



An Tumoideachas Gaeilge Sna Luathbhlianta  
Treoir Do Choistí

Irish-Medium Early Years Immersion Education  
Guidance For Committees



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guth na luathbhlianta

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An Tumoideachas Gaeilge Sna Luathbhlianta; Treoir Do Choistí  
Irish-Medium Early Years Immersion Education Guidance For Committees

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# Preface

## Purpose of the Material

This document is directed at the management committees of voluntary Irish-medium preschool settings. It provides basic information and recommendations to management committees so that they may formulate and implement policies and practices that will:

- give a coherent and informed impetus to the long-term strategic purpose and rational of Irish-medium education;
- ensure an effective day-to-day organisation and management of services;
- promote the delivery of quality outcomes for the children who attend.
- The document has several strands:
- it provides an understanding of Irish-medium early years immersion education programmes;
- it places Irish-medium early years immersion education programmes within the overall care and education context;
- it provides information on the regulatory context within which Irish-medium early years immersion education settings function and the statutory and legislative requirements to be met;
- it provides information on Irish-medium Early Years specific support mechanisms.

## Sections included in the Material

The information in this document is presented in four sections along with a number of appendices.

**Section 1** provides some initial introductory information.

**Section 2** provides an overview of the main strands underpinning Irish-medium Early Years.

**Section 3** explores staff and committee responsibilities in relation to care, play-based learning and Irish language acquisition, as well as some additional responsibilities carried by the Leader of the setting.

**Section 4** looks at issues of governance in some detail and provides signposting to relevant agencies and organisations.

**The Appendices** address a range of additional issues.

Statutory Irish-medium early years immersion education settings are managed by a Board of Governors within a different statutory and legislative framework. However, much of the material in this pamphlet may be of benefit in informing the policy and decision-making processes undertaken by such a Board of Governors.



This section provides some initial introductory information.

### **Language Immersion Education: General**

Language immersion education is a process of education whereby children are educated through a language that is not the language of the home. It happens most frequently in minority or lesser-used language contexts.

Language immersion education programmes and initiatives happen world-wide, across a diverse range of socio-linguistic contexts, with varying degrees of legislative support and funding and varying degrees of language-community size or speaker age-profile, e.g., Maori in New Zealand, French in Canada, as well as Catalan, Basque and Breton in Europe.

In these islands we have immersion programmes for Welsh in Wales, Gaelic in Scotland, Manx in the Isle of Man, and Irish in Ireland, north and south. The vast majority of children in Irish-medium education are from English-speaking homes. This has significant implications for pedagogy and methodology.

For the small minority of children for whom Irish is the home language, or where there is an even balance between Irish as a home language and another language, Irish-medium education is a home language experience and is not, strictly speaking, an immersion experience. Irish-medium education settings can comfortably accommodate children from either language background. Practitioners, as part of good practice, implement strategies of differentiated learning that take children's prior experiences into account.

### **The Purpose of Irish-medium Early Years Settings**

Irish-medium early years immersion education settings have three complementary and overlapping components, each equally indispensable:

- the physical and emotional care of the child in a safe and secure environment;
- the provision of a wide range of relevant learning experiences that will promote all aspects of the child's creative, intellectual, physical, perceptual, manipulative, social, emotional and personal development;
- the incorporation of language activities that will promote a level of competence in Irish compatible with the demands of the primary one curriculum in an Irish-medium primary school.

The provision of an environment that espouses the highest quality of care and promotes effective learning across a wide range of developmental areas is a significant challenge. The provision of a learning environment that additionally seeks to ensure the successful acquisition of initial and increasing Irish language competence by young children, is an even greater challenge.

Effective high-quality preschool education is the cornerstone on which Irish-medium education is founded. The importance of high-quality education at this level cannot be over-emphasised. Any inadequacies in the foundation being laid at this level will have long-term effects, in terms of pupil achievement, parental confidence, staff morale and public perception of the sector.

If Irish-medium preschool education is to have widespread success, a rigorous and discriminating approach is required by all those involved. However, management committees are critical in ensuring that all conditions that promote quality provision are in place.

## Regulatory context in which Irish-medium preschool education functions

Irish-medium preschool education, as with all preschool education, falls within the remits of two Government Departments:

- the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety;
- the Department of Education.

Each Department has differing but complementary roles and responsibilities. All preschools are obliged to comply with a range of requirements and conditions to ensure initial and continuing registration as well as funding.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with initial and ongoing registration, accommodation and numbers as well as health and safety. Social Services carry out an annual inspection to ensure compliance with regulations; a written report is produced, and settings are legally required to address any compliance issues.

The Department of Education is concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with the quality of learning. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carry out inspections in all preschool settings in regular cycles of inspection. Preschools are awarded a specific grade of quality. The inspection report and grade achieved are available to the public and shared with relevant agencies.

## Altram Support Services

### General

Altram provides support for all types of Irish-medium preschools and early years provision.

At both Board and staff levels, Altram has interrelated experience and specialisms across education, care, immersion methodology and practitioner language needs, as well as community development.

Altram understands, in detail, the challenges of Irish-medium Early Years, across its many strands, and is well-placed to develop and promote a strategic perspective on its priorities.

### Practitioner Support

All voluntary preschool settings, funded under the Department of Education regulations, are required to have the support of a named Early Years Specialist and to attend training. Altram has a team of qualified Early Years Specialists who provide:

- regular on-site visits;
- written reports of visits that are provided to staff and the committee;
- monitoring of the implementation of recommendations;
- pre-inspection support;
- post-inspection support;
- cluster training;
- resource development.

### Committee Support

Altram provides support to committees in relation to a range of issues and challenges.

This support includes:

- organisation of training workshops;
- face-to-face meetings;
- advice regarding funding and grants;
- signposting to relevant services.

### Advocacy Support

Altram understands, in detail, the overall Early Years landscape in which Irish-medium Early Years functions and can therefore influence policy initiatives in the early stages, by recognising potential threats to the sector, or by capitalising, at an early stage, on potential opportunities.

Altram has established a broad network of contacts within Early Years agencies and is well-placed to exert influence, informally and formally, and to capitalise on opportunities to promote and progress the needs of the sector.

### **Parental Support**

Altram provides a range of resources and activities to support parents in participating in their children's education. Activities include resource development as well as workshops and face-to-face training.

### **Access NI Disclosure**

Altram provides an Access NI Disclosure service to committee members and practitioners.

<http://www.altram.org>

This process facilitates compliance with regional vetting procedures. Information on regional vetting guidance can be found on:

[http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/pdf/VET1\\_Vetting\\_Guidance\\_03\\_03\\_2014.pdf](http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/pdf/VET1_Vetting_Guidance_03_03_2014.pdf)

## **Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta Support Services**

Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta provides support in relation to:

- identifying new areas for Irish-medium education;
- working with and supporting local groups that have expressed an interest in a local Irish-medium initiative.

<http://www.comhairle.org/gaeilge>

With regard to the establishment of a new preschool setting, it is important that the local group ensure the involvement of Altram from an early stage.





As already indicated, Irish-medium early years immersion education settings have three complementary and overlapping components, each equally indispensable. These relate to:

- care;
- play-based learning;
- Irish language acquisition.

This section provides committees with more detailed information and guidance on these three components.

### Care

There are two strands to this component.

**Strand One** refers to the physical safety and care of children.

Attention to the physical safety and care of children ensures that children suffer no injury through carelessness or negligence.

**Strand Two** refers to the emotional safety and care of children.

Attention to the emotional safety and care of children ensures that children:

- feel happy, secure and confident
- know and trust staff;
- develop positive relationships with other children;
- know the rules and boundaries of behaviour;
- are supported in applying the rules and boundaries of behaviour.

### Play-based Learning

It is well known that young children learn best through play and practical activity.

All activities in the preschool are based on play. Play is frequently regarded as something that keeps children quiet and out of the way of busy adults - but something which has no real tangible benefits. The perception is that 'real' learning involves things like reading and writing, and until such activities occur many people attach little importance to what goes on beforehand.

However, it is through play that young children learn. From their earliest days in the cot, when they kick, grab and play with their fingers and toes, they are developing muscular strength and manual dexterity.

As they become more mobile, the number of objects within their reach increases. They use their mouths, skin and hands to explore the texture, taste and feel of things. While they increase their knowledge of their physical environment and their ability to manipulate it, their memory, perceptual and thinking skills are also developing. They are also learning that they are beings who are separate from their mothers and who are beginning to engage more proactively with the world around them.

As members of a family group, they assimilate information about human relationships, social order and an understanding of right and wrong.

One of the purposes of a preschool is to provide an environment in which children can continue to learn and practice useful skills and add to their knowledge of the world and of themselves.

Play-based learning recognises the role of practical activity in the young child's learning.

The preschool provides learning opportunities for children across a broad range of learning and developmental areas – social, personal, emotional, physical, creative, intellectual and cognitive.

Some examples of the developmental benefits of common preschool activities:

- Construction toys, physical activities and games enhance muscular strength and skills of muscle control, co-ordination and manipulation;
- Jigsaws, matching games and sorting activities develop skills of observation, perception, discrimination, comparison and classification;
- Creative and imaginative faculties are engaged through opportunities for role play and make-believe, drawing, modelling and craft activities;
- Story-telling, drama, songs and music develop listening skills, memory and concentration;
- Experiences and activities involving sand and water play, plants, pets and the environment stimulate intellectual curiosity, information-processing skills and the ability to think and analyse;
- Interaction with other children and adults supports children in learning how to co-operate with, communicate with and relate to others;
- As members of a group children learn skills of independence, organisation and the importance of participating in routines.

## Irish Language Acquisition

Central to its function, and that which gives the second language preschool its 'raison d'être', is the task of including - in a natural, relevant but effective manner - language activities that will bring the children to a high level of simple Irish, in preparation for primary education.

Many people have a simplistic, and sometimes inaccurate, view of the elements involved in second language learning in the preschool. There are two reasons for this.

The first relates to the fact that we know most children learn to speak a first language. In acquiring this first language, children seem to learn automatically, without apparent difficulty and without any apparent teaching by adults. The presumption is that a second language will be learnt in the same way.

The second derives from a theory of second language learning first put forward in the 1960's by the neuropsychologist, W. Penfield. Arising from his investigation of brain development, Penfield asserted that the brain, in its early development, is characterised by a certain plasticity and flexibility. During that period there is immense potential for learning. As the brain matures it becomes less supple and the potential for learning decreases. He claimed, therefore, that language learning was easier for young children than for older learners.

Penfield contributed significantly to the credibility of second language preschool education in its early history and his influence survives to the present day. His theories, along with the assumption that first and second language acquisition processes are similar, have had a strong impact on perceptions about second language preschool immersion programmes.

Penfield's theory predominated in creating the idea that second language learning is an uncomplicated process and that children learn a second language merely by being exposed to it. This very quickly leads to the belief that



any deliberately planned strategies or special skills on the part of the adult workers, beyond a basic ability to speak the second language, are unnecessary and superfluous to the success in second language learning in a preschool setting.

This belief is ill-founded. Firstly, comparisons between first language learning in the home and second language learning in the preschool do not have similar dynamics. Secondly, Penfield's theories of second language learning have been significantly undermined by subsequent research.

Language-learning is a very complex process and there are many elements within the process that we still do not fully understand. Significantly, there are major differences in the conditions under which the child learns a first language and the conditions under which s/he is learning the second in a preschool setting.

In the first language situation the child is surrounded by the language over a prolonged period each day. It is constantly spoken to her/him on a one-to-one basis. In the preschool the child is exposed to the language for a much shorter period of time. Because s/he is one of a group, the ratio of speakers to learners is lower and opportunities for one-to-one communication are few.

Furthermore, the child already has a first language and the need to communicate and express herself/himself is being fulfilled by her/his ability to use this home language. Consequently, the motivation to acquire a second language is not as pronounced as the motivation was to acquire the first language.

Recent studies have also shown that, in similar situations and contrary to Penfield's claims, older children and adults learn a language more rapidly and competently than younger children. Experts suggest that, whatever the outward appearance, the learning of language is, in fact, a complex task.

Except in the area of pronunciation, where younger children **do** have an advantage, older children and adults (with a more developed intellect and more sophisticated learning

strategies) are much more efficient at learning than are younger children, who do not have the same capabilities of analysis, memory or concentration.

Children's experiences in learning Irish:

- are based on enjoyment, play and practical activity;
- are integrated across the broad range of other learning experiences;
- are built up systematically layer upon layer;
- ensure they have sufficient skills in Irish to transfer with confidence to P1.

The initial emphasis in learning is on developing children's ability to understand Irish rather than the ability to speak Irish. Children's ability to understand Irish builds up gradually. As children become familiar with certain words and phrases and remember them, then the ability to speak Irish gradually begins to emerge.





This section focuses on some of the initial important responsibilities of the committee. In carrying out these responsibilities, it is important that the committee has a clear understanding of the responsibilities of the staff. Committees have a critical role in ensuring policies, procedures and structures are in place that proactively support and guide staff in providing and maintaining a quality learning environment.

A committee on its own cannot ensure the provision of a quality learning environment. Similarly, a staff on its own, no matter how skilled or conscientious, cannot ensure the provision of a quality learning environment. Staff require the co-operation and support of an engaged committee that understands its responsibilities and implements them effectively.

### **Staff Responsibilities in relation to Care**

In supporting the physical safety and care of children staff must ensure that:

- the physical environment is safe;
- the equipment is safe and used properly;
- resources and equipment are maintained and cared for;
- standards of cleanliness and hygiene are implemented.

In carrying out these responsibilities staff must:

- implement all safety directions and advice;
- take action to anticipate and prevent problems;
- remain observant and watchful.

In promoting the emotional safety and care of children staff must:

- treat children with dignity, respect and good manners;
- create an atmosphere that is warm, positive and friendly;
- create an atmosphere that promotes a sense of security;

- encourage and praise children;
- show empathy and patience;
- be fair and consistent in all their dealings;
- create an atmosphere of inclusivity and tolerance;
- provide clear rules and direction.

Of paramount importance in promoting the emotional safety and care of children are the relationships that exist between the staff as a team and between the staff and the children.

### **Committee Responsibilities in relation to Care**

In supporting the physical safety and care of children the committee must ensure that:

- it appoints staff with appropriate regulatory qualifications (outlined in Health and Social Care Trust Minimum Standards);
- it appoints staff with personal characteristics that support a culture and ethos of quality pastoral care;
- all health and safety procedures and policies are implemented and adhered to effectively;
- a system is in place that alerts the committee promptly to any issues of health and safety that arise;
- it addresses any issues of health and safety in a timely fashion;
- staff are appropriately supported in maintaining premises to a high standard of hygiene and cleanliness through the:
  - inclusion of additional time for cleaning activities to staff hours,
  - provision of materials to support cleanliness and hygiene within the setting,
  - establishment of an additional regular cleaning rota of the premises;
- reads, reflects upon and takes action on the relevant issues raised in the EYS reports.

## Staff Responsibilities in relation to Play-Based Learning

In supporting an appropriate play-based learning environment staff must:

- understand and clearly define the learning needs of the children - social, emotional, personal, physical, creative, aesthetic, intellectual and linguistic;
- understand the learning potential of the setting's play materials and resources;
- develop strategies to extend and enrich the learning potential of play materials and resources;
- encourage an active participatory approach to the learning process;
- promote attitudes of interest, curiosity, independence and responsibility;
- provide for children's progress across a broad range of learning and developmental areas.

In addition, staff must:

- plan and implement activities across a comprehensive range of learning areas;
- plan and implement activities to reflect a diverse range of experience, interest, ability and maturity;
- plan activities to stimulate or maintain a high level of enjoyment, interest and motivation;
- plan activities that promote progression in children's learning;
- integrate planning for the broad areas of learning with planning for language development;
- implement strategies to monitor and record children's progress.

## Committee Responsibilities in relation to Play-Based Learning

In supporting an appropriate play-based learning environment the committee must:

- appoint staff with appropriate regulatory qualifications (outlined in the Health and Social Care Trust Minimum Standards);
- appoint staff with personal and professional characteristics that support the effective running of the preschool – intelligence, enthusiasm, common sense, commitment, approachability, empathy, initiative and imagination and the ability to work closely with, and communicate with others;
- ensure that a realistic budget is in place to provide a comprehensive range of preschool play equipment and resources that,
  - accommodates the broad range of learning and developmental areas to be addressed,
  - allows for diversity and progression in children's learning,
  - allows for replenishment of expendable materials,
  - allows for replacement of broken or tired equipment;
- ensure the staff's working hours includes weekly periods of team planning for the children's learning;
- ensure staff benefit from all cluster training days offered by the EYS support structure;
- read, reflect upon and act on the relevant issues raised in the EYS reports.



## Staff Responsibilities in relation to Irish Language Acquisition

In providing an environment for the successful learning of a second language in the pre-school, staff must try to counterbalance the disadvantages of:

- reduced exposure;
- ratio of speakers to learners;
- children's immature levels of concentration;
- children's lack of conscious motivation to learn.

The job of the staff is a complex one. They must provide a rich language environment that is relevant to the needs and nature of the young child by ensuring that they:

- use Irish at all times;
- speak Irish naturally and frequently with children in a variety of activities;
- maintain a high level of verbal interaction with children in all activities;
- maintain a sustained flow of language with children;
- co-operate with colleagues in providing opportunities to use language with children;
- provide clues that will help children understand what they are saying;
- use a simplified register;
- use strategies to increase exposure to key language areas;
- use coherent strategies to help children remember key language;
- systematically build up children's familiarity with key language areas;
- provide children with opportunities to say things in Irish;
- respond appropriately to children's attempts to use Irish.

In addition, staff must:

- plan and implement language activities across a diverse range of developmental areas;
- provide a rich language environment that is relevant to the needs and nature of the young child;
- plan the learning opportunities in a systematic, organised fashion, in order to focus on, practise, consolidate and extend those aspects of language, both specific

and general, that are part of the language programme;

- plan activities that reflect differing levels of ability and experience;
- plan activities to stimulate or maintain a high level of enjoyment, interest and motivation;
- plan activities that promote progression in children's learning;
- integrate planning for language development with planning for the overall developmental needs of the children;
- implement strategies to monitor and record children's progress;
- incorporate strategies for assessing the children's progress.

## Committee Responsibilities in Relation to Irish Language Acquisition

In providing an environment for the successful learning of a second language in the preschool the committee must:

- appoint staff who have the appropriate level of Irish to enable them to deliver children's language learning to a high level of excellence;
  - ensure that staff attend, an initial period of training in immersion methodology and good practice,
  - follow up with continuous professional development in immersion methodology and good practice,
- ensure that staff benefit from any training relating to immersion methodology offered by the EYS support structure and Altram;
- read, reflect upon and act on the relevant issues raised in the EYS reports.

It is essential that care is taken in the appointment of staff. The most important qualification for staff working in an Irish-medium immersion preschool is a high level of fluency in Irish. This does not mean university standard fluency. However, fluency, confidence and accuracy within the vocabulary and grammar register relevant to communicating and interacting with young children, is essential if the optimal level of Irish language competence is to be achieved.

It is acknowledged that it is sometimes difficult to appoint a full staff who all have the necessary fluency. In such circumstances it is essential that **at least the Leader** has the appropriate level of Irish to enable her/him to deliver children's language learning to a high level of excellence. Other staff should only be appointed on the condition they attend an effective Irish class and that their progress towards increasing fluency is monitored.

## Some additional staff responsibilities

The following additional responsibilities are usually carried out by the Leader:

- liaising with Altram support staff;
- liaising with parents about their children;
- liaising with Social Services and the Education Training Inspectorate;
- liaising with other bodies in relation to individual children, e.g. health visitors, speech therapists etc.;
- liaising with the management committee;
- liaising with Environmental Health and completing relevant procedures and documentation;
- implementing decisions and policies formulated by the management committee;
- compiling and presenting a Leader's Report at every committee meeting.

## Mandatory Staff Training

All staff should receive the following mandatory training:

- Safeguarding/Child Protection;
- Fire Safety and Risk Assessment;
- Health & Safety, Risk Assessment & Manual Handling;
- Paediatric First Aid;
- Food Safety.

In addition, the Leader is required to receive:

- Designated Child Protection Officer training.

The reality is that any staff member who has a poor level of Irish cannot be effective in promoting the children's linguistic competence in Irish and may even undermine the work of the preschool through the staff member's need to speak English.

The provision of an environment that espouses the highest quality of care and promotes effective learning across a wide range of developmental areas is a significant challenge. In addition, the provision of a learning environment that seeks to ensure the successful acquisition of initial and increasing Irish language competence by young children is an even greater challenge.

Effective high-quality preschool education is the cornerstone on which Irish-medium education is founded. The importance of high-quality education at this level cannot be over-emphasised. Any inadequacies in the foundation being laid at this level will have long-term effects, in terms of pupil achievement, parental confidence, staff morale and public perception of the sector.

If Irish-medium preschool education is to have widespread success, a rigorous and discriminating approach is required by all those involved. However, management committees are critical in ensuring all the conditions that promote a quality provision service are in place.

The achievement of this requires the active engagement of a management committee:

- whose members understand their legal and statutory responsibilities and carry them out effectively;
- whose understanding of the important processes underpinning successful Irish-medium education ensures the appointment of suitably qualified staff;
- whose respect for the purpose and rationale of the preschool ensures the implementation of an educational and administrative culture that supports the effective running of the preschool and the achievement of beneficial outcomes for children;
- whose ability to organise and co-ordinate fundraising activities determines the physical environment and resources that

support children's learning;

- whose leadership contributes to a common sense of purpose, the maintenance of high morale, co-operation and enthusiasm among parents and staff alike.

The previous section gave significant detail on much of this. The purpose of this section is to:

- give more detail on some specific legal and statutory responsibilities;
- signpost appropriate websites or sources of additional information;
- highlight some issues of particular relevance to Irish-medium education.

General information and resources to address governance can also be accessed at;

<http://www.diycommitteeguide.org/>



## Registration of a Setting

The first step for any committee that wishes to register a new setting is to contact the Early Years Team of the local Trust area who will provide the necessary information. The preschool will ultimately be allocated a named social worker who will play an important role in supporting the preschool and ensuring compliance with registration criteria and the Minimum Standards.

Registration information is also available at:

<http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/services/1760.html>

As part of the registration process all settings **MUST** register with the local Environmental Health Service and comply with regulations and guidance.

Before registration can be completed, confirmation that a Fire Risk Assessment has been carried out is required. Altram strongly recommends that the Fire Risk Assessment is carried out by an external services provider. Guidance and templates are available on Northern Ireland Fire Service (NIFRS) and Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) websites:

<https://www.nifrs.org/>  
<https://www.hseni.gov.uk/>

The statutory and legal responsibilities of committees of Irish-medium immersion preschools are detailed and outlined within statutory documents and guidance material issued by the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety as well as through legislation relating to Charity and Employment law. These requirements change periodically and committees are required to keep themselves up to date with any changes.

Each of the above Government Departments has differing but complementary roles and responsibilities. All preschools are required to comply with the full range of requirements and conditions to ensure initial and continuing registration as well as funding.

## Department of Education

The Department of Education is concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with the quality of learning. The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) carry out inspections in all preschool settings in regular cycles. Preschools are awarded a specific grade of quality. The inspection report and grade achieved are available to the public and are shared with relevant agencies. Documentation relating to issues of curriculum and quality learning are issued by Council for Curriculum, Education and Assessment (CCEA) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

<http://www.ccea.org.uk/>  
<https://www.eti.gov.uk/>

## Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is concerned mainly, but not exclusively, with initial and ongoing registration, accommodation and numbers as well as health and safety. Routine assessment of voluntary preschools is carried out by Social Services staff.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety issues recommendations under the Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) that sets out the standards under which all preschools must operate. At the date of this publication the recommendations are issued as "Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 Minimum Standards" and can be accessed at:

<http://childcarepartnerships.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/Minimum-Standards-2012.pdf>



## Minimum Standards Implementation Guidance

In ensuring delivery of the Minimum Standards committees must also refer to the Implementation Guidance.

<http://childcarepartnerships.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Implementation-Guidance-Version-3-Sessional-Full-Daycare-October-2017FINAL.pdf>

## The Minimum Standards

Minimum standards are exactly that – the minimum level of service that must be provided in order to pass an inspection and be registered with an HSC Trust.

There are 16 minimum standards that registered providers must adhere to and they are grouped under 4 sections as follows:

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Section 1: | Quality of Care                                 |
| Section 2: | Quality of Staffing,<br>Management & Leadership |
| Section 3: | Quality of Physical<br>Environment              |
| Section 4: | Quality of Monitoring &<br>Evaluation           |

## Minimum Standards: Detail

### Section 1: Quality of Care

- Standard 1: Safeguarding and Child Protection
- Standard 2: Care, Development and Play
- Standard 4: Health & Safety in the Setting
- Standard 5: Food and Drink
- Standard 6: Promoting Positive Behaviour
- Standard 7: Working in Partnership with Parents.
- Standard 8: Equality
- Standard 9: Additional Needs

### Section 2: Quality of Staffing, Management & Leadership

- Standard 10: Management and Monitoring Arrangements
- Standard 11: Organisation of the Setting
- Standard 12: Suitable Person

### Section 3: Quality of Physical Environment

- Standard 13: Equipment
- Standard 14: Physical Environment

### Section 4: Quality of Monitoring & Evaluation

- Standard 15: Documentation
- Standard 16: Complaints

An additional **Section 5** outlines the required Policies and Procedures registered providers must have in place.

## Closure of a Setting or Withdrawal of Funding

Failure to properly comply with the requirements of the Government Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, can result in the closure of a setting or withdrawal of funding. However, the Environmental Health Service or the NI Fire Service may also close a setting due to failure to comply with appropriate legalisation or requirements.

While there are references to the responsibilities of the Registered Person and Committee throughout the minimum standards document, Section 2, in particular, focuses on this area of responsibility.

## **Section 2: Standard 10. Management and Monitoring Arrangements**

Standard 10 involves the following requirements:

- A record of the name and telephone numbers of the Registered Person is maintained, and a contact point is made available for parents;
- The manager/person in charge provides monitoring reports to the Registered Person at least quarterly to facilitate the regular review of the quality of the service;
- Not all settings will have a management committee, but where they are in place, members' and Trustees' roles and responsibilities must be made explicit in writing and audited to ensure adherence to expected standards;
- Management Committee and Trustee meetings must take place regularly and minutes made available to Trust Inspectorate staff;
- The Registered Person ensures that all job descriptions, personnel specifications and contracts are approved, where appropriate, by the management committee /board;
- The Registered Person ensures that the setting's practice in recruitment, selection and retention of staff complies with equal opportunities and fair employment legislation;
- The Registered Person ensures that staff are provided with the necessary resources, including time, for the satisfactory discharge of their duties;
- The Registered Person ensures that staff are employed in sufficient numbers and with the relevant qualifications to meet statutory requirements;
- All those counted as staff must be age 18 or over;
- The Registered Person or person in charge ensures that staff respect the privacy of children and parents and only share

information in line with the Information Commissioner's Data Sharing Code of Practice;

- The Registered Person ensures that training and developmental needs of staff are identified and addressed and facilitates staff to avail of developmental opportunities;
- A record is kept of all training, including dates and attending staff. The Registered Person assesses the effectiveness of training provided for staff, whether internal or external, and uses this information to inform future training plans.

## **Section 2: Standard 11. Organisation of the Setting**

Standard 11 involves the following requirements:

- The Registered Person ensures that there is always a suitably qualified person in charge and that parents can identify this person;
- All planned absence of whatever duration of the person in charge, as well as ongoing unplanned leave such as sickness, is covered by a deputising arrangement and the Registered Person ensures that the person deputising is suitably qualified and trained;
- The Registered Person has contingency arrangements in place to cover emergencies or unexpected staff absences. The person in charge is fully informed of these arrangements;
- The Registered Person ensures that persons in charge and their deputies are qualified to the appropriate levels;
- The Registered Person ensures that within one month all newly appointed staff have induction training on:
  - the setting's policies and procedures,
  - child protection, including whistle blowing,
  - management of children's behaviour,
  - recording,
  - working with parents,
  - health and safety and
  - equal opportunities.

Whilst induction must be completed within one month, there will be some aspects that should

be completed immediately at the discretion of the person in charge – for example, child protection. Staff must acknowledge in writing that they have read, understood and agree with the setting's policies and procedures.

While this guidance material has extrapolated and highlighted some significant details, it is important that the committee and the Registered Person familiarise themselves with all aspects of the Minimum Standards document including the Implementation Guidance that can be accessed at:

<http://childcarepartnerships.hscni.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Implementation-Guidance-Version-3-Sessional-Full-Daycare-October-2017FINAL.pdf>

## Charity Legislation

Altram recommends that each Irish-medium preschool register as a charity with the Charity Commission for NI. Registration support is available on this website. Confirmation of any existing registration can be checked on the Charity Commission for NI website at:

<http://www.charitycommissionni.org.uk>

The legal responsibilities of a charity committee are explained on the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland website as outlined above. Committees can maintain best practice by carrying out an annual review of the advice and information available on this website and by attending training when necessary.

Irish-medium immersion preschools can, if they wish, also register as a company.

## Employment Legislation

The committee is responsible for the implementation of all policies and procedures in relation to staff recruitment, employment and labour relations. These areas are governed by specific detailed legislative requirements. These requirements can change. Advice on current legislation is available from the Labour Relations NI Website at:

<https://www.lra.org.uk>

All staff employed in an Early Years setting must have the relevant early years qualification. These are outlined in the Health and Social Care Trust Minimum Standards. However, in addition, a high level of fluency in Irish is also essential in underpinning an effective immersion programme. This does not involve university standard fluency. However, fluency, confidence and accuracy within the vocabulary and grammar register relevant and appropriate to communicating and interacting with young children, is of critical importance.

It is accepted that difficulties can arise in recruiting a full staff who all have the necessary fluency. If this happens it is essential to ensure that the Leader, at least, has the appropriate level of Irish to enable them to deliver children's language learning to a high level of excellence. Other staff appointed should only be appointed on the condition that they attend an effective Irish class and that their progress towards increasing fluency is monitored.

The reality is that any staff member who has a poor level of Irish cannot be effective in developing the children's competence in Irish and he/she may even undermine the work of the preschool by speaking English.

## Committee Meetings

An important aspect of the work of an effective committee is to organise regular committee meetings.

The purpose of a committee meeting is to provide opportunities to:

- address upcoming and current issues;
- input to the preschool's development plan;
- oversee all financial matters including setting budgets,
  - overseeing and monitoring income and expenditure,
  - agreeing financial reports,
  - reporting to funders,
  - preparing an annual audited financial report,
- develop and review policies and procedures;
- address staff issues;
- address parental issues;
- plan fundraising activities;
- progress committee-based action arising from the Early Years Specialist reports;
- monitor the implementation of staff-based actions arising from the Early Years Specialist reports.

**Safeguarding and monitoring of children's attendance as well as a Leader's Report MUST be standing items on the agenda of every management committee meeting.**

**It is important that time is scheduled annually to review:**

- insurance cover,
- policies;

**as well as signing off or completing mandatory documents such as:**

- risk assessments,
- safeguarding practices,
- safeguarding allegations,
- complaints register.

## Attendance of the Preschool Leader at committee meetings

Altram strongly recommends that the Preschool Leader is invited to attend all committee meetings. This allows the Leader to:

- discuss the Leader's Report;
- discuss the Early Years Specialist's report and the actions needed to progress the recommendations;
- provide information on any recent issues or challenges;
- make representation for resources and equipment;
- work with the committee to ensure registration requirements continue to be met;
- work with the committee to progress activities related to the preschool's Development Plan;
- be involved/informed about funding activities.

**It is important the committee understands that funding is a responsibility undertaken by the committee. While the setting's staff may play a role, the responsibility does not rest with them.**



## Confidentiality

The committee must ensure confidentiality is maintained with particular regard to child protection, staff issues and finance. Confidentiality procedures should be in place and all committee members should receive a copy of these. A secure filing system should be set up. Advice on the length of time an organisation should keep these records is available from the Department of Health website, under the Advice on Record Disposal Schedule, at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/good-management-good-records>

Committees need to be mindful of the Data Protection Act 2018, which governs the implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Everyone responsible for using personal data must follow strict rules that ensure information is used fairly, lawfully and transparently. The registered person **MUST** register the setting with the Information Commissioner's Office.

<https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/>

## Staff Vetting

All staff need to be vetted to ensure their suitability for providing care to children and to ensure there is no known reason why they should not work with children.

Altram provides an Access NI Disclosure service to committee members and practitioners. This process facilitates compliance with regional vetting procedures. Further information on vetting can be obtained at:

[http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/pdf/VET1\\_Vetting\\_Guidance\\_03\\_03\\_2014.pdf](http://www.westerntrust.hscni.net/pdf/VET1_Vetting_Guidance_03_03_2014.pdf)

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/information-and-services/accessni-criminal-record-checks/apply-accessni-check>

## Accommodation – Shared or Independent

Health and Social Care Trust registration of a preschool setting demands certain accommodation requirements. These requirements relate primarily to the safety and healthy well-being of the children and are included in the Minimum Standards.

The optimum accommodation for a preschool is one where the preschool has sole use of the premises it uses.

However, very often a preschool operates in a hall or community centre where the premises are used for other activities. There are several disadvantages in this situation. Shared premises rarely operate to the best advantage of the preschool, for example:

- classroom furniture and equipment may have to be cleared away every day;
- pieces of equipment may 'disappear';
- wall displays, which are an essential part of the language environment, may be destroyed or defaced;
- the preschool may be left in an untidy or dirty state by other users.

The committee can modify these disadvantages to some extent by:

- enlisting the full co-operation of other groups using the premises;
- monitoring the situation regularly through contact with preschool staff;
- implementing a rota volunteers, including parents and committee members, to ensure that premises are clean and ready for use by the preschool on those days following use of premises by other groups;
- purchasing of storage units that can be wheeled away or locked.

A preschool may be obliged to accept less than optimum accommodation in the early stages, but a conscientious management committee should direct their energies towards achieving independent accommodation.

# Appendices

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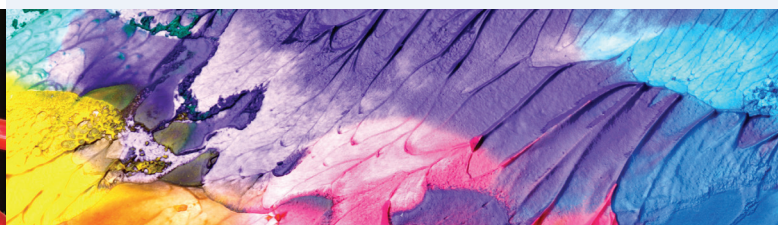
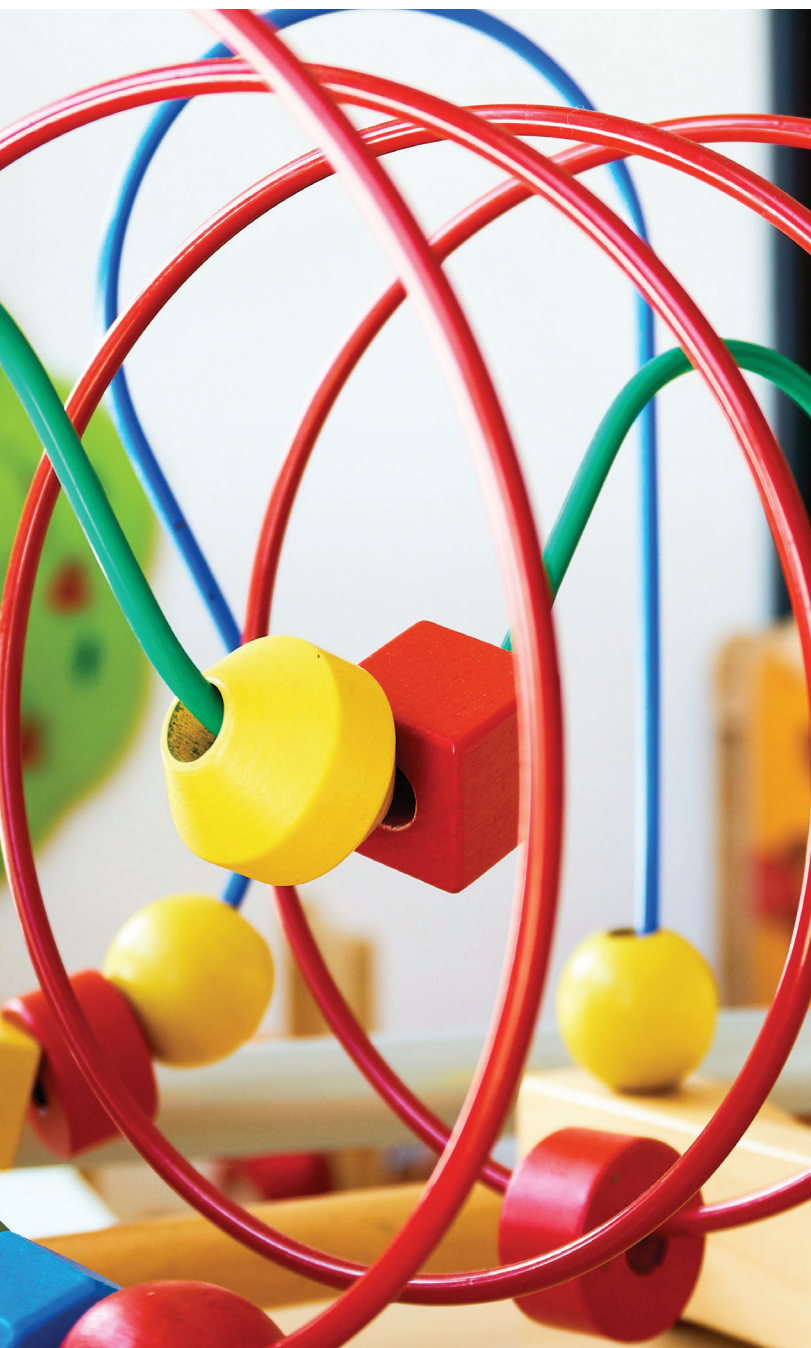
The setting's equipment and materials are the resources through which the children will develop their skills and abilities. They will have a significant impact on the quality and variety of the learning experiences across all learning areas.

A comprehensive range of equipment and materials is necessary to ensure the variety and range necessary for maintaining enthusiasm, interest and progression. A poorly equipped setting frustrates the ability of staff to provide quality learning experiences for children and compromises the potential of the children to learn successfully.



### Writing, Drawing and Painting

- variety of paper/materials
- variety of paints – range of types
- crayons
- easy-grip pencils
- chunky markers
- chalk
- brushes – wide variety
- easel
- natural materials
- drying rack



### Scrap & Junk Art

- aprons
- scissors (including left-hand scissors)
- glue sticks
- variety of joiners (e.g. masking tape, elastics, pipe cleaners etc.)
- variety of junk materials and fabric
- variety of loose parts
- variety of decorative items (e.g. sequins, glitter etc.)



### Malleable Materials

- dough & clay
- cutters
- rolling pins
- variety of loose parts
- variety of natural materials





## Construction

- variety of Lego
- variety of large-scale construction resources
- variety of small-scale construction resources
- variety of authentic/natural items
- magnetic blocks
- construction tools (real where possible)
- variety of joiners
- construction play accessories (e.g. clipboards, paper, pencils, measuring tapes, hi-vis, hard hats, sandpaper)



## Water Play

- water tray & stand
- selection of funnels
- water wheels
- selection of bottles/other receptacles
- syringes
- tubing/pipes
- variety of loose parts
- variety of natural items



## Sand Play

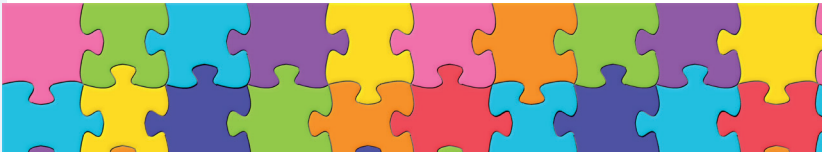
- sand tray & stand
- selection of buckets/other receptacles
- selection of spades
- spoons, rakes, sieves
- sand mills
- funnels
- variety of loose parts
- variety of natural items



## Books & Stories

- wide variety of books relating to themes
- story sacks/props
- book rack
- variety of books – diversity & inclusion

*N.B. Books should be available in every area of play*



## Jigsaws

- wide variety of peg puzzles
- wide variety of 4, 6, 9, 12-piece puzzles on shapes/colours
- wide variety of 4, 6, 9, 12-piece puzzles relating to language themes
- jigsaws promoting diversity
- wide variety of jigsaws to support individual
- needs



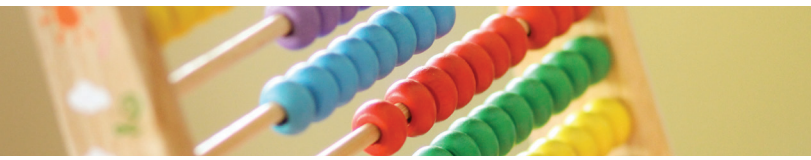
## Nature/Science/Food & Cookery

- seeds/plants/watering can
- natural items
- worm-house/bug viewers
- investigative equipment (e.g. magnifying glasses, binoculars etc.)
- sensory items
- touch & feel boards
- oven/access to cooking facilities
- scales
- technological devices



## Music

- wide variety of authentic percussion instruments
- CDs/CD player/headphones
- microphone
- sound tracks
- songbooks



### Table Tops & Early Maths

- threading resources (natural & manmade)
- lacing pack
- matching & sorting resources (natural & manmade)
- sorting bowls
- compare bears
- lotto games



### Home Corner

*(all items should be authentic/real life where appropriate)*

- cooker
- washing machine
- fridge
- sink
- kettle
- toaster
- cutlery
- dinner set
- pots & pans
- utensils (e.g. egg lifter, ladle etc.)
- tea towels
- real food (fruit/vegetables etc.)
- magazines/recipe books
- dolls - variety of same
- cot
- soft seating
- tables and chairs
- authentic home accessories (e.g. photo frames, plant, table cloth etc.)

**N.B.:** *The Home Corner area can be adapted for a variety of role play scenarios such as: Doctor, Hospital, Dentist, Vet, Shop, Hairdresser, Restaurant, Optician etc. (Additional appropriate equipment will be required).*

### Miniature Role Play

- house
- garage
- hospital
- shop
- airport/train station
- roadways
- town/village
- vehicles
- miniature people/animals
- landscape features
- discovery tray
- farm & zoo



### Physical & Outdoors

- large wooden blocks/construction resources
- hoops
- bean bags (small)
- parachute
- mats
- tunnels
- balls
- cones
- sand tray
- water tray
- wheeled vehicles/bikes/helmets
- fabric for den-making
- obstacle course equipment (e.g. balance beams, stepping stones etc.)



### Furniture, Storage & Displays

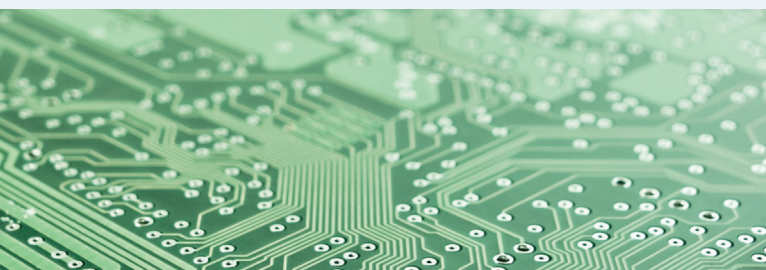
- tables (appropriately sized)
- chairs (appropriately sized)
- fridge
- storage trays
- display boards
- shelving units
- storage boxes
- soft seating (bean bags/floor cushions)
- large floor mat
- adult sized chairs
- adult sized tables
- lockable cash box
- lockable filing cabinet





### Health & Safety

- fire extinguishers
- fire blankets
- fire exit signs
- smoke detectors
- carbon monoxide detector
- first aid box
- wall-mounted medicine unit (accessible to staff only)
- buzzer/chime system
- thermometer



### Technology

- computer (access to)
- camera
- tablet
- printer/photocopier
- phone
- laminator



### Dramatic/Imaginative

- variety of masks (e.g. emotions, animals etc.)
- dress-up outfits
- dress-up unit/storage/hangers
- hand puppets
- finger puppets
- accessories
- variety of materials
- mirror
- prop box



The academic year covers the period from the 2nd July of one year to the 1st July the following year. Children are admitted to preschool in the September of the academic year in which they attain 4 years of age.

### Formal Application Process

Admission to all registered preschool settings involves a formal process of application through the Education Authority. This process occurs in the December/January prior to the September of the proposed entry. Parents may contact a preschool at any time to indicate their interest, but the formal application process must ultimately be followed. It is important that records of parental interest are maintained so that any information/awareness raising meetings can be scheduled in a timely fashion.

The committee should ensure prospective parents are made aware in advance of the admission dates for the formal application for preschool and that all relevant information is made available to them.

### Settling-In Period for New Children

An induction or settling-in period is an important part of the entry process. During this period the child gradually increases the amount of time spent in the preschool, before becoming involved in a complete session. A parent, or mature relative, will remain with the child in the preschool for part of this time, but begin to leave for increasingly extended periods of time as s/he settles.

### Late Entries

Late entries should be fully discussed with the child's parents as well as with the staff. If it is a very late entry, it is possible that the child may not reach the level of second language competence needed to support positive experiences in primary school.

### Application Process to a P1 Class in an IM Primary School

Admission to a P1 class in an IM primary school involves an application process that mirrors, in many ways, the formal application process for a preschool place. If the parents intend to transfer their child to a Primary 1 class in an Irish-medium school, it is important that they are informed of the Education Authority formal application procedure. It should be impressed upon parents that they should **not** assume attendance at an Irish-medium preschool, whether voluntary or statutory, ensures an automatic transfer to an Irish-medium primary school or is any guarantee of a successful application.

**A committee should develop and maintain a robust link with the potential receiving Irish-medium school.**



Parents enrol their children in Irish-medium education for one or more reasons, such as:

- They feel that the school will give their child a strong sense of their cultural identity.
- They believe that learning a second language at an early age will endow their child with a general educational advantage and enhance their facility for learning other languages at a later point.
- They feel comfortable with the sense of community and the level of parental participation that is a common feature of Irish-medium education.
- They believe their child will receive a higher level of education in an Irish-medium school.

**Whatever reasons parents may have for sending their child to an Irish-medium school, it is essential that they are aware of the crucial role they themselves play in influencing the success of their child's education.**

The preschool is usually the first contact most parents have with the practicalities of Irish-medium education. Parental expectations, regarding what Irish-medium education demands of them, will be significantly influenced by their experiences in the preschool.

A meeting with parents on an individual basis prior to a child's entry to a preschool is a useful forum that

- allows parents to ask questions, articulate concerns or anxieties

A meeting also gives the committee an opportunity to

- give information,
- discuss relevant issues
- draw attention to the importance of parental responsibilities.

Meetings of this kind are not designed to

intimidate prospective parents. It is not necessary for all members of the committee to attend. Where possible, both parents should be expected to attend, and the purpose of the meeting should be clearly explained to them beforehand.

While it is important that the atmosphere of the meeting should be friendly and informal, nevertheless parents should be made fully aware of the fact that the success of their child's education will require serious commitment and conscientious support from themselves.

It should be emphasised that a lack of commitment can undermine many of the advantages that Irish-medium education can provide. Strong emphasis should be placed on the need for parents to:

- use whatever Irish they have with the child;
- attend an Irish class;
- encourage all members of the extended family to use Irish with the child;
- attend Irish language family events in their area.

Attention should also be drawn to the need for:

- the child's regular attendance and punctuality;
- parental attendance at parent-teacher meetings;
- co-operation with whatever reasonable requests the staff may make.

Finally, parents must also be made aware of the fundraising aspects of the preschool and their part in it. It is important when discussing this aspect of parental involvement that the diversity of family situations and commitments is recognised, and that family strengths, along with preferences in relation to various fundraising activities, are acknowledged. It is important that parents show a genuine willingness to participate in this aspect of the life of the setting.



### **In what way is an Irish-medium preschool similar to an English-medium preschool?**

There are many similarities between an Irish-medium preschool and an English medium preschool. Like any other preschool setting the Irish-medium preschool aims to provide a wide range of learning experiences for the child across a broad range of developmental areas - creative, intellectual, physical, perceptual, social, emotional and personal in an environment that is safe, caring and protective. However, an Irish-medium preschool also incorporates a language programme whereby in which staff speak Irish to your child at all times. This ensures that your child achieves a level of competence in Irish that will enable them to deal with the normal curriculum in an Irish-medium primary school.

### **How does the child learn a second language?**

The most effective way a child learns at this stage is through play, and all the activities in the preschool are play-based. The child will have access to a wide variety of play materials, such as those for sand, water, jigsaw, construction, house-play, painting etc. Through a programme utilising these play activities and materials, and involving games, rhymes, songs and stories, the staff will gradually, in a natural manner, build up the child's competence in Irish.

### **Is it not confusing for a young child to engage with two languages?**

In many parts of the world people are bilingual from an early age without adverse effects. The first language does not suffer, and children switch between the two languages naturally and without confusion. At this age, children are extremely receptive to learning through another language. Furthermore, research indicates that education through a second language has no detrimental effects on a child's overall educational performance.

### **I would like to support my child as much as possible, but i don't have a lot of Irish. Will this put my child at a disadvantage?**

The great majority of children of Irish-medium preschools come from English-speaking homes. Your child will be in the same position as most other children in the preschool. However, it is most important that your child hears as much Irish from you and other members of the family as possible.

The most important language you can use is the language of social communication. Social language refers to such things as: *Hello, Goodbye, Come here, Good boy, Good girl, Good morning, Good night, Hurry up, Be careful, Mind yourself* and many more.

These fixed phrases are easy to learn and can be used frequently. Your use of Irish with your child shows the child you value the language; it supports and consolidates what they are doing at school and helps the child associate Irish with personal and social activities outside of school. However, a conscientious attempt to develop your own fluency would obviously be of even greater benefit in promoting your child's own overall fluency and willingness to speak in Irish.

### **Will my child become confused or upset when they go to preschool and the teacher speaks in a language which they cannot understand?**

For most children the Irish-medium preschool is the first introduction to preschool and they have little or no idea what to expect. There are many differences between home and preschool. The fact that the teachers speak 'strangely' is one of the differences that children appear to take on board without difficulty. The fact that the language activities are based on play and that well-trained staff know how to present language to the children in a way that makes it easy for them to

understand, ensures that the children's learning is natural, relevant and enjoyable.

### **Will Irish-medium education provide my child with a better education than English-medium education?**

An Irish-medium school can have many benefits for your child. Firstly, there are a number of academic benefits: they will become fluent in another language; engaging with a second language may enhance their ability to learn subsequent languages; research has also suggested that children who learn through a second language may have an intellectual advantage over children who have been educated through their first language.

Secondly, most parents who decide to send their child through an Irish-medium system do so after considerable thought and reflection. Parents in the Irish-medium system are usually highly motivated and interested. This has a significant impact in terms of school ethos, morale and pupil discipline. These all serve to enhance the quality of the educational provision, from which your child will benefit.

Thirdly, staff and management committees in Irish-medium schools are generally very highly committed to the work they do. This again enhances the environment in which your child is being educated.

There are certainly many advantages inherent in Irish-medium education. However, there are no cast-iron guarantees. The quality of an Irish-medium school is subject to the same factors that influence any school. Much of the success of Irish-medium education depends on:

- effective teachers;
- informed management;
- stimulating, coherent, appropriate learning experiences;
- conscientious, supportive parents.

It may impact negatively on the education of your child if any of the above factors are absent.



Altram is an Irish-medium Early Years Regional Support Organisation.  
It provides a range of services to practitioners, parents and pupils  
in Irish-medium early years immersion settings,  
including training, on-site visits, resources, representation and advocacy.  
It also provides support to management committees,  
in relation to governance and good practice and  
in addressing the specific issues which pertain to an immersion context.

*Uimhir Charthannachta* - Charity No. NIC 103690

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