



Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is available to all children within the eligible age range. This programme was first announced in April 2009, with children enrolling from January 2010. The aim of the programme is to provide children with their first formal experience of early learning before beginning primary school. The programme also aims to promote optimal development for all children and narrow the gap in attainment between more and less advantaged children. The ECCE programme is part of the new funding scheme, *Together for Better*, which was launched in September 2022.

About ECCE

The ECCE programme is provided for three hours a day, five days a week, over 38 weeks per year, from September to June. When the programme was introduced, children were entitled to one year of funded provision. Since 2018, eligible children can avail of the scheme for two years.

Children can start ECCE from the age of two years and eight months and can continue in the programme until they transfer to primary school. This is provided that they are not older than five years and six months at the end of the preschool year.

The current age range is now two years and 8 months and five years and 6 months. There are no exceptions to the lower age. However, if a child is over the eligibility age requirement due to additional needs, their family may be able to get an exemption from the upper age limit.

Settings that take part in the ECCE programme must provide an appropriate preschool educational programme which adheres to the principles and standards of *Síolta* and *Aistear*. *Síolta* is the national quality framework for early childhood education and *Aistear* is the early childhood curriculum framework.

Staff have a minimum of a level 5 qualification that meets the requirements of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. Recognised courses are set out by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) [here](#). Each ECCE session must have a Lead Educator, and to be eligible for the standard capitation, Lead Educators must have a minimum of a Level 6 qualification.

Capitation

Settings that participate in the ECCE programme receive a set amount from the State through capitation. The standard rate is €69 per week per child.

Prior to the introduction of Core Funding, higher capitation could apply to services that had suitably qualified staff in place. This amounted to an extra €11.25 per child per week. The ECCE higher capitation funding is now being replaced by the Core Funding Graduate Premium from the 2022/2023 programme year onwards.

Read more about Core Funding in our [Core Funding Explainer](#).

Optional Extras

As one of the core principles of ECCE is that it is free of charge to all parents, the Department prefers that services keep optional extras for children attending ECCE to an absolute minimum. The Department recommends that services arrange for charged activities to occur outside the three hours of the ECCE programme.

Apart from sessional services, additional time may not be included as an optional extra. Sessional-only services may offer an option of a maximum additional 30 minutes per day. This extra time must be listed as an optional extra on the fees list.

Charging for items which would be expected to be part of a preschool service, such as arts and crafts materials, is not permitted. Optional extras that are allowed include food, 'gymboree' type events, nappies or pull-ups, baking or one paid school trip.

AIM

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in June 2016. The goal of AIM is to create a more inclusive environment in preschools, so all children, regardless of ability, can benefit from quality early learning and care. You can read more about this child-centred model in the [AIM Explainer](#).

