



**Post Primetime Programme 'Breach of Trust'
Turning Point for Change
From Early Childhood Ireland**

About Us

Early Childhood Ireland is an organisation bringing together over 3300 members who share our mission of enabling the provision of quality early childhood care and education in Ireland, with positive outcomes for children. These members operate full day care (crèche), playgroups and after school services across the country, supporting over 100,000 children. We believe that early childhood is a critical period for the nurturing of each individual child's curiosity, resilience, creativity, confidence and potential. We believe that every child has a right to a childhood that is loving, secure and stimulating.

Setting the Context

The Prime Time Investigates programme showed the country examples of early childhood education services which were poorly managed, with stressed staff and consequently unhappy distressed children. We are all resolved to taking actions to remedy this and make sure it can never happen again and we know that the steps needed to ensure this doesn't happen again involve addressing the issue of quality.

Early childhood matters and only quality counts

High quality services are key and they make a positive difference. Conversely poor quality can, at best, make no difference and at worst can lead to negative outcomes for children. Our investment must therefore focus on ensuring the quality of service provision across all types of services that children attend.

Close to home, evidence of improvement in outcomes for children in Northern Ireland has emerged from a major, value added, longitudinal study Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland EPPENI (2006). As a direct result of investment through the Pre School Expansion Programme, Northern Ireland achieved well across all outcomes in the longitudinal EPPENI study and is also performing significantly higher than Ireland, England, New Zealand and Australia on reading at ages 9 & 10 (PIRLS: Progress in International Reading Literacy study, 2011). Northern Ireland is also outscoring Finland, England, Republic of Ireland, Australia and New Zealand on mathematics at ages 9 & 10 (TIMMS: Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, 2011).

Positive results from the EPPENI study is directly related to the Northern Ireland Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) which was introduced in 1998 and was designed to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education for every child. The programme also included

mandatory access to mentoring and support for each early childhood education service, available monthly.

Quality is systemic and it is the responsibility of the individual and collective in a service, the training providers and the quality of the training they deliver, the HSE inspectorate- its processes and sanctions, policy makers and the resources they allocate to policy, the researchers who signpost best practice and parents who make choices for their children.

Five Point Plan

Based on over 40 years of experience working with the sector and evidence emerging from Irish and international research, we in Early Childhood Ireland propose a five point plan which brings together what we know is required for quality policy, provision and practice in the sector.

1. Developing the Workforce

Under the preschool regulations, qualifications are not required to work with children. In essence, anybody can open and operate a service.

There are 4,600 notified services in the country with approx. 25,000 staff, 76% of which have a qualification at Level 5 which is a one year post leaving cert qualification. Many of those working in the ECCE sector are low paid (average €10.50 per hour for those with Level 5 qualifications), have little access to continuing professional development and are paid only for the time spent directly with the children. Under this regime there is no time for planning, evaluating or reflecting, meeting parents or staff meetings. Training is usually undertaken late in the evening and over the weekend, in staff's own time. Research strongly indicates that the quality of provision is directly linked to staff qualifications and training (EEPNI, 2006).

Prime Time Investigates showed us the consequences of a poorly managed service. A review of the Qualifications requirements for staff in early childhood education services must set down expectations for all staff levels – leadership and management, supervisors and childcare assistants.

Ireland has already developed frameworks to guide a workforce plan, including the Model Framework produced in 2002 and the Workforce Development plan produced in 2010. Early Childhood Ireland is proposing that all staff have a level 5 or equivalent, that the supervisor have a level 6 and that the manager have a level 7 or above. These new mandatory minimum qualifications must permeate the entire system and not solely focused on junior staff or in services delivering the Free Preschool year.

A phased approach to the professionalization of the early childhood workforce has been successfully implemented in Scotland and New Zealand. Higher qualifications should be incentivised and a Training Transformation Fund should be introduced to enable practitioners gain awards at levels 6, 7, 8 and beyond. This strategy has proven to be successful in lifting the sector in England where a Transformation Fund has been available since 2006.

Monitoring and review of the suitability of training agencies to deliver quality accredited training is imperative as well as ensuring that tutors delivering this training are suitably qualified with

experience relevant to the sector. There are many examples of Training organisations using inappropriate tutors in recent years which exacerbates poor quality.

Finally there is a need to review of the Current FETAC Awards level 5 &6 with specific reference to the inclusion of child protection training as a mandatory module which is currently not the case.

2. Building Quality through Mentoring

Evidence from Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland offers a clear roadmap for quality enhancement which involves providing early childhood education services with access to Mentors. Mentors would work with clusters of services building quality as well as an enhanced professional network, using the two national frameworks Síolta and Aistear. Early Childhood Ireland has worked in this way for over 12 years and can show evidence of the foundations required for a high quality Irish mentoring model.

For a mentoring system to be effective, staff will need CPD to be incorporated in their working week as well as time for planning and evaluation.

It is critical that child adult ratios are maintained at all times throughout the day in an early childhood education service. Local panels of temporary workers to ensure services can meet ratios at all times should be developed.

Finally, the absence of Special Needs assistants has reached a crisis point in services all over the country. Services are demoralised and upset at having to refuse and limit the access of children with additional needs to their services. This must be rectified as a matter of urgency if we want to ensure that children with additional needs have equality of access, opportunity and outcome.

3. Reforming Inspection

Ireland needs to move from its current system of notification to a system of Registration to include Registration of Staff, thereby ensuring that early childhood education services are staffed only by suitably qualified people.

A more robust system of inspection, which differentiates between more minor breaches of compliance (for example, a cobweb or inclusion of the wrong type of plasters in the first aid box) and more serious breaches (incorrect ratios or practices that are injurious to children) is required. The introduction of a grading system such as that which exists in England would be very attractive to parents.

More suitably qualified inspectors, with a broader expertise including curriculum and pedagogy, are required so that services are visited annually and the inspectorate should include early childhood expertise.

Data from the Inspection Reports must be collated and analysed annually to provide a thematic view of strengths and weaknesses within the sector, and which can nationally inform CPD programmes for staff in a given year. Individual reports should be available online and must be written in a consistent format which is not currently the case and must include a right to reply.

4. Ring-fencing Investment

OECD research clearly indicates that Irish investment (0.25%) in early childhood lags significantly behind the European average (1% of GDP). In parallel, how childcare is paid for needs to be addressed as there is evidence that it is prohibitive for many parents.

Pay scales for staff in the early childhood education sector are very low and higher qualifications do not result in higher remuneration. Increased capitation levels would incentivise experienced and qualified staff to stay within the sector.

In line with the recent decision by the UK Government to rescind their decision to increase ratios, we should provide medium-to long term guarantees on ratios and rates of capitation to work towards higher quality.

It is essential that the ECCE scheme is extended over a 52 week period to ensure retention of qualified staff. Since the advent of the Free Pre-school year, many staff working in the sector are only offered 38 week contracts and many go on the dole for the remaining 14 weeks.

Finally, the universality of the free preschool year is its critical strength and must be maintained. In addition, a second free preschool year should be introduced on a phased basis in order to incentivise quality by offering funding to what would be 'beacon' early childhood education facilities.

5. Reforming Legislation

Currently all pre-school centre based services notify to the HSE. However, School age childcare services, which may be in receipt of government funding, are not regulated or inspected, have no operating standards and no training requirements. An inspection of a service which offers both preschool and after school will only inspect the preschool service.

In addition, the vast majority of child-minders are exempt from regulation and currently only 1% are subject to inspection. In Scotland child-minders are required to be registered and are inspected and we must ensure that the child protection legislation which is due to come before the Oireachtas shortly includes paid child-minders.

Conclusion

We have an opportunity to enhance Ireland's early childhood education services. We must grasp this chance to put in place a vision of an early childhood education sector which is good for children, families and Irish society and which we can be proud of.