

3, 4, 5 Learning Years

Background and Context

- The importance of a child's early years in educational terms should not be underestimated. They lay the foundations of future education, and need to be of sound structure for positive educational experiences to be built upon.
- Traditionally the 'care' and 'education' of young children in Ireland were viewed as separate concepts, with 'care' occurring primarily in the home and 'education' beginning when the child enters primary school. It is now widely acknowledged that care and education are inextricably linked and inseparable elements in the life and development of the child.
- Research on early social, emotional and cognitive development suggests that the short-and long-term consequences of the care giving context are less dependent on the form of care (e.g. maternal care versus other care) than on the quality of care.
- Research suggests that children who attend higher quality childcare during the preschool years demonstrate improved cognitive and social skills during this time period. There is also evidence that suggests stronger effects for children at greater risk during preschool years, in particular among educationally disadvantaged children.

What the evidence shows

- Research indicates that providing quality early childcare and education services has the potential to alleviate some of the negative effects of poverty and can act as a powerful mechanism in initiatives designed to break the cycle of disadvantage. High quality preschool/childcare services can provide the ideal environment for children to develop the skills necessary to ease the transition into school; they can be an important resource in building parent's understanding of the various stages in their child's development; they can be a source of support for parents in employment, training or in need of respite; and they can remove a key barrier for parents who wish to join the labour market.
- Childcare policy in Ireland has been evolved in the context of access to the labour market and economic growth and rather than in the policy context of child health, social and emotional development and early learning; change is now underway with a renewed policy focus on quality standards and on curriculum
- The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – known as Síolta – defines, assesses and supports quality standards across a diverse range of early year's settings. The Framework aims to improve the quality of practice within early year's services and to impact

positively on early childhood experiences for all children. The implementation of Síolta is an objective of the National Childcare Strategy and is supported by the National Childcare Investment Programme.

- Curriculum models are also promoted as a way of increasing quality childcare and education and as a mechanism for the delivery of positive child outcomes. The Highscope Preschool Curriculum is one such evidence-based model. A central element of this curriculum is that active learning – whether planned by adult or initiated by children – is central to learning. Communication and links with parents is also key in the Highscope Curriculum.

3, 4, 5 Learning Years Service

- The 3, 4, 5, Learning Years service, delivered in partnership with Barnardos, targets all early childhood care and educational services in the Ballymun community. There are two strands to the service; strand 1 is engaging and supporting practitioners in the implementation of Síolta – the National Quality framework and; Strand 2 supporting the implementation of Highscope.
- The Early Years Quality Coordinator provides information, mentoring and coaching to practitioners and supports them in engaging with and implementing the twelve steps of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme. She is currently supporting ten early years' services that cater for approximately 300 children, with respect to the Síolta standards.
- The Highscope Coordinator facilitates and supports the roll-out of the Highscope curriculum in early year's services in Ballymun. The Coordinator is currently working with 5 early years' services that cater for approximately 150 children in the community.
- In total 3,4,5 Learning Years supports the development of about 400 pre-school children in Ballymun and aims to continue to expand its programme of work through 2010 and 2011.
- 3,4,5 Learning Years is also concerned with the availability of quality pre-school provision dedicated to 3 1/2 – 5 year olds in Ballymun and is undertaking an audit of places in June 2010. It is estimated that about 500 pre-school places are required to ensure that every child in Ballymun accesses pre-school before entering Junior Infants.