

Planning Now, for the Future

Children's Early Care
and Education in Ireland



**start
strong**
Advancing Children's
Early Care & Education

Children 2020

November 2010
Report Summary



Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance early care and education. Originally formed as the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) in 2004, we became Start Strong in November 2009. We support our advocacy with research and the analysis of good practice. In particular, we advocate the development of a 10-year national plan to bring early care and education in Ireland up to the highest international standards by 2020.

High quality early care and education matters because it works:

For children

First and foremost, quality care and education in the early years helps children to flourish and make the most of their lives. There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the long-term beneficial effect of quality care and education for young children's development.

For the economy

A strong economy depends on people's skills, creativity, motivation and knowledge. Investment in young children has high economic and social returns, because its impact on people's skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime.

For society

Quality care and education for young children helps make society fairer through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality.

Early care and education

By early care and education we mean care and education in children's early years, for children aged 0–6. Early care and education is not limited to any one place or time of the day. Young children develop, learn and are nurtured in many places: in their own homes – with their parents and families – in the homes of their grandparents, other relatives and childminders, and in centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí.

For young children, care and education should be inseparable. From the very start, children's care should be attentive to their capacity for learning and development, while their early education should be based on play and should include a strong focus on social skills and emotional development. Children's need for nurture, caring relationships and learning-through-play extends well beyond their early years.

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Welcome to *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future*, Start Strong's outline of our vision of what children's early care and education in Ireland could be.

Start Strong is committed to advancing high quality care and education for all young children in Ireland. Our advocacy is built on clear evidence of the benefits this brings for children, for the economy and for society.

This publication is a summary of a longer report, which is available on our website (www.startstrong.ie) and from our offices, and which is the first phase of a larger project. This publication presents a set of recommendations for how Ireland could bring about a step-change in the provision of high quality care and education for young children in the next decade.

In *Children 2020: Planning Now, for the Future* we have set out 5 key principles:

- Children come first.
- High quality.
- All young children.
- All families.
- Linked Services.

All of these need to underpin children's early care and education in Ireland. If we can ensure these are the basis of any Government actions around early care and education, our hope that children born in 2020 will have the quality supports and services they need to give them strong foundations as they start out in life can become the reality.

The next phase of the Children 2020 project will be putting costs on our recommendations and carrying out a cost-benefit analysis of the package of reforms we

are proposing. Goodbody Economic Consultants have already begun this work on our behalf. We have taken the decision to publish our recommendations in advance of completing a detailed cost-benefit analysis as we believe it is necessary to stimulate a national debate on the future of early childhood care and education.

We could not have completed this work without the generous support of our funders, The Atlantic Philanthropies, the Katharine Howard Foundation and the Irish Youth Foundation. We also could not have reached this stage of our work without the contributions of all those who engaged in our consultation process. We are particularly grateful to Candy Murphy of CMAAdvice Ltd. who facilitated our consultation process and brought together the thoughts and ideas of a wide-ranging group of individuals and organisations. I would also like to thank my fellow board members and those on our Research Advisory Group, who guided the work and supported us in this ambitious project. Finally, thanks to the staff: Ciairín de Buis, Toby Wolfe and Lorraine Whitty, without whom we would not have been able to publish this report.

As a society, we are at a crossroads. Decisions that we take now will make a huge difference to our ability to meet the needs of young children in the future and to lay the foundations for long-term growth and well-being. We call for leadership at national level to recognise the importance of the vision we are presenting and to act on the recommendations.

Dr Tony Crooks

Chairperson

Start Strong



Over 40 years ago, Robert F. Kennedy stated that *'...the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. .. it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile.'* (University of Kansas, 18th March 1968).

In 2010 this quotation is a salient reminder of what is important in life, something which, as we sink further into economic crisis, we are in danger of forgetting. Yet, while GNP does not allow for the measurement of quality care and education for young children, quality early care and education can contribute to our economic recovery and growth. They are mutually beneficial rather than mutually exclusive. Throughout our work, Start Strong has highlighted that high quality early care and education matters because it works for children, for the economy and for society.

This report outlines what the future of young children's care and education in Ireland could be. It sets out recommendations for Government, which would move us towards ensuring quality early care and education opportunities are available to all young children and families. We have broken down our recommendations into two categories: immediate actions that require little or no short-term expenditure, and recommendations for plans and commitments that the Government should make now, for the future.

I would like to echo our Chairperson's comments about those who contributed to the development of our report. We have been heartened by the level of support for the development of a long-term plan for children's early care and education in Ireland. Many people have contributed to our thinking, including national policy-makers, international experts, those working with children, parents, service-providers, family support-workers and, of course, young children themselves.

We now need to work to ensure that those thoughts and ideas are translated into action. The next stage of our Children 2020 project is to complete financial costings of our proposals and engage in a cost-benefit analysis. International research shows that there are sound economic arguments for public investment in high quality care and education for young children, to lay the foundations for future economic growth. The next stage of our work will examine how these arguments apply to our proposals.

However, we must not forget that this is about young children, who live in the here and now, and are not young children forever. Early childhood is a very short, very important time, a time of learning, of exploration, of new experiences. We need to ensure that we work for a future where young children will have the very best early childhood possible and the opportunity to grow and achieve the best possible future for themselves.

What we have set out here is ambitious yet achievable, and young children deserve nothing less.

Ciairín de Buis
Director
Start Strong



Ireland is at a time of change. People are questioning our values as a society, and are asking what our priorities should be in the decade ahead. Start Strong believes that young children must be a priority. They are the future of our society, and their well-being matters right now. Early childhood is a critical period in life, and high quality care and education in early childhood is essential if we are to give young children strong foundations.

This publication offers both a vision for the future of young children's care and education in Ireland and proposals for immediate actions. We have called it Children 2020: Planning Now for the Future as our proposals aim to build the quality supports and services that children born in Ireland in 2020 will need to give them a positive start in life. In responding to the current crisis in our economy, we must adopt measures that we know will contribute to the long-term well-being of our society. We believe high quality early care and education should be a priority as there is clear evidence that it brings substantial, long-term benefits for children, for the economy and for society as a whole.

Investing in young children will lay the foundations for growth in the future, both for the economy – with high economic returns to such investment – and for our children, whose well-being and development must be a central priority in policy-making.

There has been much progress in the last decade in developing early care and education in Ireland, and families can see the benefits of this. The Free Pre-School Year, which was introduced in January 2010, already has a participation rate of 94%.¹ Parents are voting with their feet, showing they recognise the value of affordable and accessible care and education services for their children.

However, we are still far behind international standards, particularly in ensuring high quality in all services and supports. High quality is essential. To ensure that high quality care and education is available and affordable for all young children and their families is a major challenge. We can't achieve all that we are looking for instantly, but we can start right now by planning for the future.

Our immediate priority, given today's economic climate, must be to preserve the current level of expenditure on services and supports for young children and their families. The progress that has been made in the last decade must not be lost. Looking to the future, plans must be developed now to ensure that policies continue to move in the right direction over the years to come.





The care and education of young children in Ireland today

The last decade has seen the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the introduction of a free pre-school year, the extension of maternity leave entitlements, an increase in the number of places in services for young children, and the introduction of the Siolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum framework and revised pre-school regulations. These have been important steps forward which we need to build on. Nevertheless, Ireland is still far behind international standards for the care and education of young children:

- In a 2008 'league table' of 25 OECD countries' performance in meeting 10 'minimum standards' for early childhood education and care, UNICEF placed Ireland at the bottom of the league, stating that Ireland then met only 1 of the 10 standards.²
- Many of those working with young children remain without formal qualifications, and most childminders are unregulated.³ Furthermore, the FETAC level 5 qualification that is becoming standard is well below the graduate-level training that is advocated internationally.

- The cost to families of care and education services for children up to 3 years old is among the highest in Europe.⁴ Some financial support is available to families with low incomes who are able to access a place in a community-based service. Others receive no support.
- In spite of recommendations from the OECD, the Oireachtas, the NESF and the Social Partners, Ireland has no national plan for the development of early childhood services.⁵



This publication marks the end of the first phase of Start Strong's Children 2020 project on a vision for the future of children's early care and education in Ireland. This first phase of the project aimed to develop policy recommendations, on the basis of national and international research evidence and in consultation with stakeholders here in Ireland. In the second phase of the project, we will examine in more detail the costs and benefits of implementing the policies we propose.

Our Children 2020 vision relates to:

- **Young children** from their earliest months to the compulsory school starting-age of 6 years old.
- **All settings** where the care and education of young children takes place, including: their own homes, the homes of relatives and childminders, centre-based services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí, and the infant classes of primary schools.
- **A wide range of services and supports**, including services for young children, parenting supports, home visiting, after-school services, and specialist services such as speech and language therapists.

The development of this vision involved:

- **A review of research evidence.** We looked at international research on child development, on early childhood education and care, and on policy effectiveness in services and supports for young children and their families.
- **Analysis of national and international benchmarks and standards.** Our vision draws extensively on reports from the NESF (*Early Childhood Care and Education, 2005*), the OECD (*Starting Strong, 2006*), the European Commission Childcare Network (*Quality Targets in Services for Young Children, 1996*), UNICEF (Report Card 8, 2008) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (*General Comment No.7, 2005*).

- **A consultation process.** Our consultation involved a wide range of stakeholders. In all, more than 200 people took part in the process, including parents of young children, service providers, academic researchers, Government officials, County Childcare Committees, professional bodies, NGOs and others. We also consulted with children – a series of projects asked children their views on what makes a good service for young children.

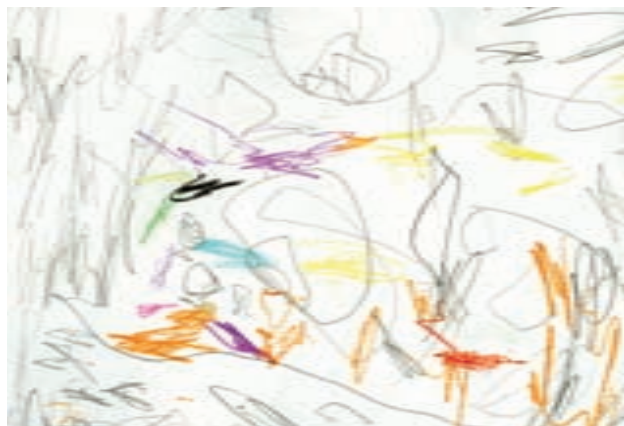
We found a striking degree of agreement on a vision for the future and on the key actions to achieve this vision. Our proposals are not only in line with research on what is best for children and with international standards, but also have support from a wide range of stakeholders in Ireland.



The following five key principles are the building blocks that underpin our vision for the future of children's early care and education. They were repeatedly spoken about by participants in our consultation process, and they emerge clearly from the research evidence:



- **Children come first.** All children have rights. Children's well-being and development should be the driving force in policies on early care and education.
- **High quality.** The quality of young children's experiences in all settings – both in the home and in services outside the home – is critical to their well-being and development. The Government must prioritise quality in services and supports for young children and their families.
- **All young children.** All children matter. High quality services and supports should be universal – provided for all children, affordable and accessible – with additional supports for those who need them.
- **All families.** Families are central in young children's lives. A wide range of mainstream supports should be readily available to all families.
- **Linked services.** Promoting children's well-being and development requires well-coordinated services and supports for young children and their families.



Where care and education in early childhood is of high quality, it can be enormously positive for children. As the first principle of Síolta – Ireland's national quality framework for early childhood education – states:

*'Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood.'*⁶

There is also a large and growing body of research that demonstrates the profound impact that children's experiences in their early years have on their future development, their later success in school and their life-chances. Through its long-term effects, high quality early care and education lays the foundations for a stronger economy and a fairer society (see page 11).

To drive the development of young children's care and education, there needs to be strong leadership at national level. The establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, began the process of integrating 'care' and 'education' at a structural level nationally. Building on the progress made since the creation of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, in our vision there would be a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

Our vision of a single Government department is in line with a recent report from UNESCO which highlights the importance of integrating caring and learning in the governance of early childhood services. In the interim, the role of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs should be further deepened and developed.

A Government department for children should be responsible for providing leadership in the development of early care and education, for the coordination, regulation and inspection of early care and education services, and also for ensuring sufficient provision in all local areas, achieving quality standards and providing public funds to services and supports, to ensure accessibility, affordability and quality for all young children and their families.





High quality early care and education also benefits the economy and society

For a stronger economy. In 2009, the National Competitiveness Council observed that '[i]nternational evidence suggests that Ireland is under-investing in services for younger children'.⁸ Also in 2009, the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) argued that quality care and education in early childhood should be a policy priority in the recession as it is 'a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy'.⁹

In the short-term, public investment in services and supports for young children creates jobs and supports parents' participation in the labour market, boosting incomes and economic growth. In the longer term, it enhances economic productivity, increases financial returns to the Exchequer, and delivers wide social benefits including a better educated society and a lower level of crime.¹⁰ Cost-benefit analyses have consistently shown positive returns on investment, with benefits ranging from 2.5 to 16 times the costs.¹¹

For a fairer society. Public investment in the care and education of young children can help make society fairer and more equal. Crucially, through the reduction of childcare costs it can increase disposable income within families and is a significant contributor to the reduction of child poverty.

In the longer term, quality early care and education facilitates social mobility and helps to break the intergenerational cycle of social exclusion. By putting in place the right supports at the earliest age, we can transform the life-chances of young children born into situations of disadvantage.

The lack of public investment in children's early care and education in Ireland is also a central cause of inequality between men and women. Only where parental leave is paid and quality care and education services are affordable and accessible do both men and women have a real choice about their participation in employment, education and training and their work-life balance.

Start Strong (2009) *Why Early Care and Education?*
Dublin: Start Strong.





Quality is critical, both in services for young children and in supports for families. Where services and supports are of high quality, the benefits to children are significant. Where they are of poor quality, children can suffer.

In the Síolta national quality framework and the Aistear curriculum framework, we have two documents that set out a great deal of our vision. The challenge is to fully implement them in services and to ensure that they are fully embedded in the training of the workforce and in inspections. In our vision, public funds would only go to services that meet quality standards.

The quality of services for young children lies partly in physical characteristics (such as plenty of space, including space for outdoor play, and an environment that is full of opportunities and interest), but above all it lies in the interactions between staff and children. Factors that affect the ability of practitioners to engage responsively and appropriately with young children include their professional training, the ratio of adults to children, the curriculum, and continuity of staff.¹²

The professionalisation of the workforce is central to the achievement of high quality. Young children need services that are staffed by skilled, motivated and well-qualified practitioners. In our consultation process, many people spoke of the problem that 'caring' is not a valued role in society, that childcare is seen as unskilled work which is usually low-paid. Our vision is that early years practitioners should be recognised as professionals, should have the training, status and development opportunities of professionals, and should be part of a profession with a much greater balance of men and women at all levels.

Anyone working in a professional capacity with young children should have appropriate qualifications that are relevant to early childhood and should be engaged in on-going professional development. Service leaders should be graduates with a third-level, early years qualification. All those in roles that support the delivery of quality services, including staff in training institutions, inspectors and those in advisory roles, should have relevant early years training and qualifications.







High quality care and education services should be available and affordable for all young children as all children can benefit. In addition, some children and families need extra supports and services to overcome barriers that they face. Early identification of additional needs and early response to those needs are essential to minimise the long-term negative effects of disadvantage in early childhood. We use the phrase 'universal plus' to call for a combination of:

- **'Universal'** – universal services and supports, which are not only accessible to all young children but, through public funding, affordable to all families; and
- **'Plus'** – additional supports for those children and families who experience disadvantage or who have additional needs. Additional supports should involve a combination of: lower fee levels for services where fees are charged; additional, targeted supports within universal services; outreach to enable disadvantaged families to access services; and specialist supports such as speech and language therapists on a referral basis.

Affordability for all. For all young children to benefit, quality services and supports for young children and their families need to be genuinely affordable. Our vision is that high quality care and education services should be available free for all children, on at least a part-time basis, from the age of 2, because of the compelling evidence of the benefits of such services. This would involve extending the principle of free education – already established in primary schools and now in the Free Pre-School Year – to all 2 year-olds.

In addition, given the reality that many parents work full-time, high quality services outside the free provision should be subsidised, including high quality after-school services. Subsidies should be structured to ensure that all families with young children can afford high quality care and education services.





Accessibility for all. Every family with young children should have access to local, quality services and supports that cater for the needs of all children in the community. In achieving provision in every community, we can build on the expansion of childcare places over the last decade, although a move to genuinely affordable services for all young children would lead to a further increase in the demand for places.

High quality services should operate throughout the year, for 48 or more weeks of the year, because continuity of care is an important aspect of quality care and education for young children. Similarly, to fit with the needs of children and families, high quality regulated after-school services should be available for children who are in the infant classes of primary schools.

There should also be diversity of types of provision, to reflect the diverse needs of children and families, and parents should as far as possible have a choice between different types of service.

Respect for all. In catering for the needs of all children in their local community, mainstream services need to be inclusive, catering for the needs of children from all backgrounds and of all abilities. To be inclusive, services need to reflect many types of diversity – social, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, family-structure and abilities – and they need to be in a position to provide additional supports when required.

Of course there are limits to the ambition of fully inclusive services. There are, for example, some children with disabilities who need specialist supports that cannot always be provided within mainstream services in the local community in a way that meets the best interests of the child. In such cases, linking services together through 'early childhood hubs' (*see page 18*) should facilitate the early identification of needs to enable the child and the child's family to access the specialist supports they require.





Families are central in young children's lives. A wide range of supports should be readily available to all families with young children, including paid parental leave, family-friendly work arrangements, and information and advice for parents and guardians on how they can best support their children.

Paid parental leave. Our vision is that public support should make it possible for children to be primarily cared for at home by a parent or guardian for the first year or more of their lives. Research evidence suggests that children benefit where a parent is enabled to remain at home with a child for the first year through paid parental leave.¹³

The current 6 months' maternity leave should be followed by at least 6 further months of paid parental leave, to ensure a minimum entitlement to 12 months at home. This parental leave needs to be paid if it is to be economically feasible for a parent to remain at home for this critical period. Furthermore, families should not experience a gap between the ending of their entitlement to paid parental leave and the availability of high quality, genuinely affordable services for their children.

Work-life balance. Where parents work outside the home, they should have family-friendly work environments which support them to meet the needs of their young children. In addition to entitlements to parental leave and force majeure leave, workers' ability to combine employment with family life is supported by flexible work arrangements such as job-sharing, flexitime, term-time working, and working from home.¹⁴

Supports for parents. Parents increasingly value clear and reliable information and advice on how best to support their young child's development. Information, advice and support on parenting should be universally available and free, to help parents in the first years of their child's life.

Supports should include information and advice to help parents' understanding of how children learn and develop, as well as advice on how to promote positive behaviour in children and information on children's health, well-being and safety. Supports should take a variety of forms, including public information, group-based supports in the community (including parenting courses), supported parent-and-toddler groups, public health nurses, and home visiting supports.





Throughout early childhood, young children's care and education are inextricably linked and encompass many aspects of their well-being and development, including their physical and mental health, their social and emotional development, and their early learning and cognitive development. Just as young children's care, learning, health and development are linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too.¹⁵

Linking care and education. In Ireland, as in many other countries, there has in the past been a distinction in both practice and policy between 'childcare' on the one hand (aimed at helping working mothers, particularly those with children up to 2 or 3 years old) and early education (aimed at developing school-readiness for children between 3 and 5 years old). We argue instead that all services for young children should be centrally concerned with both the care of young children and early education.¹⁶

Our vision is that there should be no divide between services for children under 3 with a care focus and services for children over 3 that focus on early education. From the very start, children's care should be attentive to their capacity for learning and development, while their early education should be based on play and should include a strong focus on social skills and emotional development.

Early childhood hubs. The linking together of services and supports for young children and their families needs to extend to a wide range of supports, to ensure that services and supports work together effectively and efficiently. We propose the development of 'early childhood hubs', which would involve using existing resources differently, rather than creating new organisations.

'Early childhood hubs' would link together services for young children with supports for children's families. They would link supports for young children's care, learning, health and development, and they would link services outside the home with supports for families in the home. Early childhood hubs would involve both close working relationships between providers of services and supports, and accessible points of contact, information and referral for families. They could link together a wide range of services and supports, including:

- Care and education services for young children.
- Advice and information for parents.
- Parent-and-toddler groups.
- Resources such as toy libraries.
- In-service training for early years practitioners.
- Support and training networks for childminders.
- Specialist supports on a referral basis.
- Outreach to facilitate access to services.
- Wider supports for adults including employment supports and adult education.

We envisage that early childhood hubs would build on the work already done at local level by organisations such as Family Resource Centres and at county level by Children's Services Committees and County and City Childcare Committees.

Linking pre-school services and schools. Making a successful transition to school is crucial for every child's future education. Achieving successful transitions is only partly about helping children to be 'ready for school' – above all, it is about changing schools so that they are 'ready for young children'. In many European countries young children do not begin formal school until the age of 6 or 7, and attend early care and education services before this. In Ireland, where most children begin school at 4 or 5 years old, the leap for young children into primary school can be enormous.

In our vision, the infant classes of primary schools would be supported to become more like early years settings, with a real sense of continuity for young children as they make transitions from pre-school services into schools. There are already moves in this direction, with the Aistear curriculum framework (which applies to the full age-range from 0 to 6) increasingly informing curriculum and practice within the infant classes of primary schools.¹⁷





We here present a manifesto for investing in the growing child and for investing in the future growth of the economy. We recognise that our vision is ambitious, but it is achievable. Actions are needed now to ensure that we hold on to what we have achieved so far and continue moving in the right direction.

The actions we summarise here make good sense in a recession and are essential if we are to lay the foundations now for the smart economy of the future. Start Strong urges the Government to commit to developing high quality, affordable and accessible services and supports for all young children in Ireland by 2020.

1. Children come first. Young children are valued members of society and bearers of rights – and they are the future of our society and our economy.

Immediate actions for the Government:

- Make no further budget cuts to services and supports for young children and their families, to ensure the progress of recent years is not lost.
- Make a commitment in the forthcoming National Children's Strategy to develop a national plan for young children's care and education.
- Hold a children's rights referendum to provide a firm constitutional basis for the recognition of children's rights.

In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Develop and implement an ambitious 10-year national plan for young children's care and education.
- Steadily increase public investment in early childhood services and supports, moving Ireland progressively towards European and UNICEF targets of 1% of GDP.
- Create a full Government Minister for Children, to provide dedicated leadership on children's issues and to facilitate joined-up policy-making, linking together different policy issues as they impact on children.

2. High quality. Services and supports for young children and their families must be of high quality if children's early care and education is to have the positive impact – for children, the economy and society – that research on child development has demonstrated.

Immediate actions for the Government:

- Ensure public funding for early care and education services is linked to a sufficient level of compliance with all statutory requirements, including (where relevant) the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) (No.2) Regulations, 2006*.
- Fulfil the commitment already made to make all inspection reports publicly available, by publishing them on the internet.
- Introduce compulsory notification to the HSE for all paid childminders, bringing them within the scope of the statutory inspection process.
- Introduce regulations for after-school services.

In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Build on the excellent frameworks provided by Sólta and Aistear by developing a detailed plan for their full implementation.
- Achieve substantial progress towards a fully professional workforce in services for young children, with ambitious targets for the proportion of staff qualified to tertiary level, with plans to ensure that all paid childminders have appropriate qualifications, and with plans to provide relevant early years training to inspectors, to those in advisory roles and to staff in training institutions.
- Amend the *Childcare (Pre-School Services) Regulations* to require all early care and education services to have –or have access to– outdoor playareas





3. All young children. Quality services and supports for young children and their families should be universally available, part of the framework of public services available to all members of society, with additional supports for those who need them.

Immediate actions for the Government:

- Align the school starting-age with the age for starting the Free Pre-School Year, so that all children can access the scheme, regardless of their date of birth.
- Make no budget cuts in relation to special needs assistants, to facilitate the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream services.

In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Extend the entitlement to free provision that began with the Free Pre-School Year to a second, earlier year, to at least 48 weeks of the year, and to at least 3.5 hours per day, in line with the recommendations made by the NESF.
- Introduce a subsidy for hours outside the free provision, with a tiered fee-structure that reflects parents' ability-to-pay.
- Provide for young children with additional support needs in inclusive mainstream services, when this is in the child's best interests. Additional needs should be identified early, and supports provided in response.
- Ensure adequate provision of high quality, subsidised and regulated after-school services.

4. All families. Supports for parents and families need to be universally available.

Immediate actions for the Government:

- Carry out an awareness-raising campaign to inform parents of the benefits of quality early care and education for all children, including the value of parenting supports.
- Implement the requirements of the new EU directive on parental leave.

In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Provide parenting supports locally and free of charge for all parents and guardians of young children, as well as for others who provide informal care for young children, such as grandparents and other relatives.
- Expand the provision of the public health nurse service and home visiting programmes. It should be made possible for any family to receive quality support in the home in a child's first years in relation to children's health and development, relationships, early learning, safety, parenting styles, and the early identification of additional needs.
- Incrementally introduce payment for parental leave so that paid leave is available for the critical first 12 months for every child.
- Introduce legislation to provide for at least 2 weeks' paid paternity leave for fathers.
- Strengthen work-life balance, for example through a right to flexible working arrangements for parents with young children.



5. Linked services. Young children's care, learning, health and development are inextricably linked, so services and supports for young children and their families need to be linked too.

Immediate actions for the Government:

- Commission research on early childhood hubs. This could be done through existing research funds, and possibly accessing philanthropic funding.
- Establish an innovation fund to support the design and implementation of a small number of early childhood hubs as demonstration programmes, to explore how best to implement hubs at local level, making maximum use of existing resources.
- Assist primary schools and local pre-school services to cooperate in programmes to facilitate the transition of pre-school children into schools.



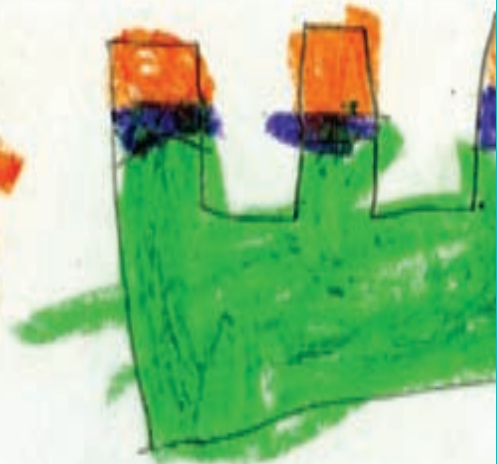
In planning for the future, we urge the Government to make commitments to:

- Roll-out a national programme for the development of early childhood hubs, following evaluation of initial models.
- Support primary schools to more fully meet the needs of children in infant classes, e.g. by amending adult-child ratios to match those for 4-5 year olds in other early years settings, revising the infant level of the primary school curriculum to bring it fully into line with Aistear, and facilitating lead teachers in the infant classes of primary schools to gain relevant training in early childhood education.



- 1 Barry Andrews TD, Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Children and Young People, written answer in the Dáil, 19th October 2010.
- 2 UNICEF (2008) *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.
- 3 Department of Education and Science (2009) *Developing the Workforce in the Early Childhood Care & Education Sector: Background Discussion Paper*. Dublin: DES.
- 4 OECD (2007) *Benefits and Wages 2007: OECD Indicators*, Paris: OECD, p.129.
- 5 Start Strong (2010) *Planning for the Early Years*. Dublin: Start Strong.
- 6 www.siolta.ie
- 7 Yoshie Kaga, John Bennett and Peter Moss (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A Cross-National Study of Integration of Early Childhood Care and Education within Education*, Paris: UNESCO.
- 8 National Competitiveness Council (2009) *Statement on Education and Training*. Dublin: Forfás, pp.19-20.
- 9 National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, p.160.
- 10 For a summary of research findings, see Start Strong (2009) *The Foundations of Growth – Investing in the Next Generation*, Dublin: Start Strong.
- 11 Lynn Karoly et al. (2005) *Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- 12 Edward Melhuish (2004) *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Years Provision on Young Children*, London: National Audit Office, p.55; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips (eds.), Washington, DC: National Academy Press, pp.314-8; and Sandra Mathers, Kathy Sylva and Heather Joshi (2007) *Quality of Childcare Settings in the Millennium Cohort Study*, London: Department for Education and Skills, pp.7-10.
- 13 Paul Gregg and Jane Waldfogel (eds.) (2005) *The Economic Journal, special issue: Parental Leave, Early Maternal Employment and Child Outcomes*, vol.115.
- 14 For examples of work-life balance policies and arrangements, see www.worklifebalance.ie, the website of the National Framework Committee for Work Life Balance Policies.
- 15 'Although the study of child development has traditionally sorted [early childhood] accomplishments into discrete functional categories (e.g., cognitive, linguistic, social), in practice they are inseparable beginning in the earliest years of life. Acknowledging and acting on this fundamental principle is critical to the success of a wide array of initiatives in child health, mental health, early education, and early intervention.' National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2000) *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*, Jack Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips (eds.), Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p.386.
- 16 Nóirín Hayes (2007) *Perspectives on the Relationship between Education and Care in Early Childhood*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.
- 17 www.ncca.biz/Aistear/







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Images All of the images used in this Summary Report were created by children during the consultation part of the project.

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