

Our Vision

Every young child is thriving and learning in quality early childhood settings. Our role in achieving this vision is to be effective champions for quality in practice, putting children and their rights at the core of our work and advocating strongly for them, their families and all early childhood professionals.

Our Mission

Our mission is to inspire and enable members to provide quality experiences for young children and their families in their settings.

We do this by:

Working closely with members, peer organisations, parents, policy makers, partners, funders and researchers;

Advocating on behalf of our members and the children and families they work with on matters that are important to them;

Progressing thinking and research to help inform and shape the quality of practice and policy

Set of Assumptions

Early Childhood Ireland is setting out our observations of and for the sector based on the following assumptions:

1. Higher quality early childhood care and education has positive long-term returns for the child, their families and society. The return can be as high as €7 for every €1 spent.
2. Only quality counts – detrimental effects can occur where children experience mediocre or poor early care and education and consequently return on investment is compromised.
3. Early childhood matters - babies are born with 25% of their brains development, by 3 years of age their brains are 80% developed. The care and educative experiences of infants and young children in this birth to three phase can have a profound effect on how they are emotionally 'wired'.
4. Parents pay on average 34% of household income on 'childcare' where the European average is 17%
5. The current market structure of early childhood care and education is inadequately designed, regulated and resourced to provide blanket high quality experiences for each child in the system.

6. 48% of early childhood settings have at least one child with a diagnosed additional need. 70% of early childhood settings have at least one child with either a diagnosed or undiagnosed additional need and there is no defined or automatic access to supports for children with additional needs.
7. Prior to the introduction of the ECCE scheme €75 was the most commonly charged fee for a preschool place with 20% of services charging that amount and a further 15% charging between €80 and €100 (ECI, 2014). The government currently pays €62.50 per place – a shortfall of €12.50 per child/per week.
8. Government under invests in early childhood care and education. Current investment into the sector is 0.2% GPD with the OECD average being 0.7% and the UNICEF benchmark lies at 1%.

Demographic & Policy Context - Growing need for quality early childhood care and education provision

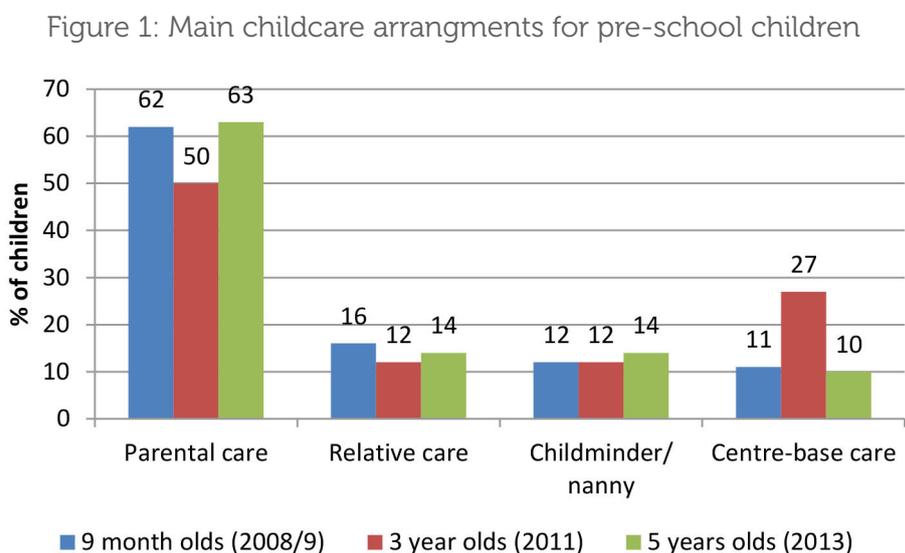
In 2014, there were an estimated 435,747 children aged 0-5 years and 458,665 children aged 6-12 years living in Ireland.

It is now well-established that investment in early years improves outcomes for children and families. Research has demonstrated that such investment can support children in benefiting more from school as well as compensating, to a degree, for inequalities in other factors related to disadvantage and parental income.

There is evidence to suggest that the timing of early years provision must be considered. Research suggests, for example, that children benefit from parental care in the first year of life. Indeed, according to the Marmot Review (2010) *'sensitive and responsive parent-child relationships are associated with stronger cognitive skills in young children and enhanced social competence and work skills later in school. It is therefore important that we create the conditions to enable parents to develop this relationship during the child's critical first year'* (Marmot Review, 2010, p. 98).

Research also indicates that *'from the age of 2-3 onwards children do better in high quality care and education services than if they remain at home'* and that *'vulnerable children in families experiencing high levels of disadvantage or with complex needs...benefit from early care and education services at a younger age, provided the services are high quality'* (Melhuish 2004, cited Start Strong, 2014, p.9).

Data on the main childcare arrangements used by families is presented in Figure 1.

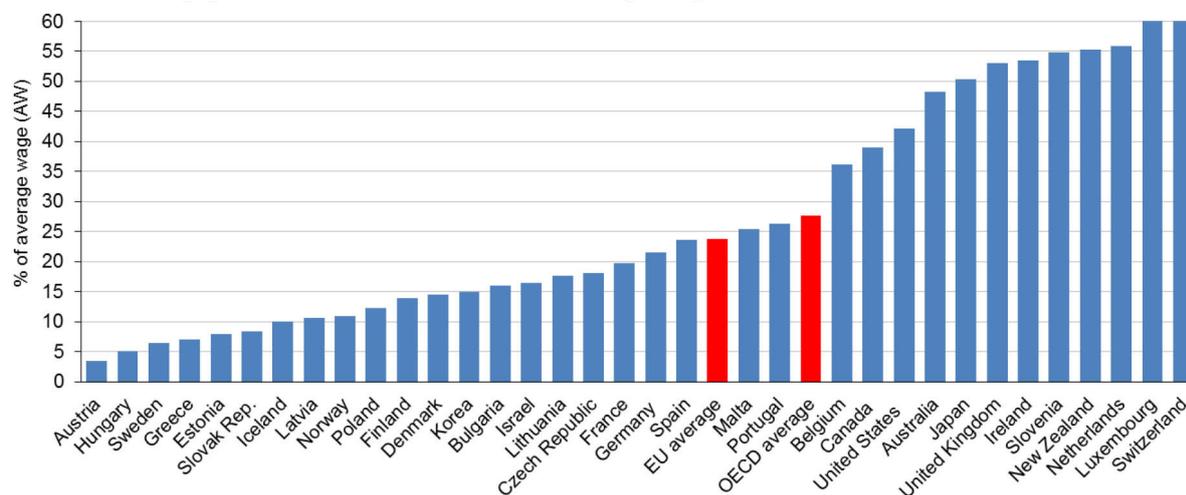


Source:
Growing Up
in Ireland

Affordability – Irish Families are paying too much

The choice of childcare arrangements is influenced by a large number of factors, with affordability often being among the most relevant. The figure below shows that, across OECD countries, the average 'typical' childcare fee paid for a two-year old in full-time care is just over 27% of the average wage.

Figure 2: Gross childcare fees as a percentage of the average wage per two-year old attending accredited early-years care and education services (2012)



Source: OECD

According to the OECD, the average European family pays 17% of family income on childcare with an Irish family paying an average 34%.

State Support

The DCYA currently provides approximately €260 million annually to three support programmes the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, and the Training and Employment Childcare (TEC) programmes supporting the provision of childhood care and education for more than 100,000 children each year.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme

Almost every pre-school service (more than 4,300) in the State is participating with up to 68,000 children, or 95% of the eligible age cohort, expected to avail of the programme in 2015. Participating services currently receive a capitation fee of €62.50 per week per qualifying child attending. A higher capitation fee of €73 a week is available to services with more highly qualified staff. Settings are open 38 weeks per year to provide the ECCE scheme for 15 hours per child per week.

Sustainability & Oversupply

We know from the Pobal ABQ 2014 that 31% of existing services report themselves as full, which means that *69% of services currently have vacancies*.

Only 35% of urban facilities report being full while 28% of rural services say that they are full.

According to Pobal, this can be extrapolated to a total of *31500 vacant places* in childcare settings nationally.

This is linked to the lack of any strategic capital development plan which is linked to changing demographics. The lack of any such plan is directly linked to too many operators in some areas with the result that too few children are enrolled in services for them ever to be sustainable.

We know that the level of capitation across the funding schemes (ECCE; CCS; TEC) is too low and does not allow any paid time for the inclusion of child free hours (non-contact time to plan/ evaluate; work with parents etc.) and does not facilitate CPD, both of which are vital to a quality agenda. The levels of capitation for each of the schemes does not support sustainability and has led many members into a situation of reckless trading.

The average preschool service is and continues to lose €12.50 per child place per week on the basis that the current standard ECCE capitation rate is €62.50 where pre ECCE, €75 was the most commonly charged fee for a preschool place (with 20% of services charging that amount and a further 15% charging between €80 and €100 [ECI, 2014]).

Staffing & the challenge of retaining a Qualified Workforce

Approximately 25000 people are working in this sector, making it a significant employer. The average salary is €10 per hour (ECI 2013). A professional early years educator earning a wage of 15 hours per week @ €10 per hour for 38 week year is earning €5700 pa. According to ECI Survey of 2013 the average wages in the sector ranged from €10.10 per hour for unqualified staff to €11.24 for graduates.

Contracts and terms and conditions for staff are problematic. Contracts of 38 week duration do not create sustainable jobs for the workforce and fail to create stability, consistency or certainty in the services that wish to retain their qualified staff. Qualification requirements are increasing but salaries are not.

This makes it impossible for a person to stay in this sector, resulting in the bleeding of experience and expertise. We need professional jobs, that are not seasonal or part time and that allow skilled and qualified people to stay in the sector.

Staff costs constitute around 80% of the running costs of childcare business, and competition and cost efficiency requires these costs to be kept as low as possible (Start Strong, 2013).

In Ireland, qualification levels and requirements are significantly below European standards (saving the United Kingdom).

Additional Needs & the challenge of Equity and Rights

There is a fundamental weakness in the current system which does not provide supports, training and mentoring for those working directly with children with additional needs and their families. This gap has come more to the fore with the introduction of the ECCE scheme. 48% of services have at least one child with a diagnosed need and ECI members indicate up 70% of them have at least one child who has an additional need (either diagnosed or awaiting assessment). Children and their families cannot access their entitlement to early education due to the lack of resources and supports.

Early childhood settings have no automatic access to SNAs or other supports when a child with

additional needs arrives in the service.

Young children typically wait for an assessment until their last term in preschool as the impetus is for the Primary School to have the assessment and diagnosis in planning for September.

Paid Parental Leave & the challenge of a child's first year at home

Since 2007, women have been entitled to 26 weeks paid maternity leave, an increase of 8 weeks over previous provision, and an additional 16 weeks unpaid leave, also an increase of 8 weeks over previous provision.

Research tells us that children do best when they spend the critical first year at home with their parent/s.

Solutions

1. Prioritise quality/equality across three areas for high impact and sustainable outcomes:

- a) **Operational Quality** that is characterised by contracts that are fit for purpose; that allows for consistency and planning in running a setting; that allows for the retention of qualified staff; that incentivises good quality and that provides a fair and realistic level of capitation, which contributes to increased staff salaries and results in a reduction of costs for parents.
- b) **Staff Quality** Improve the salaries of the workforce (sectorally agreed pay scales aligned with capitation levels); provide wider access to the learner fund (Levels 7 and 8) and develop sustainable jobs to retain expertise and experience in the sector.
- c) **Equality in provision for all children** Develop and invest in systemic supports for *children with additional needs*. Develop innovative models which train, mentor and support the early childhood educators. Within this model provide SNAs to support individual/ clusters groups of children (with formal diagnoses or awaiting assessment). Early intervention prior to assessment is vital and opportunities to make a real difference to children is lost in waiting for a formal assessment.

Prioritise quality for infants/toddlers, raise qualification thresholds in line with ECCE requirements and open the learner fund to support those working with the very youngest of children. Birth to three is a critical time for growth, development and well-being. It is therefore a very real opportunity to invest and make a significant difference for the long term.

2. Invest directly in services

Strong evidence (OECD, 2006; Lloyd and Penn, 2012) suggests that direct public funding of early childhood services brings more effective governmental steering of the sector, which drives quality in practice. Dr. Stephen Kinsella (document in print) is also emphatic that direct expenditure into the sector is the only route forward.

A system of tax credits or tax cuts will fail to make childcare more affordable. This approach may increase the cost since childcare services are struggling and have not increased fees since 2008,

thus wiping out the benefit to parents/families. Tax breaks will not equitably support parents/families to access childcare, they don't benefit low paid or part time workers and those most in need of affordable childcare would not gain.

3. Invest in the birth to six years cohort as a cohesive sector

Adopt an integrated approach for the development of early childhood care and education from birth to six years of age. Research highlights systemic failures where care and learning are separated at a policy level. Literature suggests that 'childcare' and 'early education' services in these split systems embody different visions and understandings of children, programme goals, approaches and contents (Kaga, 2010). The learning signpost the importance of an integrated policy for under and over 3s, as infants and toddlers fare badly in split systems.

Source

- DCYA (2015) Future Investment in Early Years and School-Age Care and Education Primer
- Kaga, Y; Bennett, J and Moss P. (2010) *Caring and Learning Together: A cross-national study on the integration of early childhood care and education within education*. Paris: UNESCO
- Lloyd, E. and Penn, H. (2012) *Childcare Markets: Can They Deliver an Equitable Service?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- Marmot Review (2010) Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post-2010.
- OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*. Paris: OECD
- Start Strong (2013) *'Childcare' Business of Profession?* Dublin: Start Strong.
- Start Strong (2014) *The Double Dividend: Childcare That's Affordable and High Quality*. Dublin: Start Strong.