



NCCA

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

# Towards a Framework for Early Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





# Foreword

The publication of *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* represents something of a milestone for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. While the NCCA has an established tradition of consultation with those who work in a wide range of educational settings, this is the first consultative document focused specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Supporting this learning is a new challenge for the NCCA, but working in partnership is an old and well-established practice. It is intended that this publication will serve as a basis for engagement with those who work in or have an interest in this sector of education as the NCCA moves towards the development of a national framework for early learning. Developing the framework in this way will ensure that it is built on shared understandings and rooted in a common commitment to children, their learning, and their future.

*Towards a Framework for Early Learning* is itself the product of consultation and collaboration with a wide range of agencies, organisations and individuals who brought multi-disciplinary experience and expertise to bear on the work. The members of the NCCA's working group on early childhood education played a central role in bringing the document to completion and a number of practitioners, academics and researchers who reviewed the document provided valuable feedback during its development. The ongoing support provided by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was, and continues to be, invaluable and greatly appreciated.

The NCCA team who worked on the development of this document deserve particular acknowledgement – Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive, Cathal de Paor, Bairbre Boylan and Helen Guinan, Education Officers. The commitment of Arlene Forster, Director, Curriculum and Assessment, in leading the NCCA's work in early childhood education and in bringing this document to completion is greatly appreciated by those who work alongside her in NCCA.

The completion of the document is not an end, but the beginning of a new phase of the work of developing the framework, work in which all can share through participation in the consultative process mapped out in the concluding section.

**Dr. Anne Looney**  
Chief Executive

## Terms used in this executive summary

The consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* includes a glossary which explains a number of its terms. It is important that this glossary is consulted when reading this summary. In particular, the use of the terms 'adult' and 'practitioner' should be understood in the context in which they are used.



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Introduction\*

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum matters in early childhood education. In this role, it will soon begin developing a national framework for learning in early childhood. This refers to the period from birth to six years.

The title *Framework for Early Learning* is currently being used to refer to this framework. The framework is for adults who are responsible for children's learning and development in early childhood. It will support these adults in providing each child with learning opportunities which help him/her to learn to his/her full potential.

The consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* discusses the development of the framework. This executive summary gives an overview of the key ideas presented in the document. It is important to refer to the consultative document for detail on any of the points made.

### Structure of the executive summary

Like the consultative document, the summary has five sections:

- rationale and purpose
- the child as a learner
- contexts for learning
- supporting early learning through the assessment process
- building the framework.

### Consultation and partnership

There is a variety of curriculum guidance on early childhood in Ireland. Many organisations and networks have developed their own guidelines which are used in a range of settings. There are also curriculum developments at a national level, such as the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998).

The NCCA will work with the early childhood sector during the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*. This will help to ensure that the framework draws on the expertise in the sector, and reflects the diversity and richness of all curriculum work in this country. Details of how the NCCA will work in partnership with the sector are presented in the concluding remarks to this summary.





*The child is an active learner,  
making sense of his/her environment through  
the senses, movement and language.*

Rationale and  
\*purpose

## Introduction to section one

This section explains the importance of a framework to support learning across the whole early childhood period. It discusses the purpose of this framework, its intended audience, and some of its other central features.

## The national context

There have been many developments in policy for children and in legislation which support the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

These developments have increased the focus on children, and their rights and needs. In particular, the National Children's Strategy: Our Children—Their Lives (2000) presents a vision of children from birth, as individuals who should be supported and enabled to realise their potential. This vision is important in developing the Framework for Early Learning.

Another very significant development is the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002. The NCCA has worked very closely with the centre in developing the consultative document. It will continue to do so in developing the framework.

### Recent relevant policy and legislative developments in Ireland

- 1991 - Childcare Act
- 1992 - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 1996 - Quality Targets in Services for Young Children
- 1998 - National Forum on Early Childhood Education
- 1998 - Strengthening Families for Life
- 1998 - Education Act
- 1999 - Best Health for Children – Developing a Partnership with Families
- 1999 - Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education
- 1999 - Primary School Curriculum
- 1999 - Children First- National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children
- 1999 - National Childcare Strategy Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare
- 2000 - National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives
- 2000 - Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
- 2002 - Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children: The Supporting Parents Strategy
- 2002 - Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector
- 2002 - Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
- 2003 - Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill

### The benefits of early learning

The benefits of early learning can be explained as follows:

- Early learning is the foundation for all later learning (the beginning of lifelong learning).
- Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning.

### The foundation of lifelong learning

From birth, children learn how to learn. They learn language and how to use it; they learn to think, to interact with others, and to be creative and adventurous. They also make decisions about their own abilities as learners and their own 'worth'. These different aspects of learning lay the basis for how children will learn in the future.

### A time of tremendous opportunity

Neuroscience shows that much learning occurs in the first six/seven years of life but especially in the first three years. It appears that there are certain times in these years when children benefit greatly from particular types of experiences, for example, rich language opportunities. This doesn't mean that children's learning should be rushed. With adult support, their learning should build on their strengths and address their needs. This will mean different levels and types of adult support for individual children, so that they are all helped to benefit from opportunities presented in early childhood.

### The *Framework for Early Learning* – vision and aims

#### Vision

The *Framework for Early Learning* promotes an early childhood for all children in Ireland where they can develop as learners within the context of trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environment. They will be supported in their holistic development, and in realising their potential as learners in ways which reflect their individuality as well as their diverse experiences of childhood in Ireland in terms of their abilities, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

#### Aims

Based on this vision, the *Framework for Early Learning* will aim to

1. support the development of all children from birth to six years as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with adults and peers, recognising the diversity of ability, culture, language, faith, social group, and ethnicity which influences children's learning and development.
2. emphasise the important and influential role of parents/guardians as their children's primary educators during early childhood.
3. guide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, recognising

the range of their learning strengths and the areas of learning in which they require extra and/or specialised support.

4. support existing good practices in early learning. The framework will help practitioners to reflect upon and to evaluate their own practices, and in doing so to continue to strive to create and provide learning opportunities which have a positive, beneficial, and lasting influence on all children's learning.

### Features of the framework – some key questions answered

#### Who is the framework for?

The *Framework for Early Learning* is for all adults responsible for children's learning and development from birth to six years of age.

This includes parents/guardians, childminders, and all practitioners working in out-of-home settings. These settings include family care (childminding), crèches, nurseries, parent-and-toddler groups, playschools, pre-schools, naíonraí, infant classes in mainstream and special schools, after-school, and hospital settings. These settings may operate within differing language contexts, for example, through Irish in the Gaeltacht, or through English in other parts of the country. The range of settings includes the private, public and voluntary sectors.

#### What is the purpose of the framework?

The framework will support adults in providing all children with appropriately enriching, challenging, and enjoyable learning opportunities.

The framework will be based on the latest research and thinking about early learning. It will outline broad principles to guide adults in supporting children as they learn and develop. The framework will also describe the types of environments that best support this learning and development.

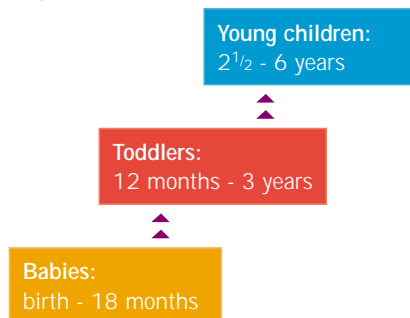
#### How will the framework support each child's learning?

Children in Ireland have differing experiences of early childhood. The framework will guide adults in building on children's individual strengths while also meeting their individual needs. This should help to ensure that each child has positive and enjoyable experiences as a learner.

'Matching' learning experiences with children's individual learning abilities is important. The framework will show the similarities and the differences in how children learn, and in the opportunities and supports they need.

The NCCA suggests presenting learning in the framework in three overlapping phases:

- babies - birth to eighteen months
- toddlers - twelve months to three years
- young children - two and a half to six years.



This is a useful way of showing children's changing abilities during early childhood. It also highlights the importance of having different focuses in learning experiences which take account of children's new and emerging abilities and competencies, as well as new interests.

### How will the framework link with existing curriculum guidance?

A variety of curriculum guidance in supporting early learning is being used very successfully by many in the early childhood sector.

The framework will complement this guidance, and try to create more connections in learning throughout early childhood.

The framework will also help to show the importance of the everyday routines and practices parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners use with their children. It will help practitioners to look back on their own practices and interactions with children, and to identify where and how they can make improvements.

It is important that the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999) have natural links, so that children experience continuity and progression in their learning throughout early childhood and as they move into the more formal stages of education.

### Why should a single framework be developed for the whole early childhood period?

A single framework has a number of advantages. It can

- show progress in learning from birth to six years. It can demonstrate that children need both care and education throughout this time.
- support all children to learn. It can provide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners with suggestions for activities and interactions to enrich and extend each child's learning.
- support people in different professions who work with children, for example, people in education, health, speech and language, and occupational therapy. This should help to bring more continuity to children's learning.
- support early childhood as a time of wonder, joy, and discovery, nurturing keen and confident learners more successfully.
- highlight the importance of adult-child interactions (relationships) from birth.
- make more connections across the curriculum guidance already in use.





The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness has positive life-long implications.

The child\* as  
a learner

## Introduction to section two

This section focuses on the child as a young learner. In particular, it explores the child's many abilities and competencies in learning. It also identifies factors which can influence how, what, and when the child learns. The section concludes by presenting early learning through four connected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. The consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* would be presented through these themes.

## Emerging key principles

- **The child is an active learner.**

Children actively explore their environment. This exploration varies from child to child as it is shaped by the child's particular stage of development, his/her experiences in life, and his/her ability to learn. The child makes sense of the world through this exploration.

- **The child's learning is enhanced by warm and supportive attachments and relationships.**

Children's relationships with their primary caregivers provide them with confidence and a feeling of security. This confidence and security encourage and motivate children to explore their environment, to interact with others, and to communicate what they think and understand about their world. In this way, trusting and loving relationships support early learning.

- **Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning**

**based on the child's interests, strengths and life experiences is more interesting, relevant and fun for him/her.**

Children are born with their own unique abilities and capacities to learn. Every child should be helped to learn to the best of his/her ability. Learning experiences should be based on his/her interests, strengths, culture, language, and ethnic traditions. By focusing on the child as an individual, learning is made more meaningful, relevant and enjoyable.

- **Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.**

A positive self-image and a strong sense of self-esteem are important if children are to grow up secure, confident and happy. Each child should feel valued and respected for who he/she is. This provides great motivation for learning.

- **Encouraging learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness, can contribute positively to the child's future.**

Developing positive learning dispositions can greatly enrich children's learning. Children can be more open to accepting new challenges in their learning, to working towards 'mastering' learning, and to persevering when faced with difficulty and/or uncertainty.

- **Children should have broad and balanced learning experiences.**

Children should have a wide range of learning opportunities. Together, these experiences should support children's emotional, personal, physical, cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development. Each learning experience will support many

of these aspects of learning at the one time. This shows the ‘connectedness’ of early learning.

## Holistic view of early learning and development

Given the ‘connectedness’ of learning, the consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* will present learning through four broad and linked themes:

- well-being
- identity and belonging
- communication
- exploring and thinking.

Each of these themes is explained briefly below.

### Well-being

Well-being can be defined as being content and healthy. While this is important for all learning, it is especially so for early learning.

Well-being is encouraged within warm and supportive relationships with others. The child’s emotional well-being is related to the quality of his/her early attachments with adults. Warm and trusting relationships, where the child feels loved and where he/she is encouraged to express himself/herself, help the child to be positive about learning. This, in turn, helps him/her to become more independent, and able to cope with change and challenge. Physical well-being is also important for learning as this enables the child to explore, to investigate, and to physically challenge himself/herself in the environment. This exploration occurs through physical well-being, but it is also important for achieving physical well-being.

### Identity and belonging

Identity is about the characteristics, behaviours and understandings children have, both individually and shared with others. Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or connection to a particular group. It is important that children develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity, and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith, and language help them to feel valued and respected in society. Children, who come from a home where the language, culture and faith are not those of the wider society, should be supported in developing their identity and belonging within their own language, culture, and faith, as well as within the language, culture, and faith of the wider Irish society. For many children, the Irish language will be a significant part of their cultural inheritance and of their sense of identity. However, all children can be enabled to develop plurilingual identities at an early age.

Relationships with others also contribute to the child’s sense of identity and belonging. It is essential that each child is surrounded by messages of respect, love, praise, and encouragement. These messages should highlight for the child the importance of himself/herself as an individual rather than what he/she can/cannot do.

### Communication

Communication is about expressing and sharing thoughts, information and feelings. It helps children to indicate their needs, to build relationships with others, to explore their feelings, to create knowledge, and to represent and understand the world around them.

Children give and receive information in different ways. These different forms of communication generally reflect developmental stages during early childhood. While most children will eventually master oral language as their main form of communication, others may need to use a range of non-verbal means of communication, including pictures, symbols or gestures. Whatever form is suitable, all children should be supported and helped to communicate to the best of their ability from the earliest possible age. While children continue to develop their communicative abilities long after early childhood, this period is especially important. Play and the adult are central. Early experiences which support the development of children's communication skills are important for the development of literacy and numeracy (reading, writing, and mathematics). Children can also be supported in developing bilingually and benefiting from the advantages which bilingualism offers.

### **Exploring and thinking**

Exploring and thinking involve investigating and making sense of the world. Early childhood is a time of great opportunities for exploring, investigating, and interpreting these experiences to form ideas and theories about the world.

In exploring and thinking, children use their communication, physical, and sensory-motor skills. Trusting and loving relationships with adults provide the security for the child to explore and to find things out. In doing this, the child builds ideas about how things work and why things are the way they are. Interactions between the child and the adult, as well as interactions between peers, enrich and

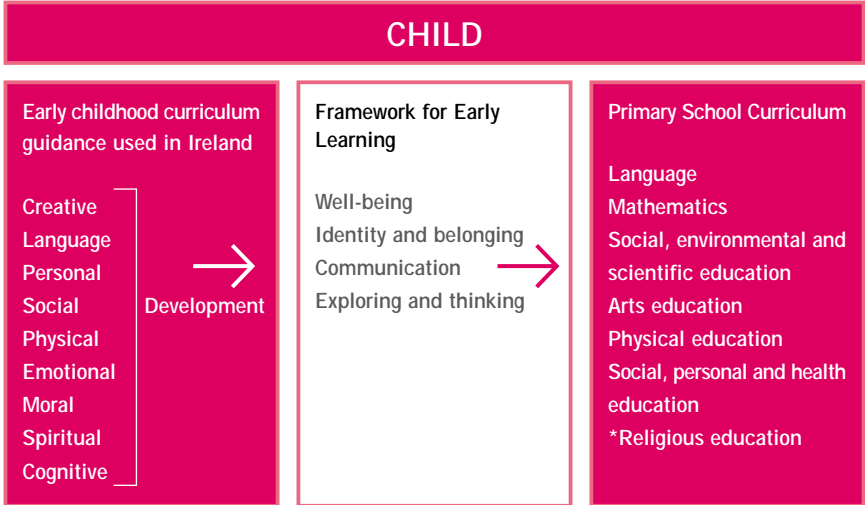
extend this exploring and thinking. Communication is a necessary part of these interactions as it allows ideas and thoughts to be created, shared and interpreted. Most children use language including oral, written, or signed, to achieve this.

The child's curiosity, as well as his/her ability to take risks in discoveries and adventures, provides the basis for being creative in exploring and thinking. Much of this occurs through play as children interpret their experiences and demonstrate their thinking with toys and other objects, including mark-making tools such as crayons. Play also supports the child's decision-making abilities. This is important in developing confidence and self-discipline.

### **Connections**

As outlined in section one, it is important to have connections between existing early childhood curriculum guidance, the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999) so that there is progression in children's learning. The following graphic shows some of the connections between these different sources of guidance.

Connections across curriculum guidance



\*Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups





*Play is a powerful  
context for learning.*

# Contexts for learning\*

## Introduction to section three

Learning is a continuous process, occurring in all the environments experienced by the child. Children learn through their senses, and through active engagement with the people, objects, events, and experiences in these environments. This section explores relationships and play as key contexts, and shows how they can support all children in their learning. Through this exploration, the section emphasises the importance of language as a tool for learning in both relationships and play.

The discussion in this section shows how learning through the four proposed themes for the framework—well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking—can be supported through relationships and play.

## Emerging key principles

### - **Children learn through actions and interactions with others.**

Early learning is a social process. Most children naturally enjoy contact with other people. This can be clearly seen in a newborn baby's efforts to communicate with his/her primary caregivers. Children's early learning is based on these first relationships which, with time, broaden to include their relationships with other adults and their peers.

Relationships based on respect, love, and care give children confidence to explore their environments. With help from adults, children interpret these explorations to create ideas and theories about how things work, why things happen the way they do, how people relate to each other, and so on.

### - **The adult is central in supporting children's learning through quality interactions.**

The adult-child relationship is critical in supporting and enhancing early learning. The adult enables each child to learn to the best of his/her ability, by considering his/her interests, experiences and strengths, and by meeting his/her needs. In this way, the adult gently and sensitively extends the child's learning by giving the help and the encouragement he/she needs to move on to the next stage of learning. The adult shares the responsibility for learning with the child – sometimes the child leads the learning, and sometimes the adult leads it.

Different children will require different types and amounts of help from the adult in their learning. The type and amount are based on the child's ability, strengths and needs as a learner. This ensures that each child is supported appropriately.

### - **Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children's early learning.**

Parents/guardians play a key role in laying the foundations for their children's learning. Much early learning is highly informal, occurring through the relationships and the conversations parents/guardians have with their children, and through the activities, routines, and tasks they share with their children. This supports and extends all learning, including language, for example, the child's acquisition of Irish in the case of Irish-speaking parents/guardians. Parents/guardians are also role models for their children, sending out powerful messages about

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how to behave towards others, how to care for oneself, and about what is important in life. In this way, parents/guardians support their children's learning in a way which is fun, appealing, and relevant to their children's lives.

- **Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners enhances children's learning.**

Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners can have a positive impact on children's learning. This communication helps childminders/practitioners to understand more fully how children learn, their strengths and needs and so on. Parents/guardians are also helped to understand what their children are learning and to support this at home. This sharing of information can help children's thinking, language, and social development in particular. This is most notable for children who are experiencing educational disadvantage where the provision for their learning is of a high quality.

In the case of children with special educational needs, parents/guardians often need to be supported by other specialists such as therapists. These specialists play an important role in helping parents/guardians to support and extend their children's learning at home. The early childhood practitioner is often the first to identify these special needs, and to assist parents/guardians in accessing the help they need.

- **Play is a powerful context for learning.** Children enjoy many different types of

play, including exploratory, construction, rough and tumble, role, and fantasy play, as well as games such as outdoor, card, and board games. This range of play is important in helping children to develop physically, to think and to create ideas, to imagine, to solve problems, to communicate, and to develop reading, writing, and mathematical skills, as well as to develop socially, morally, and spiritually.

While children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved. The adult fulfils many roles. As a 'player' with the child, he/she provides ideas and makes suggestions for the play, guides the child's learning through discussion, makes equipment and playthings available, and learns about the child by observing and listening. The adult uses these different strategies to ensure that each child is helped to learn to the best of his/her ability through play experiences.

- **Language is a major vehicle for learning.**

Most children will learn to use language as their main form of communication. Early childhood is an important time for learning this language. Children also learn through language. They use language to ask questions, to look for answers, to obtain information, to test their ideas, and to create new understandings. By listening to adults using language in varied and rich ways, by sharing in story times, learning rhymes, listening to songs and jingles, children broaden the range of words and phrases they use, and they use their language in new and different ways. This is also important in the

context of the child's plurilingual development.

- **The learning environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.**

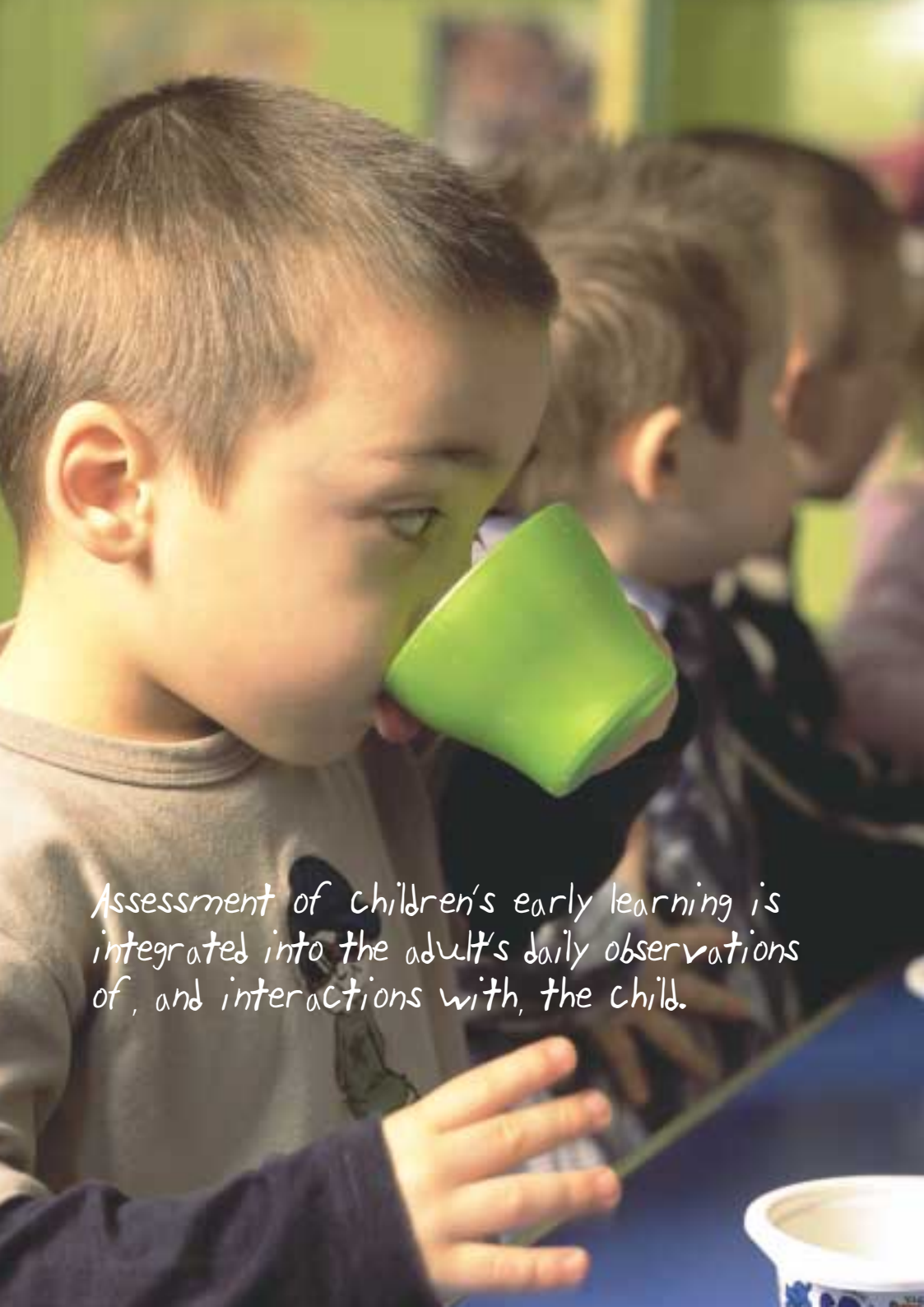
Children learn in both outdoor and indoor environments. These environments should be motivating and inviting, and reflect children's changing developmental needs as well as the specific needs some may have. For example, a child who is blind or partially sighted will benefit from large equipment and playthings with strong sensory features, as well as the assurance that certain playthings are to be consistently found in the same areas of the environment. The environments should also reflect the diversity of children's identities through their playthings, music, language, stories and games. This should support each child to develop his/her sense of identity and belonging which is critical for success in learning.

It is important that the environments encourage children to interact with adults and where possible, other children. Environments which support children's learning through relationships and also through play make early learning appealing, relevant and fun. This does not happen naturally. The adult needs to plan, organise, resource, and evaluate the environment regularly so that each child's learning is supported in the best way possible.

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*learning is enriched and extended  
when the adult is involved*



*Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.*

\* Supporting early learning through the assessment process

## Introduction to section four

This section highlights the important role of assessment in early learning. Assessment helps the adult to recognise and celebrate progress, and to plan for and support the child's learning in the most appropriate manner. The consultative document suggests that assessment should be a natural part of adult-child interactions. More formal ways of assessing are used where there is a concern about the particular needs of a child, and to monitor progress as children near the end of early childhood. The early identification of special educational needs, in all their diversity, is particularly crucial here.

It is important that information about the child's social, cultural, linguistic, and physical environment is considered when interpreting assessments. The child himself/herself should play an active part in making assessments about his/her learning, as should parents/guardians who have detailed information and knowledge about their child.

## Emerging key principles

- **Assessment of children's early learning is informal and a natural part of the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with the child.**

The assessment process should help practitioners to observe children's learning, understand it more clearly, and use that understanding to support future learning. Carefully observing the child, talking meaningfully and sharing in his/her learning, provide the adult with information which he/she can use to improve day-to-day interactions with the child. A narrative ('story') approach

to assessment is particularly helpful. This can include the practitioner and the child keeping a diary, portfolio, or 'learning story' together, and supplementing written notes with pictures, and audio/video recordings. Assessments are usually made over time and in a range of learning situations. The practitioner's experience and training help him/her in structuring and deciding what information should be recorded. This recorded information is used to provide the child with appropriate learning experiences. It also helps the practitioner to share information with parents/guardians, and other professionals.

- **Assessment celebrates the child's progress and achievements, and helps the adult to plan for enhanced learning, by building on the child's strengths and meeting his/her needs.**

It is important that each child's progress is celebrated. Assessment helps the adult to identify this progress, and plan for the next steps in learning ensuring that this learning is meaningful to the young learner, and appropriate to his/her needs. Information on the child's current strengths, needs, and interests enable the adult to gently challenge and support the child as necessary.

- **Assessment facilitates the early identification of children with special educational needs, and helps in planning for the necessary resources and appropriate approaches to support learning.**

Adults have a responsibility to identify children whose learning is, or will be, affected negatively for any number of reasons. Where adults have concerns

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about children experiencing potential difficulties in their learning, diagnostic assessments and screening tools are useful. Early detection is an important part of the process in order to refer children to specialists where necessary. Where there is such a concern, diagnostic assessments need to be carried out by specialists in early intervention.

- **Children should be actively involved in assessing their own learning and setting their own goals, helping them to become confident, capable, lifelong learners.**

The ability to think critically, to apply and adapt knowledge to new situations and to be creative in problem-solving is essential for children in today's world of change. The adult gently draws out the child's ideas about activities and concepts, and encourages him/her to play an increasingly active part in setting and pursuing his/her own achievable learning goals. Self-assessment can often give insights into aspects of learning missed by the adult, and seen as important by the child. It can also provide the adult with information on what the child finds difficult. Very importantly, self-assessment can help the child in learning how to learn, which in turn builds his/her confidence as a learner.

- **Parents/guardians have valuable insights and information about their child which are important in creating a whole picture of the child's development.**

When children attend settings outside the home, parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners have a joint role to play in the assessment process. Open, two-way relationships between

parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners support the sharing of information about the child's progress and development. Parents'/guardians' information greatly enhances the childminder's/practitioner's picture of the child as a learner, and vice versa.

- **Reflective practice and assessment go hand-in-hand, and together benefit all the partners in the learning process.**

Ongoing assessment of children's learning helps the practitioner to identify areas of practice that could benefit from attention. Through analysis and discussion, practitioners as a group can identify areas where practice needs to be improved as well as recognising areas of strength. They can also identify how this improvement can take place. These areas can be used as the focus for further raising the quality of provision for children's learning.





The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

\*Building the  
\*framework

## Introduction to section five

This section proposes a model for the *Framework for Early Learning*. It is hoped that this model will help to focus people's thoughts on some possibilities for presenting the framework. The final design of the framework will be decided through consultation with the early childhood sector, and through follow-on work directed by the NCCA.

## Influences on a national framework

Many factors influence the types of early learning experiences children have. The choices we make about these experiences reflect what we as a nation consider important for children to learn, and how, when, and where we think they should learn. The *Framework for Early Learning* will be based on the beliefs and values we have as a society regarding children, and their learning during early childhood.

## The *Framework for Early Learning* – proposed components

It is suggested that the framework should

- present the **vision** of children as early learners upon which it is based
- articulate its **philosophical and value base** and its **aims**
- present the **principles** which underpin how children's early learning should be supported in a manner which respects how they learn, and the importance of that learning
- outline **learning through the four themes** discussed in section two (well-being,

identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)

- present a set of **aims** within each of the four themes
- present **learning goals** within each aim
- identify and describe a range of **learning experiences** that could be used to achieve these goals, taking account of children's different abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds
- include **exemplars** (or case studies) of good practices in supporting early learning, which reflect the diversity of Irish early childhood care and education (for example, diversity of setting, age of child, philosophy, and pedagogical approach)
- outline **interaction styles/strategies** for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting early learning
- promote the importance of **partnerships between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners** in supporting children's learning and/or where children are supported by other **professionals including therapists**
- advise how parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners can support each other in using **assessment** for the benefit of individual children
- promote **reflective practice** (by practitioners) which empowers the adult in his/her role as educator, but also as learner

- provide practical advice on **planning** (by the practitioner) for early learning so that children's strengths as well as their needs shape the experiences they are offered.

### The proposed model for the framework

The consultative document outlines the proposed model for the *Framework for Early Learning* in some detail. It presents learning using the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. Each theme has a set of aims. Each aim in turn is sub-divided into learning goals. Suggestions for learning experiences to assist the child in working towards these goals are also given. Some exemplars of good practices are included to demonstrate more clearly how the adult can support the individual child to learn. It is important to refer to the document for this detail. In considering the proposed model, it is essential to remember that it is a suggested model.

### Conclusion

The model outlined is a **sample** model. It gives ideas about how the framework might be structured and presented. It is important that the early childhood sector shares its thoughts on this model with the NCCA. On reaching a decision as to how best to present the framework, we can then move forward in developing it.

The conclusion to this summary presents plans for a consultation process. The NCCA will use this process to meet with the early childhood sector to discuss the proposals outlined here.





*All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are interwoven.*

\* Looking ahead

## Consultation and partnership

The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* is an important opportunity to build a shared understanding of how all children from birth to six years can be supported appropriately in their learning. During this, the NCCA will work with

- parents/guardians
- childminders
- practitioners
- relevant government departments
- other professionals in early childhood care and education, and related disciplines.

An extensive consultation process is planned from March to August 2004 following the launch of the consultative document. There are a number of strands in this process. These are outlined below.

### 1. The consultative document: *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*

The NCCA developed the consultative document based on extensive research of curriculum guidance, in Ireland and internationally. It also drew on its past experiences of developing the Primary School Curriculum (1999) which contains an infant curriculum based on principles of early learning. The NCCA worked closely with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), and the Early Childhood Technical Working Group during the development of the document. In this way, the document provides a sound base for the NCCA to work in partnership with the early childhood sector in developing a framework which is informed by research, and which reflects good practices.

The NCCA plans to consult with the early childhood sector using

- **response forms**, which will be available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) and in hard copy
- **regional seminars** organised and hosted by the NCCA
- **sectoral briefings**, on request, for early childhood organisations and networks
- **written submissions** from organisations and networks
- **portraits** of a small number of early childhood settings.

### 2. Invitational seminar

The NCCA will convene an invitational seminar during autumn 2004, where a report on the findings of the consultation process will be launched. The report will also present a revised plan for the framework in light of the findings. The seminar may provide opportunities to learn from early childhood experts on issues central to the development of the framework.

### 3. Early Childhood Committee

The NCCA has established an Early Childhood Committee, whose membership is representative of the early childhood sector. This committee will support the NCCA in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

Through these different strategies the NCCA will develop the framework in partnership with those who support children in their early learning.

## Work plan

The following table sets out the timeframe for the consultation process.

Timeline for the consultation process	
Date	Action
March 2004	Launch the consultative document <i>Towards a Framework for Early Learning</i>
March – August 2004	Consult with the early childhood sector (response forms, regional seminars ...)
Autumn 2004	Invitational seminar – report on the findings from the consultation, and present revised plan for the framework

## Conclusion

The last decade has seen significant developments in policy for children as well as substantial financial investment in support of early childhood. There is a growing awareness of the importance of the quality of children's early experiences, both for their lives as children, and as adults. The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* represents an opportunity to promote this importance, and in doing so, to enrich all children's lives as learners.

The early childhood sector has a central role to play in developing the framework. Through consultation and partnership, a framework can emerge which can meaningfully support parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in extending and enriching each child's learning. Through your involvement in the consultation, the *Framework for Early Learning* can reflect the richness of good practices in the sector. In this way, a national framework can be developed which will make a positive and lasting contribution to all children's lives as young learners.



## Photographs

The NCCA would like to thank all those who kindly consented to having their photographs taken and used in this document. The NCCA was granted parental/guardian permission in the case of the children in the photographs. This was considered necessary and appropriate with children in the age group from birth to six years.

