and extended. It notes that vocabulary, in addition to the ability to use language appropriately in social contexts, impacts on later academic achievement. The review highlights that the connection between the amount of vocabulary a child has and later school functioning has been widely accepted. It highlights vocabulary growth as an important ongoing target and that social communication skills, along with vocabulary development, should be a focus in the update of *Aistear*.

Exposure to a variety of texts in multiple formats and mediums

The review states while book reading is referenced in *Aistear* (2009) in the update early childhood educators should be encouraged to expose babies, toddlers and young children to a wide variety of informational texts. Informational texts provide factual details about real-world topics and can support a broader understanding of the world. The review notes there is a need for a multimodal approach to the sharing of books as babies, toddlers and young children come to ECEC with a range of meaning-making experiences. For example, digital storytelling is emerging in the literature as having a positive effect on literacy skills. It proposes that these differing experiences warrant the use of a culturally responsive approaches to communication and that approaching literacies through a multimodal lens gives educators the opportunity to see how different communication modes help babies, toddlers and young children to express themselves. The review details the importance

of games, shared reading and reciprocal interactions and highlights the benefits of responsive and guided literacy experiences. It also notes that consideration could be given to broadening intentional approaches to supporting early literacy and language within the update of *Aistear*.

Playing with symbols

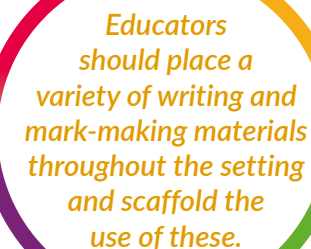
The review explains that the focus of Aim 3 of *Aistear* (2009) which referred to opportunities for early engagement with mark-making materials in enjoyable and meaningful contexts, is endorsed in the literature. It goes on to stress that babies, toddlers and young children benefit from experimenting with a variety of interesting materials at various stages during the day and that educators should place a variety of writing and mark-making materials throughout the setting and scaffold the use of these. These can include open-ended, natural materials, artefacts of interest and digital technologies to stimulate interest in communicating through mark-making.

The review details that toddlers begin with scribbles and simple drawings to communicate ideas in a symbolic fashion. This is the beginning of a series of stages that children progress through as they learn to write. It goes on to explain that emergent writing refers to the gradual emergence of writing skills and practices that can be supported by the educator through an interactive process that begins long before letters or words are recognised. The foundation of emergent writing is understanding that writing (in any form) can be a mode of communication. The review notes it is important to consider the time and space provided to develop these skills at a pace that suits the learner. It describes writing as developmental and stresses that this needs to be communicated clearly to educators and parents and that all attempts to communicate through writing should be recognised and valued. The review explains that as a child begins to communicate through writing, they move through a series of stages which are:

- Drawing
- Scribbling
- Wavy scribbles/mock letters
- Letter-like forms/mock letters, seemingly random letter strings

- Transitional writing (groups of letters that resemble words or words copied from the environment)
- Invented spelling (semi-phonetic/phonetic)
- Beginning word/phrase writing
- Transitional spelling (uses sophisticated phonic knowledge and visual strategies to spell with more accuracy)
- Conventional spelling.

The review emphasises that writing has its foundation in oral expression and is supported by interactions. Writing can also support oral interactions including extending storytelling and play scenarios as the act of drawing and writing can help children organise their thoughts in a manner that is useful not just for current interactions and play purposes but supports future understandings of more formal literacy and numeracy. The review notes that babies, toddlers and young children should be encouraged to use a variety of cultural symbols as part of meaningful activities in their play. It goes on to argue that educators need to extend the range of literacy pedagogies used so that it does not unduly privilege alphabetical symbolic representations, but brings in multimodal representations, particularly those typical of digital media which enables mode switching. The review suggests that by playing in a way that requires the manipulation of physical objects with symbolic meaning, computational thinking through coding and programming can provide engagement with a new literacy for communicate ideas. The review suggests that there is scope for enhancement of such approaches within the update of *Aistear*'s Communicating Theme (2009) and where possible, the curriculum should embrace the potential of digital play experiences including digital storytelling along with a variety of interesting and aesthetic materials to enhance mark making and meaning making through symbols.



Educators should place a variety of writing and mark-making materials throughout the setting and scaffold the use of these.

Aim 4: Children will express themselves creatively and imaginatively

The review explains that *Aistear's* Aim 4 (2009) focused on the communicative potential of creative and imaginative opportunities for babies, toddlers and young children to share their feelings, thoughts and ideas and to respond to such experiences. It goes on to state that arts-based and playful experiences enable them to share what they know, think or understand about the world around them. The review notes that in considering play, *Aistear* (2009) recognised the importance of creative play.

Arts-based and playful experiences enable babies, toddlers and young children to share what they know, think or understand about the world around them.

It stresses that an arts-based, playful pedagogy should foster exploration, creativity, self-expression with access to open-ended resources, including digital technologies. The review suggests that an updated *Aistear* could give consideration to various forms of 2D and 3D representations and expressions that facilitate creative and agentic tendencies, while simultaneously supporting learning and development across the early childhood curriculum. Arts-based and playful activities offer opportunities for social interactions and involve sustained shared thinking. It goes on to note that the pedagogical strategies of linguistic scaffolding, listening and noticing can advance oral language competencies while participating in the arts as they encourage agency and participation in conversations at a higher level and can provide information about the meaning of drawings and mark-making. Visual arts, music and drama, provide a multimodal context to communicate knowledge and make sense of their worlds for babies, toddlers and young children.

Visual arts

The review highlights that experiences with visual arts can enable babies, toddlers and young children to express themselves cognitively, aesthetically and creatively. It states that rather than seeing mark-making and drawing as a pre-literacy activity instead it should be seen as an important form of communication, empowering mark-makers into meaning-makers. It can improve communication and help babies, toddlers and young children make sense of previous experiences and knowledge as well as helping to develop new understandings.

Experiences with visual arts can enable babies, toddlers and young children to express themselves cognitively, aesthetically and creatively.

Music

The review stresses that music is a distinct and essential form of communication that occurs naturally from birth onwards as babies, toddlers and young children engage in musical play regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds. It goes on to explain that music provides two different roles for communication. First it acts as an expressive and/or communication tool and second, musical activities provide the experiences in which communication happens.

Music is a distinct and essential form of communication that occurs naturally from birth onwards as babies, toddlers and young children engage in musical play regardless of their cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

The review notes that musical experiences are good for everyone and can be linked to a sense of belonging and can promote psychosocial behaviours like the ability to be calm, to focus, attend to others, as well as enhance or facilitate self- and co-regulation. It goes on to say that music nurtures the capacity to communicate and relate to others and supports critical thinking, creativity and collaboration. However, the review notes that creative musical

play differs from music activities associated with rituals or guided musical play as it involves free exploration, spontaneous improvisation. Babies, toddlers and young children have an extraordinary capacity for creativity with music which they can communicate independent of cultural differences. The review also advocates for the use of nursery rhymes as they support multiple domains of development including the skills needed to communicate needs and wants in socially appropriate ways, symbolic use of language and storytelling. It notes that the rhythmic and action-orientated characteristics of nursery rhymes offer ways to make sense of words, numbers and concepts in a playful way.

Drama

The review notes that drama provides language-rich, social contexts for understanding language and can introduce new language structures and vocabulary. Drama provides opportunities to use and combine communication modes to actively engage and interact with others. The review notes that the concept of drama includes socio-dramatic play and points out that while *Aistear's* Aim 4 (2009) identified the context of drama in terms of supporting creative and imaginative expression. The review stresses that early childhood educators must understand multimodal expressions to respond with appropriate pedagogical strategies to support holistic development. There must be a recognition of the rich contribution that the arts offer to babies, toddlers and young children to express the thoughts and ideas and recommends that arts-based and playful experiences cannot merely be viewed as a precursor to writing but rather there is a need for educators to take a broad view of literacies as modes of communication, conceptualisation and meaning-making. The review stresses that babies, toddlers and young children need access and choice to interact and play with a range of toys (including open-ended and digital), artefacts and cultural resources to promote creativity.

Drama provides language-rich, social contexts for understanding language and can introduce new language structures and vocabulary.

Play

The review suggests that an updated *Aistear* should consider making explicit reference to play as a context for communication, meaning-making and expression. It should also spotlight the full potential of creative and imaginative experiences of play, story, poetry, music, art, movement and drama in developing communicative competence. The review suggests that through playful engagement and interaction with toys, artefacts and other cultural tools, including digital technologies and tools, babies, toddlers and young children experiment how to represent the world through many forms of literacy. Therefore, the review proposes that play provides a meaningful context for participating and negotiating communicative experiences. It goes on to point out that play experiences support communication before productive language skills have been developed and that certain types of tools facilitate both individual play and joint activities.

Through playful engagement and interaction with toys, artefacts and other cultural tools, including digital technologies and tools, babies, toddlers and young children experiment how to represent the world through many forms of literacy.

The review notes the strong association between pretend play and developing creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking and its interconnected relationship with early literacy development which it notes is well-established. The review states that any consideration of play needs to incorporate various modes of representation including technology as it provides a modality of representation and touch technology functionality which goes beyond traditional literacy skills. Taking into account digital devices in homes, the review articulates the need for educators to build on these funds of knowledge.

Conclusion

The review re-affirms the relevance of *Aistear's* Theme of Communicating (2009) and identifies areas for updating. It calls for the update to continue to recognise the multiple ways babies, toddlers and young children communicate as this is vital so that educators value the communicative abilities of all.

Babies, toddlers and young children have the right to be heard and to have freedom of expression through a variety of ways – orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of their choice. The review highlights the importance of an inclusive and responsive approach which promotes multimodal communication. The review notes the Theme of Communicating (2009) was about empowering babies, toddlers and young children to use their agency to give, receive and make sense of information through multimodal channels that incorporated their cultural capital and serve their social needs. The review acknowledges the educator's role in creating an environment where communication can thrive, so that everyone is comfortable expressing themselves in a variety of ways so that communication can flourish. It highlights the importance of the educator carefully scaffolding and nurturing language development, valuing every attempt to speak, draw, write or use gesture, body language or digital means of expression. The review states that communication should be viewed as an important social tool to enable the sharing of cultural funds of knowledge. It states that an updated *Aistear* should continue to facilitate babies, toddlers and young children to engage with a wide variety of texts, symbols and experiences in order to widen their understanding of the world. The review stresses that agency in communication is essential. It calls for an updated *Aistear* to continue to include arts-based and playful experiences, digital modes, mark-making and writing so babies, toddlers and young children can be multimodal communicators and meaning-makers. The review draws particular attention to those learning English as an Additional Language (EAL), the influence of digital technology on communication and the need to recognise babies, toddlers and young children as multimodal communicators and meaning-makers in the update of *Aistear*.

Updates to the Theme of Communicating

Like *Aistear* (2009), *Aistear* (2024) states that the Theme of Communicating is about babies, toddlers and young children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, feelings, interests, needs and rights with others with growing *muinín* (confidence) and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. While similar to the original, the opening sentence has been expanded to include needs and rights – two very important concepts. The findings of the review re-affirmed the relevance of *Aistear's* existing Theme of Communicating and identified areas for updating, which have now been incorporated.

In the update there has been a move away from describing communication as 'non-verbal' or 'verbal' as it detracts from the importance of the variety of early communicative intentions. Instead, there is a greater focus on communication multimodalities such as gesture, posture, expression, tone and eye-gaze that signal babies, toddlers and young children's interest, engagement and communicative intent in the update. The update also highlights the importance of babies, toddlers and young children interpreting and responding to the intentions, signals and social communication of others, as these are important skills in social and communicative development.

The update also emphasises the importance of allowing time and space for educators to notice, listen, respect and understand what is being communicated – both through the key person approach and through slow relational pedagogy. Babies, toddlers and young children's bodies, emotions and brains work together as they pursue their actions and communicate and make-meaning. The update also makes more explicit the importance of communicative agency, ensuring that babies, toddlers and young children's multiple ways of being, knowing and communicating are noticed and responded to. Emphasising multimodality in the update is inclusive of all modes and ways that babies, toddlers and young children communicate and supports agency and a sense of identity and belonging.

There is a greater recognition of the importance of supporting home languages and the update highlights the importance of opportunities to learn their own and other languages within a multicultural society. The update also includes a focus on learning about the importance of *Gaeilge* (Irish) as part of our linguistic heritage.

A greater emphasis on the importance of emergent literacies is included with the understanding that this needs to be underpinned by a strong foundation in oral language(s). The importance of developing a positive disposition towards literacy has been maintained and the use of books and digital technologies where developmentally appropriate has been outlined. Play and the importance of arts in supporting communication and creativity has also been maintained.

The update signals the importance of inclusive and rich communicative environments so that babies, toddlers and young children can be agentic, competent and confident communicators.

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 Communicating

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 Communicating. 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.

Through nurturing relationships within a supportive environment, the educator:	Birth to 18 months	12 months to 3 years	2.5 to 6 years
understands and values multi-modal communication and is attuned to individual preferences and communicative intent through the key person approach and slow relational pedagogy	<i>For babies, the educator:</i> acknowledges all forms of communication as meaningful. Interprets and responds quickly – soothing when upset, verbalising their intentions by responding to gestures with words. Makes time to establish eye contact, speaks when interacting, pauses to take turns. Uses infant-directed speech – a distinctly higher pitch, short phrases, simple words, a slow pace, and elongated vowels.	<i>For toddlers, the educator:</i> encourages them to interpret both their own and others' different ways of communicating. Helps them understand expressions and body language – shaking the head means <i>no</i> , a thumbs up means <i>yes</i> , pointing means trying to show something. Uses and encourages gestures and signing to support speech. Responds when they use a gesture for help: <i>I'm just coming to help you now.</i>	<i>For young children, the educator:</i> mirrors and helps extend their preferred communication style. Supports them to further understand the different ways they and others communicate – some speak the same language, some have different home languages, some sign, some use technology, some express themselves through behaviours – knocking things or hitting out when they find it hard to communicate with words.
respects the right to choose whether or not to engage with others or with experiences, supporting their development as competent and confident communicators	responds to their communications and respects their decision not to participate – in an action song. Understands sometimes they prefer to sit and observe or engage with something else.	responds quickly to expressions of preferences – when they say ' <i>Stop!</i> ' or cover their ears because someone is talking too much or is too close. Replies <i>Thank you for telling me. I'll give you space.</i> Welcomes changes of mind – after declining or stepping away. They can rejoin an experience or vice versa.	responds to them and values their choices, knowing that hitting out may signal social rejection or overwhelming sensory or social input. Acknowledges and reaffirms their agency by saying <i>I understand. It's too loud for you. You can sit on my lap or play somewhere quieter. Supports decisions such as Sam doesn't feel like playing chase right now. Would you like me to play instead while Sam finishes what he is doing.</i>

supports language development including vocabulary development and the development of listening and receptive skills

describes what is happening around them. Names familiar objects and experiences, linking words to actions – *You crawled over the mat to reach the red truck. I can see you are excited to go outside as you wave your hands and your feet.* Provides opportunities to learn language through observing, playing, and listening. Repeats names and actions. Introduces new words and repeats regularly. Asks rhetorical questions. *I'm a silly billy for forgetting the keys, aren't I?* Models attentive listening and responds to gurgles, cries, smiles with intentionality. Helps develop listening skills by using varied voice tones, music, movement, songs and rhymes. Uses the human voice whenever possible and leaves pauses that invite them to join in.

introduces new words in context and models more complex language structures – adding descriptive words: *The snail crawled slowly, The big giant was very hungry, Tony is sad because his pet hamster is sick.* Responds to their efforts and focuses on what they are trying to communicate. Instead of correcting “ba” for “ball,” says *Ball! Yes, I understand you want the ball.* Asks who, what, when, why and how questions. Introduces sequencing and connecting words – *First... then...* Provides opportunities to listen to a variety of sounds, and to describe and identify them – birds, dogs, traffic, clock ticking. Plays listening games that focus on particular sounds or sound patterns. Encourages turn-taking when listening to peers and provides props to support engagement – a microphone for the speaker.

provides opportunities to talk with others one-to-one, in pair or in small groups – saying nursery rhymes or sharing news. Plays language games such as *I spy* or *tongue twisters* and encourages them to retell and sequence stories or create their own (perhaps recording it, playing it back or writing it down to act it out). Expands their efforts to speak focusing on extending their vocabulary and introducing new adjectives, prepositions, action verbs and play related terminology. Encourages attentive listening among peers and works with them to establish *how we listen* rules, promoting respect for each other's contributions. Organises listening games.

understands, values and uses free play, guided play, educator led play and social interaction to support communication

supports language development by ensuring they experience a blend of different play approaches. Observes as they engage with a toy and introduces words – crinkly, noisy, playing, pressing, fun. Plays games – pauses for them to respond, fostering turn-taking skills. Fosters engagement in pretend/socio dramatic play – barking like a dog, singing a song to help Teddy sleep. Encourages the use of dolls, puppets, dress-up items, everyday objects to encourage communication.

supports language development by observing their play and describing what they are doing. Sets up one- to-one play experiences and joins as a co-player to better understand. Uses statements, questions and prompts where appropriate to encourage interaction. Intentionally organises small group play to introduce new words related to a topic of interest or to clarify ideas or thinking. Introduces props related to a story and observes the conversations and interactions these spark. Encourages retelling and adapting stories and lived experiences.

supports language development by observing them play on their own and with others. Sets up open-ended small group play experiences to support sequencing, negotiating and descriptive language. Invites them to talk about the steps they took to complete tasks. Sets up educator led play opportunities – a feely bag game to predict and describe. Supports retelling and adapting stories and lived experiences – provides finger puppets or small world figures.

<p>supports creative expression through music, song, rhyme and dance</p>	<p>exposes them to a variety of music, songs, rhymes. Involves them in saying rhymes and singing – pausing and waiting for them to imitate an action, make a sound for a familiar line or word. Repeats songs and rhymes often so they become familiar with them. Plays a variety of music and encourages responses – clapping, tapping, waving, babbling, moving.</p>	<p>encourages them to listen to and respond to different types of music. Describes and uses facial expressions to explain how pieces of music make people feel. Provides a variety of home-made and real musical instruments. Sings different songs and rhymes regularly so they become familiar with the words. Provides props for dancing – scarves, ribbons, fabric pieces. Invites family members who sing or play instruments to share their talents.</p>	<p>introduces them to different types of music and musical instruments along with their names. Provides opportunities for moving to music inside and outside – hopping, twirling, crawling, jumping, dancing, skipping. Invites them to focus on features of different pieces of music – fast/slow, high/low and loud/soft. Plays rhyming games or making up nonsense words, (e.g., man, tan, ban, dan, chan, wan). Encourages them to sing and learn the words of different songs, to form a band, make and play different instruments. Invites local musicians in.</p>
<p>uses and encourages the use of language of feelings</p>	<p>talks about emotions and put words to feelings – <i>You are happy because you are outside. You get excited when you see Daddy at the door to collect it. You feel relaxed when you have your soother and your bunny with you as you get ready for your nap.</i></p>	<p>chats about different emotions – happy, sad, angry. Put words to feelings and helps them cope when they get overwhelmed by talking them through it. Reads and discusses books that reflect a range of emotions and encourages them to think and talk about their own and others' feelings – <i>Molly got scared when ...</i> Has posters and displays showing different emotions.</p>	<p>helps them understand and name emotions – joy, sadness, fear, worry, jealousy. Encourages them to work through emotions – naming them and offering coping strategies. Acknowledges emotions communicated – <i>You're stomping your feet really hard—I can see you're frustrated.</i> Plans small group discussions about feelings and behaviours. Encourages making and using emotion masks (happy, sad, surprised, angry). Reads stories that illustrate different emotions in everyday experiences.</p>
<p>fosters a love of the arts as a means of communication</p>	<p>encourages them to explore a range of materials – painting with their hands, playing with bubbles, crawling on fabrics of different textures, touching grass, leaves and other natural materials.</p>	<p>ensures choice and agency in experiencing the arts. Provides a variety of art materials to engage with – open-ended resources – clay, pasta shapes, pinecones, stones, leaves, sand, water. Encourages the taking of photos to record creations.</p>	<p>has their art displays at eye level and listens as they talk about their creations. Displays famous pieces of art accompanied by provocations connected to the art piece. Invites discussion before or after they engage – <i>What do you think about it?, How does it make you feel?, or What colours and shapes can you find?</i> Organises visits to local museums or galleries for hands-on experiences. Invites local artists or family members with artistic talents for short hands-on sessions.</p>

<p>fosters higher order and critical thinking, memory, negotiating skills</p>	<p>follows their lead and supports problem-solving – putting a toy partially under a cloth and waiting to see if they pull it out and describing what they did. Supports understanding cause-and-effect by offering rattles, shakers, crinkly books, keys, pop-up toys that respond to actions. Facilitates repeated actions to test ideas and explains: <i>When you shake this, it makes a noise! Yes! You dropped the keys again. I will pick them up!</i> Plays object permanence games like peek-a-boo or hide-and-seek.</p>	<p>supports negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution – modelling waiting, sharing, scaffolding, offering alternatives <i>Hmm, both of you want the drum. How can we solve this problem? Why don't we leave it with Caoimhe as she had it first first and then Jake you can have your turn after 5 minutes. I will put a timer on so we don't forget.</i> Organises hide and seek games.</p>	<p>introduces negotiating language during play: <i>Can I be the doctor? (requesting), You did it the last time so (persuading), Okay, I'll be the patient first, then I'll be the Doctor (compromising).</i> Asks open-ended questions to encourage thinking aloud and exploration, <i>I wonder how do aeroplanes stay up in the sky?</i> Encourages planning, predicting, speculating and problem-solving. Encourages them to play memory games – adding to lists – <i>I went to the shop and I bought...</i></p>
<p>encourages mark-making for enjoyment</p>	<p>provides safe materials for mark-making – non-toxic paint, food colouring, water, brushes, paper, cornflour, gloop, sand, playdough, cardboard. Encourages them to use fingers, toes, large paint brushes to make marks.</p>	<p>provides mark-making materials in different areas indoors and outdoors – paints, crayons, chalk, clay, play dough, sponges, rollers, toothbrushes, pinecones, various types of paper, cardboard, brushes. Helps them become familiar with print through drawing, painting and making marks with a variety of tools. Observes as they engage with brushes and with water to paint on paths, walls, fences, or rocks.</p>	<p>provides opportunities to make sense of experiences through mark-making. A writing area is available with post-its, envelopes, pens, pencils, crayons, clipboards with pencils attached, and typewriters accessible throughout the day. Encourages messy play through mark-making, using hands, feet, sponges, cotton balls and sticks to make lines, shapes, dots, smears, swirls with paints, sand, flour. Makes space for large-scale movement-based mark-making – drawing with crayons, markers, chalk or water while standing, kneeling or lying down.</p>
<p>understands the developmental process of emergent writing and models the use of meaning-making through mark-making and early writing experiences.</p>	<p>helps them engage with mark making materials inside and outside – chunky crayons, paint in trays, clay, wet, sand. Notices how they respond. Models how to hold a brush.</p>	<p>values all attempts to communicate through mark-making. Makes books of drawings, photographs, writing with written descriptions using their own words. Encourages those that aren't particularly keen by organising small group mark-making experiences related to interests or favourite stories. Offers guided but open-ended invitations – <i>Would you like to make a line with the stick that goes all the way across the sand tray? I wonder what kinds of marks can this stone make?</i></p>	<p>focuses on the process and encourages making shapes and lines before letters. Encourages drawing lines, circles, zigzags, letters indoors and outdoors. Scaffolds using a hose pipe to mark-make with water. Notices progression in mark-making – scribbles, letter-like forms, strings of letters, early phonetic writing (connected letters with sounds). Provides time and space to transition into conventional writing, avoiding templates or inappropriate formal instruction. Models using writing to make shopping lists, convey messages including using digital technologies where developmentally appropriate.</p>

<p>creates a print-rich environment and fosters a love of and understanding of books, using digital technologies where developmentally appropriate</p>	<p>shares a variety of books, including personal learning journals and the babies' favourite stories. Encourages them to lift flaps, feel textures, and press buttons to hear sounds. Looks at and talks about pictures and photographs that link to their experiences.</p>	<p>reads, enjoys and explores stories drawing on new words and modelling their use in meaningful ways. Uses gestures, puppets and different voices to bring stories alive. Invites toddlers to 'read' stories. Has a variety of books available in different areas – inside and outside. Organises making books related to family/interests Organises visits to the library or for the mobile library to visit.</p>	<p>encourages dialogic reading by inviting them to predict the story and explore characters and events. Provides opportunities for them to discuss, think, suggest, recount, and speculate. Explores topics and interests arising from books, including informational texts that introduce Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) and sustainability concepts as well as digital storytelling. Where developmentally appropriate, models how to use digital technologies to gather information – finding and following a recipe, booking tickets or checking the weather forecast.</p>
<p>understands the developmental process of emergent reading and provides appropriate scaffolding.</p>	<p>models how to use books in a variety of languages – holding them the right-way up, reading left to right or right to left depending on the language, top to bottom and turning pages in sequence.</p>	<p>introduces different aspects of books – author, illustrator. Encourages exploration and play with magnetic or wooden letters. Draws toddlers' attention to letters in the environment – notices, signs, food containers, shop windows, books.</p>	<p>uses a variety of books to support the development of early reading skills. Draws attention to letters and their sounds during the day in their play, routines and while reading books. Encourages shared reading experiences. Where developmentally appropriate, facilitates the use of digital technologies.</p>
<p>builds on their linguistic funds of knowledge and values and supports home languages (if different from setting) through culturally responsive approaches</p>	<p>intentionally speaks key words and phrases in their home language (if it is not English or Gaelige/Irish) – hello, thank you, please, goodbye. Asks families for support to do this respectfully.</p>	<p>encourages the use of home languages (if these are not English or Gaelige /Irish) for simple phrases or saying a rhyme – hello, goodbye, please, thank you. Provides books and audio resources that reflect home languages. Invites parents or extended family members to share stories or songs in their home languages.</p>	<p>helps them make connections between their home language and the language of the setting. Uses dual-language labels where possible. Introduces them to different languages and emphasises that all languages are important. Supports them to demonstrate their competence by asking questions <i>How would you say... at home?</i> Observing how they follow instructions or inviting them to explain how they did something to a friend.</p>

supports EAL learners to learn the language of the setting

uses simple, repeated language to connect words with objects and routines – during snack holds up a banana and says *'Banana. Would you like a banana? Yes? You'd like a banana.* Repeats key words slowly and clearly, pairing words with gestures or actions -pats the chair and says *Would you like to sit down here beside me?* Points to objects and names them.

pairs words with facial expressions – smiling while saying *'Well done for helping tidy up.'* Uses visual cues (pictures, objects, routines) to support understanding – a picture daily schedule, social stories. Uses gestures and words – points to the bathroom when it's time to wash hands, points to the schedule and says *'We are going outside next.'* Models everyday phrases such as *'It's your turn now.'* and *'Yes, I will help you next.'*

creates language-rich play invitations and acts as a co-player to introduce vocabulary in context. Supports peer interactions with others who can scaffold and model target language. Reads books with predictable, repetitive text to reinforce language learning.

