



Start Strong

Strategic plan 2009-2013

Vision:

That all children in Ireland are valued and supported through quality early care and education.

Mission:

To promote informed policy development and increased investment in early care and education.

Start Strong is a coalition of organisations and individuals seeking to advance children's early care and education. All of Start Strong's work and activities is in line with our Strategic Plan. Start Strong's policies, projects, campaigns and activities are developed through ongoing collaboration with its members, drawing on research and evidence, and the views and experience of members.

Start Strong was launched in November 2009. We grew from the Irish Childcare Policy Network (ICPN) which was founded in June 2004 by a number of organisations and individuals with the dual aims of progressing the early care and education agenda in Ireland and advocating increased investment in supports and services.

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

Early care & education

By early care and education we mean care and education in the 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 naionraí.

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.



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

Key strategic aim: Children 2020

Start Strong will work to achieve a 10-year national plan (Children 2020) that will secure the policies, supports and investment required for the provision of a comprehensive and sustainable early care and education system in Ireland.



Photograph © Derek Speirs

High quality, affordable care and education in children's early years matters for children's development, for future economic growth, and for a fairer and more equitable society.¹ There is a large body of evidence that demonstrates the importance of public investment in young children and family supports as well as the significant benefits of prevention and early intervention.

Some children in Ireland have high quality care and education in their early years – but many do not. According to the Central Statistics Office, 60% of parents in Ireland do not believe they have access to high quality, affordable childcare in their community.² If we are to give all young children the support they need, major changes are required in the funding and regulation of services for young children, in family supports, and in entitlements to parental leave and work-life balance. These changes won't happen overnight. But what we can do now is to set out a clear vision of what we need, and to call upon the Government to develop a national plan that would move us steadily towards that vision over the years ahead.

That is why Start Strong is campaigning for a national, 10-year plan for early childhood. We are calling our campaign Children 2020, in the hope that all young 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.³

Start Strong aims to:

- Secure the commitment of policy makers to the development of Children 2020, a 10-year national plan for early care and education
- Contribute to the development and early stages of implementation of Children 2020
- Support and monitor the implementation of Children 2020

Start Strong will work to prepare the case for Children 2020, based on national and international experience and good practice, as well as findings from our own research highlighting:

- The need for a 10-year plan for children's early care and education
- The benefits of a 10-year plan
- The main elements of a comprehensive early care and education system



Supporting strategic aims

Start Strong has 4 supporting strategic aims towards the achievement of this ambitious goal of Children 2020:

Early care and education now – sustaining progress in difficult times

Start Strong will provide ongoing analysis of early care and education policies and campaign for the most effective use of existing resources. The pressures on public and personal spending as a result of the economic crisis require smart decisions to ensure that long-term recovery is realised. Despite a reduction in Exchequer finance, early care and education is an essential investment, which will deliver tangible benefits for children, the economy and society.

In working to achieve this aim Start Strong will:

- Provide analysis of current policy and activity in the delivery of early care and education that is relevant to the development and content of Children 2020
- When appropriate, call for the protection of existing early care and education resources and propose changes to current policies and spending
- Develop a series of publications to disseminate our thinking to key policy makers and influencers

Making early care and education matter – advocacy for change

Start Strong will work to raise awareness and deepen understanding of the benefits, components and resources necessary for children's early care and education, to achieve sustainable and progressive long-term planning. A deeper understanding is needed of the concepts of early care and education and its importance for our children, our economy and our society.

In working to achieve this aim Start Strong will:

- Target policy makers and influencers using quality, evidence-based information and research
- Work in partnership with other advocacy organisations with complementary goals to strengthen the voice for early care and education
- Raise awareness of the role of quality early care and education





Enhancing understanding and support for early care and education through research

Start Strong will develop and implement a research strategy to carry out, encourage and utilise research which will inform the development of early care and education in Ireland. Start Strong will ensure that its policy recommendations are evidence-based, and will develop a research programme to support its advocacy and campaign work.

In working to achieve this aim Start Strong will:

- Manage a research programme that provides an evidence base for Start Strong's advocacy work
- Gather and analyse existing research around early care and education
- Prepare a series of documents around research areas of relevance to Start Strong
- Liaise with experts around potential areas of research interest and partnership work

Building and maintaining Start Strong as a credible, professional advocacy body

Start Strong will establish and sustain an organisation capable of achieving its aims and objectives by adopting and implementing best practice in all aspects of governance and management. As a new organisation, the right building blocks are essential to ensure Start Strong develops robust organisational foundations enabling it to achieve its objectives. In the longer term Start Strong requires resources to maintain and continue the development of leadership skills, Board and staff competences to deliver its vision.

In working to achieve this aim Start Strong will:

- Formalise all governance structures and systems
- Develop and implement a membership strategy
- Develop and implement all necessary organisational policies and protocols
- Identify key funding opportunities and prepare and implement a funding strategy

1. Start Strong (2009) *Why Early Care and Education?* Dublin: Start Strong.
 2. CSO (2009) *Quarterly National Household Survey: Childcare, Quarter 4, 2007*, Dublin: CSO.
 3. Start Strong (2009) *Children 2020: Giving Children a Strong Start in Life*, Dublin: Start Strong.

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

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