



The EU Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

Early Childhood Ireland Explainers



What is the EU Quality Framework?

In 2014, the European Union (EU) Directorate General for Education and Culture published [Proposal for key principles of a quality framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#). This report was from the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care which comprised representatives from 25 countries including Ireland and it identifies actions that help produce and assure high-quality Early Years provision. It covers the most relevant themes in current EU policies on Early Years in a comprehensive way and devises clear recommendations on each topic.

The EU Quality Framework was seen as needed as it can be an efficient element of good governance in Early Years provision. The Quality Framework provides key principles and a European approach to high-quality Early Years provision based on good practices in EU Member States. The main objective of the Framework is to describe a system that can provide high-quality Early Years care and education for all children and its development.

In 2019, the [Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems](#) was adopted. This document, prepared by the European Commission,

sets out a series of recommendations including improving “access to high-quality early childhood education and care systems in line with the statements set out in the Quality framework for early childhood education and care”. Recommendations are non-binding acts that are used by the EU to achieve certain ends without imposing a mandatory legal framework. Though they are non-binding, it is expected that the suggestions set in the Recommendation are followed. Recommendations have power in that they create precedents and set standards. The Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems carries extra significance since Ireland negotiated and voted on this recommendation, and they participated in the development of the EU Quality Framework.

Measuring Quality

Quality is a complex and relative concept that is constantly in motion. Due to this, the European Quality Framework aims to stimulate thought about quality and keep it in the forefront of professionals and other stakeholders during actual practice. Measures to achieve, improve, and further develop quality are interdependent and should not be considered in isolation. Measures have been identified which help produce and assure high quality. These include structural quality, process quality, and outcome quality.

- Structural quality looks at how the Early Years system is designed and organised and often includes rules linked with the accreditation and approval of individual Early Years settings, requirements about the number of professionally trained staff, and the design of the curriculum.
- Process quality looks at practice within an Early Years setting. This involves the role of play with the curriculum, relationships between Early Years providers and children’s families, and the extent to which care and education is provided in an integrated way.
- Outcome quality looks at the benefits of Early Years for children, families, communities, and society. Where the benefits relate to children’s outcomes, they often include measures of children’s emotional, moral, mental, and physical development.

Issue 1: Shared Image of the Child

The European Quality Framework outlines how each child is unique and a competent and active learner whose potential needs to be encouraged and supported. Every Early Years setting needs to be child-centred, acknowledge the children’s views, and actively involve children in everyday decisions in the setting. Early Years care and education is designed to offer a holistic approach based on the fundamental assumption that education and care are inseparable.

Issue 2: Shared Vision of the Role of Parents

The family is the first and most crucial place for children to grow and develop. Parents and guardians are responsible for each child’s well-being, health, and development. Families are characterised by great social socioeconomic, cultural, and religious diversity, and this diversity should be respected as a fundamental element of European societies. Families should be fully involved in all aspects of education and care for their child. To make this a reality, Early Years services should be designed in partnership with families and should be based on trust and mutual respect.

Issue 3: Shared Understanding of Quality

Research shows that high-quality Early Years services are crucial in promoting children's development and learning and enhancing their educational outcomes. The European Quality Framework shares the underlying assumptions of quality set out by the European Commission's Network on Childcare, which, in 1996, outlined 40 targets to be achieved by all Member states over a 10-year period. The Network emphasised that the targets were not the last word on quality as defining quality should be a dynamic, continuous, and democratic process.

Quality Statements

The European Quality Framework contains 10 quality statements that can be grouped together under five themes:

1. Accessibility
2. Staff and Working Conditions
3. Curriculum
4. Monitoring and Evaluation
5. Policy and Financing

Accessibility

1. Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.

Early Years provision should be made available from birth to the age that children begin compulsory primary education. High-quality universal Early Years provision is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged and/or marginalised groups. To respond to parental circumstances and encourage all families to use Early Years services, provision needs to offer flexibility in relation to opening hours and the content of the programme.

2. Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.

A high-quality pedagogical practice respects different views on education and makes all families feel welcome which makes it possible for them to trust the services. This involves working on diversity and inclusion regarding social status, cultural and religious background, gender, disability, and more. Parents need to be involved and staff should reflect on the diversity of the population being served.

The Workforce

3. Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role.

Recognising the Early Years workforce as professional is crucial. Professional

development has a huge impact on the quality of staff pedagogy and children's outcomes. Good training improves a professional's ability to engage in warm, supportive, and stimulating interactions with children. Not only is training critical, but the content of it, the way it takes place, and the methods used are very important. Developing common education and training programmes for all staff working in the Early Years sector helps to create a shared agenda and understanding of quality. Training that is adapted for educators working with more vulnerable groups can help them better respond to possible additional needs that these families may have.

4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork, and cooperation with parents.

Different factors influence the well-being of staff and the way they relate to and work with children. A higher number of educators per group of children can positively affect the sensitive-response work toward both the individual child and the group. Other factors include wages and education level. It's often seen that educators working with the youngest children often have lower wages and education levels than teachers in schools. Leadership is also crucial, in terms of management, in a pedagogical sense, and in the valuing of the team.

Curriculum

5. A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values, and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.

The curriculum should set common goals, values, and approaches that reflect society's expectations about the role and responsibilities of Early Years settings in encouraging children's development towards their full potential. It is critical to keep a link between the care, education, and socialisation of the child. Moments of care are at the same time moments of learning but learning with young children should not be seen as formal learning. The implementation of the curriculum needs to be planned within an open framework that acknowledges and addresses the diverse interests and needs of children in a holistic manner. Children's experiences and their active participation should be valued, and the importance of learning through play should be understood and supported.

6. A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues, and parents and to reflect on their own practice.

A curriculum is a significant tool in stimulating the creation of a shared understanding and trust between children, and between children, parents, and Early Years staff to foster development and learning. A curriculum can guide the work of all Early Years settings and contexts. It can also describe the practices and priorities in the contexts of each setting. To develop a collaborative approach to the curriculum, individual staff must be able to analyse their own practice, what has been effective, and develop new approaches, along with their colleagues, based on evidence. The quality of Early Years provision is improved when staff discuss the implementation of the curriculum within the context of their setting, and consider the needs of children, their parents, and the team.

Monitoring and Evaluation

7. Monitoring and evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional, and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.

Generating appropriate information and feedback at the relevant local, regional, or national level comes from systematically monitoring Early Years provision. This information should then foster open exchange, coherent planning, review, evaluation, and the development of a high-quality Early Years system. Monitoring quality is not an ad hoc activity but is a continuous process with all parties involved, top-down as well as bottom-up.

8. Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child.

Monitoring and evaluation are conducted to support children, families, and communities. All stakeholders should be engaged and empowered during the implementation of any monitoring and evaluation process. While monitoring can concentrate on the quality of structures, processes, and outcomes, focusing on the interest of the child and staff engagement strengthens the importance of looking at the quality of the processes used in Early Years settings.

Policy and Financing

9. Stakeholders in the Early Years system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.

Governments, stakeholders, and social partners need to work together to ensure the success of Early Years services. Legislation, guidance, and regulation can help create clear expectations regarding the importance of working collaboratively to ensure high-quality outcomes for children, families, and local communities.

10. Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised or funded Early Years, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders.

Access to Early Years can be supported by structural and legislative arrangements that give families the right to access Early Years provision. Providing additional funds to ensure access for disadvantaged groups can be an effective strategy for increasing access, especially for children from migrant, disadvantaged, or low-income families. Monitoring participation in Early Years can ensure the effective use of funding. Measures that emphasise the attractiveness and value of Early Years services would also be required when moving toward universal entitlement.

