



Early  
Childhood  
Ireland

# Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

## Early Childhood Ireland Explainers

### Development

The development of Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education was the main objective of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Care (CECDE) when it was first established in 2002. The CECDE was eventually shut down in 2008. A significant step in the development of the National Quality Framework (NQF) was the commissioning of a literature review of the domains of learning by the CECDE. This review was never published but was reported in [Early Childhood in Ireland: Evidence and Perspectives](#). The review presented its evidence thematically and these themes formed the nucleus of the NQF.

In 2004, two reviews of national and international policy were published. [Insights on Quality: A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2004](#) recommended that the NQF take several perspectives on quality into account. It also suggested that the NQF would be flexible and consider the changing needs of children, families, and Irish society. It stated that the NQF should be child-centred and have a focus on children's rights while also covering indoor and outdoor environments. The review proposed the establishment of a national registration system for Early Years providers and that the implementation of the NQF should be the responsibility of a centralised agency for Early Years care. This would be fully supported by infrastructure at a national, regional, and local level. Overarching principles that were recommended in the review included adequate and sustained funding, and a national data strategy on Early Years provision.

The second review, [Making Connections: A Review of International Policy, Practice and Research](#), looked at policy, practices, and research on Early Years in six countries and made a series of recommendations relevant to Ireland. The main one was the importance of a coordinated and integrated policy framework for Early Years provision.

The CECDE was advised by its Consultative Committee which comprised over 40 representatives from organisations such as Barnardos, Childminding Ireland, the Children's Rights Alliance, and the Irish Preschool Playgroups Association and the National Children's Nurseries Association (both of which merged to form Early Childhood Ireland). The Consultative Committee represented the views of the educators and advocates in the

Early Years sector. Consultation meetings were held nationally with practitioners and stakeholders, including one in Irish in An Cheathrú Rua in Galway.

The findings from this process were published in [Talking About Quality: Report of a Consultation Process on Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education](#). These showed that there was a wide variety of perspectives and philosophies regarding quality. The publication also indicated that there was a need for quality standards to be flexible enough to accommodate this diverse range of views. Aistear was being developed at this time and the stakeholders believed that the NQF should support the development and dissemination of the curriculum framework.

The NQF, now titled Síolta, was eventually published in 2006. It comprised four manuals, for full and part-time care, sessional care, childminders, and infant classes in primary schools. Síolta has 12 principles of quality, and 16 standards, which involve 75 components of quality.

## Principles

The first principle recognises the value of early childhood. A child's early childhood is a significant and distinct time that must be nurtured, respected, and valued. The second principle is Children First. This principle acknowledges that a child's individuality, strengths, rights, and needs are central in the provision of quality Early Years experiences. The third principle is concerned with parents. Síolta sees parents as the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting his/her well-being, learning, and development.

Relationships are at the centre of the fourth principle. Responsive, sensitive, reciprocal, and consistent relationships are crucial to the well-being, learning, and development of young children. Equality is an important principle in Síolta and a critical characteristic of quality Early Years care and education. Diversity is the sixth principle of Síolta and advocates that quality Early Years settings recognise and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural, and linguistic identity validated.

Environments are an important part of Síolta. It recognises that the physical environment of a young child has a direct impact on his/her well-being, learning, and development. The eighth principle revolves around welfare and emphasises the safety and well-being of must be protected and promoted in all Early Years environments. The Role of the Adult holds a significant place in the NQF. This role is fundamental in providing quality Early Years experiences.

The principles of Síolta also recognise that teamwork is important and that the provision of quality Early Years experiences requires cooperation, communication, and mutual respect. Another critical principle is Pedagogy and this is expressed in Early Years by curricula or programmes of activities that take a holistic approach to the development and learning of children, and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education. The final principle is Play and this is central to the well-being, development and learning of a young child.

## 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.

