



Early  
Childhood  
Ireland

# Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

## Early Childhood Ireland Explainers

### Development

Aistear was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). First set up in 1987, the NCCA was reconstituted as a statutory body in 2001 to advise the Minister for Education on curriculum and assessment for Early Years education, primary schools, and post-primary schools.

The development of Aistear began in the same year. The NCCA worked with stakeholders and reviewed curriculum documents and resources used within the sector, as well as those used internationally. This work helped shape a background paper that responded to the curriculum proposals in the white paper, [Ready to Learn \(1999\)](#) and diverged from them. It suggested that instead of having three separate curricula, one for birth to three years old, one for three to four-year-olds, and one for four to six-year-olds, a single national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years old should be developed.

Building on this document, the NCCA set up the Early Childhood Technical Working Group in 2003. Its members comprised leading researchers and academics in Ireland. Its expertise helped guide the development of [Towards a Framework for Early Learning](#), a consultative document published in 2004. It outlined the vision, aims, and model for developing a curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years old.

In 2004, the NCCA also set up the Early Childhood Committee. This group drew its membership from across the sector. The 15 members included representatives from the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, government departments involved in the Early Years sector, the HSE, the National Parent's Council, the Irish National Teacher's Organisation, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, Foras na Gaeilge, and school management bodies. The Committee's brief was to support the NCCA's work in developing the Framework.

The NCCA published [Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report](#) in May 2005. In this report, the Early Years sector broadly agreed with the vision and aims outlined for the framework. The sector also identified a series of areas that required further

consideration including the Framework's philosophy, vision, and aims, the Framework's contents, and the process of developing and supporting the Framework.

In 2006, the NCCA undertook a portraiture study, which is a form of research that involves developing a picture with words of children's experiences. The study's intention was to find out what children liked doing, where they liked to be, and who they liked to be with. The study resulted in the publication of [Listening for Children's Stories: Children as Partners in the Framework for Early Learning](#).

The NCCA also commissioned a series of [four background papers](#) across 2007 and 2008. These were written by experts in Early Years care and education in Ireland. The papers covered the relationship between education and care, early learning and development, play, and formative assessment. Much of the research used to develop Aistear is summarised in these papers. These four papers, along with the consultation findings, the portraiture study, and the expertise of the Early Childhood Committee and the Technical Working Group helped shape Aistear, which was eventually published in October 2009.

## Purpose

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides adults with guidance to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging experiences. These experiences will help children grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. Aistear outlines the types of learning that are important for children in their Early Years. It also offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. Aistear allows adults to make decisions about what and how children learn in their own particular contexts and situations and is not a prescriptive set of things that children must learn.

## Principles

Aistear is based on 12 principles of learning which can be split into three groups. The first group is concerned with children and their lives in early childhood and includes principles such as the child's uniqueness, equality and diversity, and children as citizens. The second group focuses on children's connections with others and covers principles such as relationships, parents, family and community, and the adult's role. The final group covers how children learn and develop. This group covers principles such as holistic learning and development, active learning, play and hands-on experiences, relevant and meaningful experiences, communication and language, and the learning environment.

Aistear presents children's learning and development using four themes: Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking.

## Themes

**1** The first theme of Well-being focuses on developing as a person and has two main elements: psychological well-being and physical well-being. The relationships and interactions children have with their families and communities contribute to their sense of well-being. Children need to feel valued, respected, empowered, cared for, and included, while also needing to respect themselves, others, and their environment. Physical well-being is crucial for learning and development as it enables children to explore, investigate, and challenge themselves in the environment. Adults support children's psychological and physical well-being by helping them make healthy choices about nutrition, hygiene, and exercise.

**2** The second theme is concerned with Identity and Belonging. This theme is about children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community. Children develop a sense of who they are from birth and relationships play an important role in building their identities. Belonging involves having a secure relationship or connection with a particular group of people. When children feel like they belong, they can be emotionally strong, self-assured, and able to deal with challenges and difficulties.

**3** The third theme of Communicating is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas, and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes. Communicating involves giving, receiving, and making sense of information. It is a two-way activity as children not only learn how to share their experiences with others, but they also learn how to interpret what others are sharing with them. Key to a child's development is being a good communicator. Adults can encourage children to communicate by listening to them, interpreting what they are saying, responding to them, and modelling good communication.

**4** The final theme is Exploring and Thinking. This is concerned with children making sense of the things, places, and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, as well as forming, testing, and refining ideas. Children use their senses, minds, and bodies to experience the world and make sense of it. They gather information and develop new skills such as thinking skills. They form ideas and refine them through exploring their environment and interacting and communicating with others.

## Updating Aistear

The NCCA is currently in the middle of updating Aistear. The updating comes as a result of considerable change in the context for the provision of Early Years care and education in Ireland. Since Aistear was first published. This includes changes in national developments, policies and strategies, curriculum and assessment developments, and children's lived experiences.

Phase 1 of the consultation ran from May 2021 until April 2022, with the [consultation report](#) being published in April 2023. Phase 1 focused on asking stakeholders what is working well with Aistear and what suggestions they have as to how it might be enhanced and updated. The feedback was then taken to develop proposals for Aistear.

Phase 2 began in September 2023 and ran until November of that year. This phase consisted of sharing the developed proposals on updating Aistear with stakeholders and then gathering their feedback. The report on the consultation findings will be published in Spring 2024.

## Aistear – Síolta Practice Guide

The [Aistear – Síolta Practice Guide](#) aims to support practitioners in using Aistear and Síolta together to develop the quality of their curriculum. This will better support children's learning and development. The Practice Guide includes a series of resources to aid practitioners in critically reflecting on their curriculum and identifying what works well. The Practice Guide can also help in identifying priorities for development and planning actions for positive change. The Practice Guide can be used for ongoing review, development, and improvement.

