

Acknowledging the change:
Supporting the 'new'

Reopening settings post-lockdown

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ALTRAM



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“Stress can destroy much more than just our physical health. Too often it eats away at our hope, beliefs and faith.”

Charles F. Glassman

During the Covid-19 lockdown, we faced new and unnerving times. Things changed from day to day and it was extremely difficult to forward plan for anything.

As practitioners, we have been linking in with families and children in ways we have not done previously. We are now using software that some of us hadn't even heard of before March – Microsoft Teams, Zoom, SeeSaw etc.

We adapted quickly to this new way because we had to. For many of us, having to change our approach has been daunting, maybe even terrifying. We've been anxious, afraid and in awe at what's going on in the world around us. Working from home as an Early Years practitioner has its significant barriers to overcome and we, as an organisation, want to acknowledge that. We want to acknowledge you. You've been doing an amazing job so, from all of us, Go Raibh Maith Agaibh.

Adapting to this new approach is something that we've all had to come to terms with. Early Years practitioners are in the job they're in for the love of it. We know you have had many a sleepless night thinking about the children and families you work with – those added stresses and anxieties on top of worrying about your own families and loved ones.

There is no handbook to get us through this and we are all learning from each other. This will be a period of transition like none of us have done before.

So much of this year will be remembered for feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and worry and we need to acknowledge that and the impact on emotional and mental well-being during settling-in and planning for the year ahead. We know how difficult these times of transition will be for children and families – parents handing their child over at a set point, at a set time, not getting to go into the classroom and partake in the normal settling in process.

For those new parents who are sending their children to your Naíscóil and have never set foot in it and haven't met you or had a walk around your site... they will undoubtedly experience worry, stress and anxiety in ways that might never have faced before. We have to be there to meet their needs and put them at ease as best we can.

We're working together through this and we hope that we can support *you* in order for *you* to support your children and their families.



Time and time again we have heard the phrase “we’re all in this together” during the last few months of the Covid-19 crisis. However, this is a more appropriate way of looking at it. We are not all in the same boat but we are all weathering the same storm. Yes we are all facing the challenges of Coronavirus, but we also have individual circumstances at play – just like the families and children in our settings, be they in our daycare provision, SureStart settings, our Naíonraí, Naíscoileanna or Scoileanna.

Staff have been working remotely with families who have loved the time in lockdown – time when they have had to switch off and be at home. And we also have families who have additional responsibilities

that have been impacted on due to the lockdown – for example those families who have caring responsibilities for family members which has put immeasurable stress on them. Some of our children are from families where poverty, furlough and unemployment has played a massive role in making this time of lockdown the most challenging time they’ve ever encountered. We also have families where mental health has been a factor in their experience of lockdown – be that due to a longterm condition or due to the worry and anxiety of the unknown of Covid-19 that has now impacted on so many, as well as those families dealing with grieving during lockdown. Our children also come from families where parents are frontline workers and they’ve been brought into this new normal where they don’t run and hug their mummy and daddy when they come in the door from work - instead, they have learned to hold back on the most instinctive reaction of running to their parents. They now have to wait until their parents get showered and changed and until it’s safe for them to have contact.

There is no way we can underestimate the impact this lockdown will have had on the children and families we work with and, the reality is, that when they come back in to our settings, it’s also going to be a new normal for them. The setting the children left in March is not what they are coming back to. The layout will be different, the staffing may be different, expectations will be different, boundaries will be different, routine will be different. But our responsibilities will be the same – and that is to provide a safe, nurturing, learning environment. But how do we do that and how do we address the issues of transition and settling in whilst supporting and protecting our children from any more stress or worry? How do we support them best?

As we are all aware the guidance is ever changing and what was talked about in May is totally different from what is being issued from government now but the one thing that is constant and that won’t change is that we know – we are so aware – that our priority will be the emotional and mental well-being of each child in our care, their parents, and our staff teams. We need to acknowledge that everyone is coming at this with different anxieties and that’s ok. This is new to every single person. It’s only natural that worry and stress levels are heightened, but acknowledging that and creating a safe, nurturing space, will help in ensuring that we come through this.

During the lockdown period, a survey of parents took place which had a response from 41,917 parents across the North. The figures help give us an insight into how parents have felt during this lockdown and what home life has been like for them and their families.

- 71% responded to say that parenting during lockdown was a mix of 'good days and bad days'
- 17% said it 'wasn't great but they were getting by'
- 6% said it was terrible with loads of rows. (that's 23% that said it either wasn't great or worse which is almost a quarter so this is something we need to be conscious of for when our children are coming back in to our settings.)

The statistics in relation to the impact on mental health are what we need to pay attention to in order to best support the well-being of the children in our settings

- 32% of parents said their children were struggling to cope with their emotions. That's considerably high. I'm sure throughout the last few months many of us have had those days where we struggled to cope with our emotions and we're adults who have been taught to rationalise and regulate and we knew why we were doing what we were doing – we knew why we couldn't see family and friends – you might say we knew too much at times! But the majority of these children have no idea why they weren't going to school, why they didn't visit their granny and granda etc. Some of them may have heard the word coronavirus but what do they imagine that is in their heads? What are they comprehending that as? As a monster? As something that will get you? We've been living through a time where adverts on tvs and radios open with the line 'Coronavirus is killing people' – no wonder over 3 in 10 children struggled to cope with their emotions.
- 23% of parents said they had always struggled with their mental health but lockdown had made it worse, which is more than understandable.
- 15% of parents said they were having problems with their mental health for the first time
- In 23% of households, everyone was struggling.

I'm sure we can all relate to these statistics. It has been such an overwhelming time for so many people where the lives we were once used to changed completely overnight.

The last few months will have a long lasting impact on all so how do we work through that? How do we support the children and families in our settings?

Throughout this pandemic many will have faced deeply distressing or disturbing experiences – being separated from family and loved ones, contracting Coronavirus, family members contracting it, loved ones being admitted to hospital, to ICU, being hooked up to ventilators, or even the death of a loved one.

We are unaware as to the extent of what each child has endured during the lockdown but we have to be prepared to support their emotional needs and those of their parents. This settling in period will probably be one of the toughest with a particular increase in levels of separation anxiety (from both children and their parents).



TRAUMA-INDUCING
OR
TRAUMA-REDUCING



So how do we do it?

How do we create an environment that supports those wide-ranging emotional needs? The same way we've always done it. We take a step back. We use our knowledge to prepare us. We use Child Profiles to gather as much information as we can for settling in and we create an environment that supports the needs of those children. Child Profiles this year will have been edited to provide a space for parents to share with you any particular information relating to Coronavirus that they need to – if that child was affected personally by it. If they or a family member had it, if they are the children of frontline workers, if they were in a childcare provision that wasn't their normal, if they lost a loved one throughout the process. We now use that information to create our space.

We need, more than ever, to walk in to our settings and look all around it through the eyes of a 3 or 4 year old. We have seen images of areas taped off, tables yards apart, divider screens between children, marked off zones. Now imagine you're the child. You're coming into a setting you've never been in. You're taking the next milestone step on your educational journey and you walk into that environment. How do you feel? Are you scared? Intimidated? Overwhelmed? You grip that hand that's holding your hand even tighter. This isn't what you were expecting. There will be measures we will have to take, there is no doubt about that, but we can still work together to make sure the environment is welcoming, is friendly, is loving, is a tearmann for those children coming in. We need to work to make sure our environment is trauma-reducing and not trauma-inducing. For everyone's sake. Us as staff, the children and their parents.

If you feel it might be trauma-inducing or if you think it could be more trauma-reducing, the Brace framework is a good tool that will hopefully help you to develop your environment.

THE BRACE FRAMEWORK

- B**elonging – children feel connected to staff and peers
 - safe and secure environment, both physically and emotionally
 - engaged with both children and families

- R**outine - predictable routine
 - consistent approach to learning and behaviours

- A**ttachment - staff develop relationships with children and families
 - staff are attuned to the needs, emotions and behaviours of children

- C**apacity - children's strengths are identified
 - competency is promoted for all children
 - children are assisted to be successful

- E**motions - skills in recognition, expression and regulation of emotions are promoted
 - staff provide co-regulation and assist children to self-regulate
 - staff recognise and regulate their own emotions

The majority of these elements are things that we would typically expect from our settings but it's now even more important that we really make the effort to make sure these are engrained within our normal practice.

With so much uncertainty and panic in the world at the minute, we really need to give particular attention to certain elements of this framework – they all go hand in hand but the likes of supporting children to regulate through co/self-regulation is going to play a major role in helping them adapt as they begin their new school year in this new climate.

Returning back to the school environment is going to be daunting for many children (and staff) so we can only imagine how intimidating it might seem to those children stepping foot inside the Naíscoil building for the first time, especially those children who have never experienced a day care setting, a creche or a SureStart environment.

Be aware of the children’s emotions, watch for their facial expressions, be alert to any indicators that it’s getting too much for them and have a bank of support measures in place.

Have you taken note from your ‘Getting to know me’ booklets about certain things that settle particular children? Have you a calming area in your room where children can retreat to – with or without staff support? Perhaps there’s a story you could use? A calm down rhyme technique that you introduce the children to for them to use? The breathing technique below is a firm favourite and helps the children to regulate their breathing and in turn their heart rate and feelings of anxiety. One of the best things about this technique is that it needs no additional resources, it can be used at any time – inside, outside, in a subtle manner, with or without adult support – and can be shared with parents and it’s also something that they can use themselves too. There’s no age limit on this technique.



This year is going to be tough, that’s the one thing we know. But we also know that, as always, our role is to create a safe space for these children where all the worries of the world are left behind when they step into the tearmann of the Naíscoil. Use each other for support and try to create a tearmann for staff as well as children.

We will continue to use play to educate and to help those curious minds to grow and explore. We will use the power of play to get us through this pandemic, through the year ahead and to help heal wounds that the trauma of lockdown may have caused any of the children in our care. Play is a powerful tool, we are well aware of how crucial play is - our entire Pre-school curriculum is designed around it. It’s more important now than ever that we fully tap into the power of play and nurture the children in our care and support them in building their resilience, developing their skill base, nurturing their talents and strengths and making them feel safe. Thig linn seo a dhéanamh.

Useful links

[Education Re-start webpage](#)

[Pre-school Education: Guidance for re-opening settings](#)

[Covid-19 Infection prevention and control training resource for childcare settings](#)

[EA Supporting Learning](#)

[Safeguarding Board 'What just happened? Coping with Covid-19'](#)

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