



Children 2020: Giving children a strong start in life

We all want our children to thrive, to be happy, and to develop to their full potential.

Children's early years are a wonderful opportunity. High quality care and education in their early years allows children to start strong, giving them solid foundations upon which they can build their lives.

If we do not give young children the care, support and opportunities they need, we are wasting the chance to lay those solid foundations. Children do not have a second chance – there is only one childhood.

The reason why young children need high quality care and education is very simple: because it works. 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.

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 and more equitable through reducing social and economic disadvantage and strengthening equality.

Quality care and education should be a right for all young children.



Early care & education

When **Start Strong** uses the term early care and education, we mean just that: care and education in the early years, for children aged 0-6. 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 right through their early years and beyond.



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



Photograph: Courtesy Katharine Howard Foundation, © Derek Speirs

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 services such as crèches, playgroups and naíonraí. As the proverb says, it takes a village to raise a child.

But, while each child's early years may be a colourful patchwork of supports and opportunities, as a society we can't afford to have a patchwork response to children's rights and needs. Ireland doesn't have a comprehensive and sustainable system of early care and education that meets the needs and rights of all our children. To get that, we need to plan for it. Now, more than ever.

Without it we are putting at risk not only our children's future, but Ireland's future well-being and economic prosperity. A sustainable national recovery will not happen without comprehensive policies and supports for quality care and education for young children.

We can't achieve this overnight, but we can put the plans in place. That's why **Start Strong** is calling for a national, 10-year plan for early childhood. And that's why we are calling this plan **Children 2020**, in the hope that all children born in Ireland in 2020 will have the supports and services they need to give them strong foundations as they start out in life.

Ireland fails to meet 'minimum standards'

In 2008, UNICEF published a 'league table' of 25 OECD countries, comparing their performance in meeting 10 minimum standards for the care and education of young children. Ireland came bottom of the league.

UNICEF (2008) *The Child Care Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Commenting on the report, Ireland's National Economic and Social Council noted in October 2009 that, 'the recent review of childcare by UNICEF shows that Ireland performs very poorly across 10 benchmarks of early childhood care and education'.

National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, vol.2, p.34.



A national plan for early childhood

If by 2020 we are to have a comprehensive and sustainable system of early care and education that meets the needs and rights of all our children, we need a national plan that is grounded in evidence of what is best for children and that reaches the highest international standards. **Start Strong** believes the following priorities should be central to **Children 2020**:

1. Children at the centre

Quality care and education in early childhood brings substantial benefits for children's well-being, development and life chances.

- The rights and needs of the child should be at the centre of a national plan. The starting-point for the plan should be the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that: 'In all actions concerning children ... the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration' (Article 3.1).

2. Supports for families

Families are at the centre of young children's care and education, and the home learning environment is one of the most important factors in determining children's development. Services and supports for families can be particularly effective where provision is joined up through integrated centres in local communities.

- **Children 2020** should include the further development of a range of integrated supports for families.

3. Paid parental leave

The full-time care of a loving adult during a child's first year can bring many positive outcomes for children, including better health and stronger emotional and cognitive development.

- Paid parental leave should be extended and paid, so that a parent can afford to remain at home until a child is at least 1 year old. A national plan should also aim to

support fathers to play a larger role in the parenting of young children, e.g. through paid paternity leave or the option of splitting paid leave between parents.

4. Work / life balance – to meet children's needs

Every family faces different challenges in work/life balance: long hours of work and commuting, working hours that do not match the opening hours of care and education services, or the need to move young children from place to place during the course of the day.

- **Children 2020** should include measures to enhance family-friendly arrangements in the workplace and to increase flexibility in care and education services for young children, so that families are better able to meet children's needs.

5. Affordability and accessibility for all families

60% of households in Ireland state that they do not 'have access to high quality, affordable childcare' in their community (CSO, 2009). Costs in Ireland are among the highest of all EU and OECD countries.

- Services must be affordable and accessible if we are to make sure that the benefits of high quality care and education are available for all young children, and if we are to reduce child poverty through lowering the barrier to employment for parents who choose to seek work.





6. High quality

Care and education in early childhood can have very beneficial effects on children's development, but only where the care and education is of sufficient quality. There is no second chance for young children if their care and education is not of high quality.

- Raising quality standards in early care and education services and supports needs to be a central aim of the plan.

7. A graduate-led, professional workforce

Quality in early care and education services depends on having highly skilled and trained staff, with low staff turnover, and a high ratio of staff to children.

- **Children 2020** should aim to develop a graduate-led, professional workforce. All those working in care and education services for young children should have professional qualifications, with salaries appropriate to professional workers and career development opportunities.

8. Childminding as part of the plan

Childminding offers stable, on-going care from one person, which is important for younger children. Though childminding is one of the most common forms of paid care for pre-school children and the most common form for primary school children, it is the least regulated and least supported type of service.

- A national plan for early childhood should support all paid childminders to offer a quality, regulated service that combines the care of young children with early learning.

9. Universal services, with additional support where needed

All young children benefit from quality care and education. Some children need additional support in the form of extra services, more intensive supports, or reduced fees for families with lower incomes.

- **Children 2020** should aim to make quality care and education services available for all young children, with additional supports for children who experience disadvantage.

10. Increased investment as part of a strategy for national recovery

Investment at all levels of education is essential for human capital, but the returns to investment are highest for education and supports in the early years. Although the current state of the public finances is a major constraint on public spending, investment in young children is particularly important during a recession, as it lays the foundations for a strong economy in the future.

- Over the course of the 10-year plan, the Government should substantially increase investment in young children as part of a strategy for national recovery. In the short term, existing expenditure should be protected.

A policy priority in the recession

'The provision of a more comprehensive system of early childhood care and education should remain a priority as it impacts on the well-being of children and their families and communities in both the short-term and the long-term. It is also a good long-term investment for the state and a sound basis for the move towards a knowledge-based economy.'

National Economic and Social Council (2009) *Well-being Matters: a Social Report for Ireland*, Dublin: NESC, vol.1, p.160

Start Strong is a national organisation committed to advancing early care and education in Ireland. **Start Strong** advocates evidence-based policy-making.

Our website www.startstrong.ie includes references to the research that underpins the positions presented here.

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