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Early childhood care and education should be seed of our recovery

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Putting money into early care and education can be the seed of Ireland's recovery and the smart economy of the future. Advocacy group Start Strong today said that Government must urgently develop an ambitious 10 year plan as a recession priority.

Unlike most OECD countries, Ireland has no comprehensive national plan for early care and education. The current limited programme runs out in 2010 (National Childcare Investment Programme). International evidence shows that early childhood intervention can have a return of up to €16 for every euro invested.

Speaking ahead of the launch of Start Strong's **Children 2020: Giving children a strong start in life**, director Ciairín de Buis said that Ireland was currently bottom of the list for quality of education and care but top of the list for costs. Research shows that early intervention and prevention, starting at the beginning of life and sustained through childhood and adolescence depending on need, enhances children's development, strengthens an economy and makes society fairer.

In a UNICEF League Table (2008), Ireland comes bottom of the list amongst 25 "economically advanced" countries, meeting just one of ten minimum criteria. The existence of a national plan is one of the benchmarks used by UNICEF. The OECD has also found that childcare costs in Ireland are amongst the highest in the world.

"Early care and education is good for children, good for the economy and good for society," de Buis said. "While there have been advancements in Ireland in the last years, we were starting from a low base. We need to plan for comprehensive investment in the next generation, now more than ever."

"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 skills and dispositions lasts a lifetime," she continued.

Start Strong, formerly the Irish Childcare Policy Network, sets out 10 priorities for a 10 year plan ranging from provision for longer maternity and paternity leave to the availability of affordable and accessible childcare. A recent CSO survey found that 60% of households in Ireland do not have access to high quality, affordable childcare in their community.

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