



# Learning Together:

Exploring children's and childminders' experiences of mixed-age communities in home-based settings



Early  
Childhood  
Ireland

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## About the Author

Early Childhood Ireland is the leading national children’s advocacy and membership organisation. We work in partnership with Early Years, School Age Care, and Childminding settings to ensure that every child is thriving and learning. We advocate for an effective and inclusive system which values, supports, and invests in childhood, children, and services.

This research and data analysis were undertaken by Kathleen Tuite and Dr Muireann Ranta, respectively, and the project and accompanying report were co-authored with Dr Carmel Ward. Early Childhood Ireland extends appreciation for their commitment to research rigour and their collaborative efforts in advancing understanding to enhance childminding experiences for children.

## Acknowledgements

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## Glossary

Definitions	
Aistear	Ireland’s Early Childhood Curriculum Framework
Funds of knowledge	Funds of knowledge refers to the valuable skills, knowledge and interests that babies, toddlers and young children learn from their families and communities. This can include things like cooking, gardening, shopping, farming, storytelling, and cultural traditions. Educators use this information to nurture and extend early learning and development through providing meaningful learning experiences and provocations that connect with the everyday lives of babies, toddlers, and young children.
Pedagogy	This refers to all the educator’s actions or work in supporting babies’, toddlers’, and young children’s learning and development. It infers a negotiated, respectful, and reflective learning experience for all involved.
Rights-based	An understanding of babies, toddlers and young children as rights-holders who are provided with meaningful opportunities to influence decisions about their lives.
Slow relational pedagogy	This involves taking time and being present to nurture supportive, stable, warm relationships that promote secure attachments with caregivers, healthy and safe environments and meaningful learning experiences for babies, toddlers and young children.

\* Definitions from Aistear, Ireland’s Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024, pp. 30–33)

Acronyms	
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education programme. Nationally, all children aged 3–5 years are entitled to two years of early childhood education and care for 15 hours per week.
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care (refers to both the sector and settings).
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

# 1. Introduction

## 1.2 Purpose and audience

This report is intended for professionals and stakeholders in the Early Years and School Age Care system, including childminders. This study contributes to strategic actions in *First 5*, which aims to fund and support the use of accessible research with babies, young children, and their families across all domains of their lives (Government of Ireland, 2019, Strategic Action 4.a). The aim of this participatory research study with children and childminders is to explore their perspectives and the experiences of mixed-age groups in Childminding settings. The purpose is to contribute to understanding and evidencing what children's experiences and pedagogical practice for mixed-age groups look like in home-based settings, particularly learning from insights of children in Childminding communities. This research could benefit children who attend both home and centre-based Early Years and School Age Care settings, in terms of practice, environments, relationships, and interactions. For this reason, implications are practice-based actions addressed to childminders, educators, practitioners, and managers working with mixed-age groups.

## 1.3 Report overview

The report starts by establishing its relationship with existing research before outlining the methodology. A summary of the key findings follows, together with the corresponding discussions. These findings are then briefly summarised, and the study's contribution is discussed to address the research questions. The report concludes with a series of implications based on the research findings.

## 2. Relationship to Existing Research

Mixed-age learning in education typically refers to the practice of grouping children of different ages within the same learning environment, which contrasts to single-age or grade-level classes where children are grouped according to chronological age (Katz et al., 1990). In Ireland, mixed-age groupings in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are not new, however, the extension of the ECCE Programme to a second year of provision for children in 2018, along with the broader eligibility window (from 2 years 8 months to 5 years 6 months), has led to a renewed increase in mixed-age groupings in ECEC settings (Gavagan, 2022). Nonetheless, mixed-age groups have been described as a distinctive feature of Childminding, and the value of these groupings, which often include siblings, has been emphasised in previous research (O'Regan, 2020).

Internationally, research on pedagogical practice in home-based Childminding settings remains rare, particularly from the perspective of young children (birth to six years) (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). However, Irish research reveals that childminders adopt a unique 'Close Relationship Model' that prioritises love, fun, and flexible learning across different age groups (O'Regan, 2020). The research strongly advocates for recognising the unique value of mixed-age Childminding as a distinctive pedagogical approach in Early Years and School Age Care (O'Regan, 2020).

Early Childhood Ireland's systematic review (2024) of international research investigated determinants of children's experiences and outcomes in the specific context of Childminding. The review shows that while mixed-age groups in Childminding settings foster rich and varied learning experiences, they can hinder activities such as physical play due to differing developmental needs. It is worth pointing out that the review also highlights research gaps, particularly for children under three years and for research involving children. Additionally, much previous research leans towards a positivist perspective, focusing on outcomes rather than lived experiences.

Internationally, the benefits and challenges of mixed-age learning in school (Cronin, 2019) and preschool settings are more well-documented (OECD (2020). Research

suggests that the age range of peers influences children's development. For example, research by Justice et al. (2019) in ECEC suggests that children develop vocabulary best when exposed to mixed-age peers but not when the age difference exceeds 24 months. An OECD (2020) literature review found negative associations between mixed-age groups, or groups with greater age ranges, and process quality in centre-based early education and care settings.

Again, these studies largely take a positivist perspective and are outcomes-oriented. However, several master's dissertations have explored the qualitative nature of the social interactions. For example, Goodwin (2014) explored the experiences of children, parents, and staff in the provision of a mixed-age group model in a west Dublin Early Years setting, reporting that children were provided with unique learning opportunities and social experiences in their mixed-age community.

Overall, while research highlights both the benefits and challenges of mixed-age learning, little is known about how such dynamics affect children aged under three, particularly in Childminding settings (Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). This gap underscores the need to explore children's lived experiences in these environments to inform quality practice.

## 2.1 Research with childminders

Explorations with childminders of pedagogical practice in home-based settings is relatively scarce internationally. There is, however, rich research in Ireland focused on documenting the praxis and pedagogy of paid, professional Childminding in Ireland. This research, which has primarily been conducted by O'Regan and colleagues (2022, 2023), highlights two distinctive approaches that are evident in childminders' practice and narratives: A Close Relationship model of praxis and a Real Life Learning model of pedagogy (O'Regan, 2020).

The Close Relationship Model of praxis in Childminding emphasises love, fun, and enduring relationships, where childminders develop a deep understanding of each child as an individual (O'Regan, 2020). The Real Life Learning cultural model of pedagogy centres on relationship-driven, child-led learning mediated through everyday

experiences, both in an enriched home environment and out in the community (O'Regan et al., 2023, p.911). This approach is characterised by the learning opportunities that span different age groups and emerge organically (O'Regan et al., 2023), reflecting the emergent curriculum promoted through Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework (NCCA, 2024). Within this Real Life Learning model, the following factors shape children's experiences:

<b>Relationship-driven learning</b>	is where childminders get to know each child 'inside-out', which fosters child-led activities and allows children to benefit from the caregiver's particular interests.
<b>Learning from everyday experiences</b>	provides a rich array of experiences that cater for children's individual needs, interests, preferences, and capabilities.
<b>Mixed-age groups</b>	facilitate peer learning between children of different ages, in particular empathy and responsibility towards younger children, translating and explaining knowledge, and copying older children's activities.
<b>Enriched home learning environments</b>	provide everyday tools as well as educational materials and outdoor spaces that provide rich sensorial experiences, including opportunities for physically active, unstructured outdoor play, gardening, and exploration of the natural environment.
<b>Outings in the community</b>	are a routine feature of Childminding that fosters belonging, familiarity, and identification with the wider community.
<b>The home-from-home environment</b>	is a relaxing space, which also offers plentiful opportunities for expanding and enhancing children's learning through cooking and baking, household chores, as well as afterschool activities, such as swimming, football, or dancing.

Figure 1: Real Life Learning Model (O'Regan, Halpenny and Hayes, 2023)

O'Regan's (2020) work is grounded in an ecocultural perspective, meaning that Childminding is viewed as 'a home-based ecological niche in which multiple families (i.e. childminder, children, childminder's own family and children's families) work together in raising children' (Tonyan and Nuttall, 2014, p. 119). The term 'ecocultural' combines two concepts: ecology (referring to a physical place and its ecosystem that includes networks of people and children) and culture (Nsamenang, 2015). 'Ecological' refers to the environmental and contextual conditions that shape daily life, learning, and development, including geographical location and surroundings (e.g.,

home-based setting), social structures (e.g. family roles, community networks), and economic and institutional factors (e.g., access to services, schedules).

Ecocultural theory emphasises how children's daily activities and participation in routines reflect these cultural models, offering a lens to understand the interplay between cultural values and developmental processes in real-life settings (Weisner, 2002; Tonyan, 2015). Ecocultural perspectives view culture as consisting of both tangible elements (tools) and subjective elements (e.g., belief systems, norms, values, oral traditions), and different realities, ways of being, and ways of thinking about life. The ecocultural framework situates human development in a specific ecological context, which is geographically located and bounded by a physical environment consisting of social systems that reflect the cultural elements of those living and interacting in that ecosystem or setting (Nsamenang, 2015). This perspective is highly relevant to home-based Childminding, where caregiving practices, routines, and relationships are deeply embedded in the cultural and ecological realities of family homes and local communities.

## 2.2 Research with children

While the above studies provide rich qualitative insights, they are limited in number and are primarily based on interview and case study methodologies with childminders. Research with children on their experiences of Childminding and their day-to-day interactions in home-based settings is rare (Ang et al., 2017; Early Childhood Ireland, 2024). Ang et al. (2017) conducted a comprehensive literature review that reveals a significant gap in understanding children's lived experiences in home-based Childminding contexts. Of the 278 texts reviewed, only 22 directly addressed children's experiences. Early Childhood Ireland's systematic review (2024) also noted this gap. Thus, while some studies suggest that Childminding can offer meaningful and effective provision, the nature of mixed-age groups remains underexplored. As suggested by Ang et al. (2017, pp. 265–266):

If Childminding, as a model of practice, is encapsulated within a holistic, ecological framework as some of the literature appears to suggest, then a closer examination of children's perspectives on their experiences will undoubtedly provide valuable insights into the culture and nature of home-

based childcare. It also raises the possibility of identifying a particular type of ecology or key elements that are distinctive to the nature of home-based childcare, and how it varies across specific cultural contexts and reflecting local and national influences.

If Childminding is understood as an ecological practice shaped by relationships, routines, and cultural context, then examining children's perspectives and experiences is essential to provide insight into the distinctive elements of home-based care and how these vary across cultural and national contexts, and it helps identify the unique ecology of Childminding and the cultural influences that shape its nature (Ang et al., 2017). Mixed-age peer play, which is common in home-based settings, may foster unique relational and developmental experiences that differ from those in centre-based care. Thus, closer attention must be paid not only to adult-child relationships but also to the social dynamics among children. It is also important to explore how communities influence individual development and, in turn, how each child contributes to shaping the communities they are part of (Lewis et al., 2007).

This research with children and childminders seeks to address the gaps in knowledge evident above while also providing opportunities for children and childminders to share their contributions as prominent stakeholders alongside early years researchers.

### 2.3 Babies', toddlers', and children's participation

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UN, 1989), in particular Article 12, has provided momentum and a framework for children's participation to ensure that young children's views are sought and taken seriously in early childhood. Researchers and practitioners have embraced this obligation, leading to significant growth in early childhood research and policy, curriculum, and practice work that involves young children, ensuring that their views are sought and taken seriously in early childhood (Lundy et al., 2024). Historically there has been much less opportunity for children under three years of age to share their views and experiences of education in research (Cassidy et al., 2022). For exceptions, see Cheeseman et al. (2022).

Nationally, children's participation in decision-making has been embraced, as evident in national guidance and evolving case studies that demonstrate how children's views are heard and acted upon (e.g., DCEDIY, 2021; Hub na nÓg, DCEDIY, 2024). Ireland was the first European country to develop a National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, with the aim of 'mainstreaming the participation of children and young people in the development of policy, legislation and research' (DCYA, 2015, p. 17).

The accompanying *National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making* (DCEDIY, 2021) provides supports for multi-sector organisations and professionals to foster a shared understanding and improve participation practice with children and young people. Supports include a recently developed *Toolkit for including children from birth to 5 years in participation in decision-making* (Hub na nÓg, DCEDIY, 2024). Interestingly, a group of four children aged 10 months to 2 years 8 months who were accessing a Childminding setting participated in both phases of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children (see O'Toole et al., 2023, 2024) to inform the updating of Aistear, Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework (2009). Nevertheless, the present research brings new knowledge to our understanding of children's perspectives and experiences of Childminding.

## 1.1 Context and research overview

This research report explores children’s and childminders’ perspectives and experiences of mixed-age groups of children in Childminding settings in Ireland. The context for this research is one where Childminding plays a significant role in the provision of Early Learning and Care and School Age Care in Ireland; however, childminders and the children participating in Childminding services have largely been visible in their communities but not to the State.

Childminders in Ireland provide paid, non-relative care for children in their own home. Almost 53,000 children up to age 15 years participate in Childminding services in Ireland (CSO, 2023). Due to the previously unregulated nature of Childminding, the number of childminders operating in Ireland can only be estimated, standing at approximately 13,000 (DCEDIY, 2021). Irish childminders are legally defined as working alone. The current and historical circumstances for the regularisation of Childminding in Ireland mean that a childminder works alone, without seeing any supportive or oversight agency to enable self-reflection and provide support for pedagogical enhancement (DCEDIY, 2021)

Childminding settings have unique features that differ from centre-based Early Years and School Age Care, where children’s immediate learning environments are often, though not always, segregated by ages or stages (e.g., baby rooms, preschool, and after-school). Relevant to this research are mixed-age groups of children, which are a defining yet underexplored characteristic of Childminding settings in Ireland (O’Regan et al., 2023).

A major shift in Childminding provision is underway in Ireland, driven by the implementation of the first *National Action Plan for Childminding, 2021–2028* (DCEDIY, 2021). The plan commits to regulating all Childminding services and providing training and quality development supports and quality assurance. The Childminding Regulations 2024 provide for the mandatory registration of all Childminding services with Tusla, within a three-year transition period. The Regulations require the childminder to facilitate the well-being, learning, and development of children attending the Childminding service, taking the home and family context into account.

This is a significant juncture for children, their families, and childminders. Policymakers and stakeholders need to know more about children's and childminders' experiences and Childminding practice to respond appropriately based on an understanding of the 'real life learning' (O'Regan, 2020) happening in childminders' homes. Against this backdrop, the findings presented in this report offer timely insights that can inform policy and practice as the sector evolves.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research aims, questions, and approach

The study aimed to explore children's and childminders' perspectives and experiences of mixed-age groups of children in Childminding settings in Ireland. The research question it seeks to answer is: *How do children and childminders perceive and experience mixed-age groups in home-based settings?*

The following research sub-questions were developed to provide clarity for the research:

- What do children like or dislike about being in a mixed-age Childminding setting?
- How do children perceive and experience relationships with/in/between mixed-age groupings?
- What do children's everyday lives in a mixed-age Childminding setting look like?
- How do children experience transitions in relationship to other children of different ages across their day?
- What are childminders' perspectives on the benefits and challenges of mixed-age groupings?
- How do childminders build relationships with/in/between mixed-age groupings?
- What kinds of practices and strategies do childminders adopt to support children's learning and development in the mixed-age collective?

## Research approach

This qualitative study is situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which seeks to understand the individual's subjective world (Cohen et al., 2018). In this approach, the researchers aimed to understand mixed-age groups in Childminding settings from the perspectives of the children, and the adults, in their own specific contexts. Within this paradigm, the research adopted a constructivist worldview in its design and process, whereby reality and knowledge are understood as being locally constructed and based on shared experiences (Cohen et al., 2018) and which prioritises the subjective and contextual nature of children's life worlds (Waghorn and Yelland, 2024).

Acknowledging the dynamic nature of groups and individuals, constructivism recognises that people actively choose and construct their perspectives, which are embedded in sociocultural contexts and interactions (Bruner, 1996; Cohen et al., 2018). Constructivism requires that researchers focus on the processes of construction and the relationships involved, highlighting multiple perspectives and how people collectively create sense of their experiences in diverse social worlds (Hammersley, 2013; Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

In this worldview, the researcher is an active participant in the context of the childminder's home, rather than a detached observer. Therefore, it was understood that there was not objective data in the settings that the researcher can collect. Instead, in each of the childminders' homes, the children and childminders create their own realities and make meaning together (Hammersley, 2013; Mukherji and Albon, 2018).

## Case study methodology

This research adopts a descriptive case study methodology aligned with a constructivist paradigm to explore how children experience and make meaning of mixed-age Childminding settings. Rather than evaluating practice or advocating for mixed-age arrangements, the focus is on describing and understanding experiences in real-life contexts. Consistent with Yin's (2014) conceptualisation, the case study methodology is deployed here as an overarching research design that incorporates multiple cases (five mixed-age Childminding communities) rather than a single in-

depth case. The study is bounded by the context of home-based Childminding with mixed-age groups, providing a clear scope for inquiry.

Incorporating multiple perspectives, descriptive observations, and a flexible research agenda in the case study methodology enables nuanced insights into children's lived experiences in their everyday environments (Yin, 2014; Waghorn and Yelland, 2024). This methodology is particularly valuable for the present research, where the complexity of relational, spatial, and cultural dynamics in home-based education and care demands a sensitive, responsive, and contextually embedded inquiry (Yin, 2014; Waghorn and Yelland, 2024). This methodology allows for nuanced exploration of relational, spatial, and cultural dynamics, recognising multiple realities and adapting to emerging insights (Baxter and Jack, 2008; Yin, 2014; Waghorn and Yelland, 2024).

Data collection methods included focus groups, interviews, participant observations, and artefacts (e.g. photographs of children's creations), supporting a holistic and flexible approach that can adapt to new insights as they arise in the field (Yin, 2014).

#### [A children's human rights-informed approach](#)

As children are participants, this study employed a child rights-informed methodology, which had implications for how the research was conducted. The process was guided by the Lundy model (2007), described further below, to ensure purposeful participation. This approach acts as a guide for conducting research with children as active participants who contribute to transformations in their lives and the lives of others, including shaping policies and practices (Lundy et al., 2011).

The right of children to be heard and have their views given due weight applies to research (Lundy et al., 2011; UN, 2009, para. 14). The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child advises against the use of tokenistic approaches 'which limit children's expression of views, or which allow children to be heard, but fail to give their views due weight' (UN, 2009, para. 132). Lundy's model of participation was chosen to guide the research because it offers a holistic children's rights approach and emphasises that children's views are acted upon (Lundy et al., 2011). Lundy's (2007, p. 941) legally sound but practical conceptualisation of the UNCRC's Article 12

identifies that implementation requires consideration of four interrelated concepts (Figure 2):

- Space: Children must be given the opportunity to express a view.
- Voice: Children must be facilitated to express their views.
- Audience: The view must be listened to.
- Influence: The view must be acted upon, as appropriate.



Figure 1: The Lundy model (Lundy, 2007)

The Lundy model further emphasises young children’s multimodal capacities of expression and adults’ responsibility to listen responsively to children (Ward and Lundy, 2024). How the model was applied in this research context will be discussed in the following sections.

### 3.2 Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select childminders who provide a setting with mixed-age groupings of children. Invitations for expressions of interest to participate were sent to Early Childhood Ireland members and through City and County Childcare Committees and childminder associations and networks. The research involved 20 babies, toddlers, children, and young people, aged 1 year to 12 years 10 months, together with their five childminders. It was undertaken in five mixed-age Childminding communities based across three counties in the Republic of Ireland (see Figure 3). All names have been pseudonymised to preserve participant anonymity.

Setting	Joy's home	Helen's home	Lily's home	Holly's home	Faith's home
<b>Number of children in setting</b>	4	5	4	3	4
<b>Children's names and ages</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• George (2 years)</li> <li>• Anna (4 years)</li> <li>• Elsa (5 years)</li> <li>• Zoe (1 year)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aly (2 years)</li> <li>• Eve (3 years)</li> <li>• Harry (1 year 6 months)</li> <li>• Nial (6 years)</li> <li>• Ryan (4 years 6 months)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lottie (2 years)</li> <li>• Jack (2 years)</li> <li>• Rose (4 years)</li> <li>• Pam (5 years 6 months)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• James (4 years 10 months)</li> <li>• Seán (2 years 3 months)</li> <li>• Eoin (1 year 10 months)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oisín (3 years)</li> <li>• Finn (3 years)</li> <li>• Riley (2 years)</li> <li>• Niamh (12 years 10 months)</li> </ul>
<b>Siblings</b>	Anna Zoe  George Elsa	Nial Eve	Jack Rose Pam	James Seán	No siblings

Figure 3: Participants

### 3.3 Research methods and process

Figure 4 summarises the sequence of research methods used in the present study, described in further detail in the sections below.



Figure 4: Research methods and sequence

#### Arts-based focus groups

Because young children have become increasingly involved as active participants in research, it has become common in early childhood research to adapt traditional methods such as interviews and focus groups to include interactive, activity-based

methods (Clark and Moss, 2011; Harcourt et al., 2011; Cheeseman and Press, 2022). The use of 'creative methods' in participatory research is well established and recognised to enhance young children's participation (Blaisdell et al., 2019). Arts-based methods offer playful dimensions and are a medium for young children to express themselves (Drury and Ruckert, 2022). Art is one of the multiple modes of expression and languages of children and is therefore appropriate as a participatory technique with children (Blaisdell et al., 2019; Malaguzzi, 1996).

Art-based methods were chosen to ensure children's active and meaningful participation in the research. Creative, activity-based methods were used to create a comfortable space and facilitate children's views and multiple modes of expression (Lundy, 2007). This method allowed the researcher to gain deeper insights into children's lives and experiences by providing 'space' and facilitating children to express their views in multiple ways.

### Observations

Observations were incorporated into the focus groups to ensure that children's multimodal forms of communication were noticed and recorded. Observation as a strategy for listening to and understanding children's perspectives is well established in early childhood research (Elfer, 2006; Pascal and Bertram, 2009; Cheeseman and Press, 2022).

Incidental naturalistic participant observations, a method used to study behaviours in a natural setting, were integrated into the focus groups with children to notice and listen to multi-modalities of communication (Ward, 2025). The children's actions, body language, and facial expressions were recorded by the researcher using audio recording or handwritten notes during the sessions. This approach supported the participation of all children, including those who were non-verbal.

### Process

Arts-based focus groups which incorporated observations took place in the childminders' home settings, facilitated by a principal researcher from Early Childhood Ireland and supported by the childminder. Focus groups consisted of the children

present in each childminding setting. Sessions lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. The art material introduced to the children by the researcher was air-dried clay. Children were invited to play with the clay, and they decided if they wanted to participate or not. The researcher offered them the choice to create a representation or model of themselves or someone in their childminder's home. However, the focus was on the process rather than product, and the children were free to explore the clay – pound it, flatten it, roll it – and to choose what, if anything, they wanted to produce.

The focus groups were guided by a semi-structured script which allowed the researcher to adopt a flexible approach in probing further information and elaboration where needed. The focus group questions explored the child participants' views and experiences of relationships with and between the group, their likes or dislikes about being in a mixed-age group, transitions, and any further perspectives they chose to share. Photographs of the clay creations were taken by the researcher, after getting the child's consent. The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed.

#### [Semi-structured interviews with childminders](#)

One-to-one interviews are useful for 'gaining insight into people's perceptions, understandings and experiences of a given phenomenon' (Ryan et al., 2009, p. 309). Semi-structured one-to-one interviews were conducted with the childminders in their homes ( $n = 2$ ) and using the online Zoom platform ( $n = 3$ ) to seek their perspectives and experiences of working with mixed-age groups. The semi-structured approach allowed the researcher the flexibility to explore themes or responses further while maintaining the focus on specific themes or topics through a combination of predetermined and spontaneous questions. The questions were designed to encourage open-ended responses, allowing participants to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words. An informal approach to the interviews was used because the research was based in childminder participants' homes. This meant that a choice of either online or in-person interviews was offered to childminders.

The interviews also served as a space where the researcher could share the emerging findings from the children's focus group with the relevant childminder and use the interview to create opportunities for deeper reflection on the children's perspectives.

This feedback and reflection process between the researcher and the childminders contributed to fulfilling the audience and influence elements of the Lundy model (2007) described above. The interviews lasted up to one hour and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### Feedback and dissemination

Fast, friendly, full feedback is an essential component of delivering the element of 'influence' and, therefore, meaningful participation (Lundy, 2018). Feedback was provided to participating children through a short video presentation which included photographs that visually communicated the main findings. An online focus group was facilitated with all childminders who participated in the research, to provide feedback on the overall findings of the research, offer opportunity for collaborative reflection on the findings or learnings, and enable participants to help shape recommendations.

## 3.4 Data analysis

An audio recorder was used throughout the research sessions with both the children and childminders. The data file was uploaded to Microsoft Word, which transcribed the recording using speech-to-text technology. The transcript was carefully checked for errors and edited manually by the researcher.

Analysing children's creative data is challenging, and the researchers' explanatory notes and interpretation were therefore essential (Horgan, 2024). In this study, observations and recordings of children's spoken, physical, and emotional expressions were central to the data.

A rapid form of reflexive thematic analysis was considered most salient to interpret the project's data in terms of its flexibility and the fact that it does not require particular theoretical knowledge for its application (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2021). This approach was applied to the data produced from the focus groups with the children, including participant observations and photographs, and from the semi-structured interviews with childminders. This reflexive thematic approach made the analysis more open for reflection and change of thought processes (Braun and Clarke, 2021),

which is important given the complexities and evolving nature of ECEC. Additionally, a contextualised and constructivist lens, defined previously, was used which acknowledged the diversity and individual nature of how the participants, particularly the children, made their own meaning and experienced the research questions and participation.

The data was analysed and coded inductively and deductively. This was completed manually to include data that was not clearly (verbally) articulated, such as interactions with the environment and others, which would not be picked up by the audio recorder. Through further analysis of these codes, certain commonalities between them could be identified. For example, the perspectives shared by both the children and childminders on children's interests, influence, and close relationships were folded into a broader theme of a sense of community and relationships. This provided opportunities to develop and bring forward insights from both groups and to discuss them under the lens of current early childhood literature.

### 3.5 Ethics

The study observed Early Childhood Ireland's ethics policy and procedures, using the guidelines published by EECERA (Bertram et al., 2025) and Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) guidelines (Child Ethics, 2024). A review was undertaken before commencing the research; however, a reflexive process was required as the project unfolded (Child Ethics, 2024).

As described previously, the study uses a child rights–informed approach. The UNCRC is described as the blueprint for the ethical treatment of all children in research (Bessell, 2015). It is based on principles of dignity, deep moral respect, and the rightful entitlements of children. This study's primary framework revolves around valuing children as rights-holders and active agents in their own lives, including their educational choices and participation rights. Child safeguarding and protection were a priority throughout.

*Participatory ethics:* All participants in the research were viewed as subjects with rights to participate in the research activity, either actively or passively or indeed not at all (Child Ethics, 2024).

*Information and informed consent:* All participants, including children, were provided with information about the content, purpose, and process of the research. The information was shared through written and video formats, facilitating a multimodal and child-friendly approach to communication. Respect for non-participation, and participants' right to withdraw before and during the research without any consequence, were emphasised. The children's parents or guardians and the participating childminders both acted as gatekeepers for involving child participants.

*Knowing from multiple perspectives:* The perspectives of both the young participants and the childminders are at the forefront of this research journey. For this matter, an ethic of respect for knowledge from multiple perspectives, including participants, families, gatekeepers, ECEC professionals, policymakers, and various research disciplines, underpins the study throughout.

*Integrity and transparency:* This project's ethical guidelines were also outlined in all communication with the childminders and the children's families. This includes making research actions transparent and documented fully, with data and methods open for external scrutiny and critical review.

*Confidentiality, anonymity, and data protection:* The right to privacy was upheld for the entire project. The European Union's *General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679* (2016) guided confidentiality, anonymity, and data safeguarding methods. Children and childminders were asked for their consent before the audio recorder was turned on. The write-up omits names or other personal information. Photographic images were used only to capture creative data, and no identifiable pictures of children were used.

### 3.6 Limitations

This is an in-depth, small-scale study offering valuable insights into childminders' perspectives and practices. It is not statistically representative, and no male

childminders took part. A notable limitation is the relatively narrow range of children's ages, which shaped the boundaries and findings of the study.

In addition, some participants' perspectives were not directly relevant to the research question. Nevertheless, they were deemed important, and the perspectives shared by childminders will be shared through further work by Early Childhood Ireland.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Four themes were created through the thematic data analysis: (1) a sense of community and close relationships; (2) friendships and sibling relationships; (3) play encounters; and (4) real-life learning, flexibility, and participation rights.

This section of the report considers each theme in two parts: a presentation of the findings, followed by a discussion. Findings under each theme are presented first from the perspectives and experiences of the children, followed by the views of the childminders.

### 4.1 A sense of community and close relationships

This theme begins with evidence of a sense of community, based on the emotional learning environment, and the overall sense of comfort, familiarity and ease depicted through the participants' contributions, in which children's **interests, influence, agency, and participation** become visible (first subtheme). This is continued with a second subtheme of **close relationships** and the role of the children and childminder within these, highlighting how participation and relationships shape children's experiences, and how children shape interactions and activities in home-based settings. This highlights the intergenerational community present in the settings and at the same time highlights the values and elements in the community or environment that make it a safe, comfortable space overall.

#### Children's interests, influence, agency, and participation

From the start of the focus group sessions with the child participants, there was a notable sense of relaxed familiarity and ease in the learning environment and research space. This can first be identified through the interactions between some of the children, their childminder, and the researcher, which illustrate comfortable relationships and their active participation, evident in the extracts throughout this subtheme.

To begin, the following extracts and others throughout provide insight into the children's interests and experiences, and how children influenced activities and

routines in the home setting. As the young participants engaged with the focus group activity of playing with clay, different perspectives, interests, and preferences were shared.

Elsa (5 years old): I'm making my favourite Christmas decoration, 'cause my little brother knocked it off the table and it smashed.

(Childminder Joy's home)

**Observation:** Eve (3 years old) picks up a doll and places it on the table in front of all of us; she is pretending to feed the doll with a spoon, which she has put some pieces of clay on. She is concentrating very hard.

(Childminder Helen's home)

**Observation:** Harry (1 year 6 months old) is sitting next to me (researcher), pulling out some little pieces of clay and making a whooshing sound as he drops the clay on the floor. Harry smiles as he drops each piece of clay.

(Childminder Helen's home)

Interest-driven explorations of the clay are also evident, where children express their preferences or 'likes':

Researcher: And who would you make out of the clay?

Rose (4 years old): A cat.

Researcher: OK, why would you make a cat?

Rose: Because I like cats.

(Childminder Lily's home)

Researcher: Let me see what you've made here.

Ryan (4 years 6 months old): It's a light bulb.

Researcher: Ryan, why did you make a light bulb?

Ryan: I like bulbs.

Childminder Helen: Ryan's dad is an electrical engineer.

(Childminder Helen's home)

These extracts suggest that children are bringing their 'funds of knowledge' that stem from 'real-life' learning in their families into the Childminding community. 'Funds of knowledge refers to the valuable skills, knowledge and interests that babies, toddlers and young children learn from their families and communities' (NCCA, 2024, p. 32).

In the following extract, Pam's choice-making aligns with a Close Relationship Model that prioritises fun (O'Regan, 2020):

**Observation:** Pam (5 years 6 months old) had begun making this house, saying she was making it because it is fun and she never made a house before and she has no idea what she is doing. Pam decides to make a rock instead of the house she started to construct out of the clay.



(Childminder Lily's home)

Through these clay explorations and interactions, children expressed their views, preferences, and interests. These episodes also illustrate these babies', toddlers', and young children's experiences of active participation and being 'agentic' (NCCA, 2024, p. 22) in their small community spaces. Being agentic means they have influence and can make choices about and in their learning, and experience being heard and respected by educators and, in this case, the researcher, who support their active participation.

The following examples give insight into how the children confidently defined their participation in the research context with an unfamiliar adult. Finn (3 years old) does not engage with the clay:

**Observation:** Finn is sitting on Childminder Faith's lap, he watches as she squeezes some clay, presses it down on the table, and offers it to him. Finn does not engage with the clay; he watches as Faith rolls the clay.

(Childminder Faith's home)

Whereas in Childminder Holly's home, James (4 years 10 months old) joined in, and Seán (2 years 3 months old) appeared to follow his lead:

**Observation:** I (researcher) asked James did he know what I was here to do. He told me, 'You are going to use your phone to listen to us and play with clay with us.' I asked James was he happy to join me to play with the clay; he said yes. I relied on Childminder Holly to support the two younger children with the clay activity with us. I

explained to James that he could leave the activity anytime he wanted. I was guided by Childminder Holly as to the small children's participation. Seán (2 years 3 months old) and Eoin (1 year 10 months old) were happy to join us at the small table. Seán took some clay into his hands as he saw his brother engaging with the clay, Eoin watched on from the safety of Childminder Holly's lap. The children were given a few minutes to explore the clay and then the recording began.

(Childminder Holly's home)

Lottie was hesitant but gestured her choice to engage in the research activity:

**Observation:** The youngest children in the group, Lottie and Jack (both 2 years old) watched for a while as the researcher put the clay on the table and divided out some clay for Pam (5 years 6 months old) and Rose (4 years old). Then Lottie puts her hand out for some clay and a few minutes later Jack joined us at the table.

(Childminder Lily's home)

Nial (6 years old) chooses not to play with the clay. Aly (2 years old) also declines the invitation to play with clay:

Childminder Helen: Do you want to make a little person?

Aly: No.

(Childminder Helen's home)

Aly receives a bit of extra support to get involved, (discussed below). These examples give insight into how the children confidently defined their own participatory rights in the research context with an unfamiliar adult. This might suggest that being listened to and heard was a regularly occurring element in their childminding community and thus supported competent research participation.

The following extracts provide further insight into how children expressed their views, how these were respected by their childminders, and how they influenced activities, agendas, and routines in the home setting.

**Observation:** James (4 years 10 months old) does not want to play with the clay any more, so Childminder Holly suggests, 'Maybe we will put the leftover clay back in the bag, so it won't get too hard.' James helps Holly to put the clay in the bag, and Holly places it on the low shelf.

(Childminder Holly's home)

**Observation:** Jack (2 years old) comes over to Childminder Lily looking for her to lift him up on to her lap. Lily asks Jack to get a book and bring it over to her. Jack picks

up a small lift-the-flap book, and Lily lifts Jack up onto her lap. Jack is content flipping the pages over, and Lily acknowledges him doing this as she continues the interview.

(Childminder Lily's home)

**Observation:** Finn (3 years old) has got down from Childminder Faith's lap and walked over to the bookshelf and picked up a book; he returns and sits back on Childminder Faith's lap and turns the pages of the book.

(Childminder Faith's home)

These extracts give insight into how children direct interactions and their involvement in activities, providing an immediate sense of safe, comfortable spaces (Lundy, 2007). The children appear relaxed in their daily interactions, which was expressed both independently and interdependently with the support of their childminder. These short extracts, which could be classed as everyday 'influence', give further insight into this community being put forward by the young participants. Together they highlight important elements of community, particularly membership, mutual influence, inclusion (fulfilment of individual and group needs), and emotional connections formed through shared experiences (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) and everyday participation.

### Close relationships

The following extracts demonstrate the childminders' knowledge of the children, particularly their lived experiences and interests, and how this is used to support children's participation, illustrating the interdependent nature of participation rights and the role of the childminders in supporting the children's participation in this research:

Oisín (3 years old) has a piece of clay, and he has flattened it down, pounding it down with his fists.

Researcher: Oh, you're very strong.

Childminder Faith: Oisín, tell [researcher] who are you strong like?

Oisín: I'm strong like the Hulk.

Childminder Faith: He tells me all the time he is strong like the Hulk. And what colour is the Hulk, Oisín?

Oisín: Green.

Researcher: And where did you see the Hulk?

Oisín: In my house and garden.

Childminder Faith: Oisín has a Hulk costume, so he wears it out in the garden sometimes.

(Childminder Faith's home)

**Observation:** Finn (3 years old) walked over to the bookshelf and picked out another book. There is a donkey on the book. Childminder Faith asks Finn what is that animal called as she points to the donkey. Finn tries to say donkey. Childminder Faith says this is Finn's favourite book at the moment.

(Childminder Faith's home)

In Childminder Joy's home, Joy helped one of the participants to explain the topic of their favourite book:

Childminder Joy: Anna [4 years old] loves that book; we only have it on loan from the library, so other people can have a go with it, but it's really nice. Can you remember what it's like? It's funny, and the girl in it is very brave and she's very strong.

Anna: Yeah, and I want to show [researcher] what is so funny.

Researcher: OK, show me; I love funny stories too.

Anna shows the researcher the page in the book where the girl is having a big scary moment.

Childminder Joy: It's a great book. The girl has cystic fibrosis. So now Anna knows what cystic fibrosis is, and in the book the girl, when she coughs, she blows bubbles. Anna finds it funny. Now it's good for her lungs.

Anna: But it is good for her lungs, and when she drinks, she blows bubbles too (Anna laughs).

(Childminder Joy's home)

Researcher: What's your favourite thing to eat here in Holly's house?

James (4 years 10 months old): Candy [laughs].

Childminder Holly laughs also.

Researcher: Are you eating candy all day?

James looks to Childminder Holly and laughs.

Childminder Holly: James had a special day in school today – I think he got lots of lovely treats and sweet things, so it is probably on his mind since.

Researcher: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

James: We had a chipper day at playschool.

Childminder Holly explains that the playschool invited a local chipper van to the setting for the children there.

(Childminder Holly's home)

The above extracts provide further insight into the close relationships between the childminder and the children. In this instance it is also being highlighted as significant to supporting the children's participation within the research space and facilitates children's expression of ideas, likes, or dislikes. Aistear (2024) describes how 'there are times when babies, toddler, and young children will have to depend on educators, family and other people in their lives to facilitate, interpret, understand and respond to their needs, rights and wants' (NCCA, 2024, p. 7).

Similarly, the children also know each other well and use this knowledge to support their peers' engagement in the research. This is evident in the following conversations, where knowledge of siblings is expressed:

Researcher: George [2 years old], what are you making?

Anna (4 years old, speaking for George): He's making a pancake, and . . .

Elsa (5 years old): George loves pancakes.

Anna: Oh, he loves pancakes with chocolate.

Elsa: I like them as well.

...

Researcher: Does Zoe [1 year old] ever get sad? [Zoe is Anna's younger sister.]

Anna: When somebody annoys her.

Researcher: How would you know if Zoe was annoyed?

Elsa: Well, she might say 'Ahhh' – isn't that right, Anna? [Elsa confirms with Anna.]

Researcher: What about George? Does he get cross?

Elsa: No, never.

...

Elsa: I have really long hair, and my brother really likes having his hair brushed.

Elsa: George likes getting his nappy changed too!

(Childminder Joy's home)

The following extracts illustrate how older children's knowledge of others, or possibly concern for others, is used to support younger children's participation.

**Observation:** James's (4 years 10 months old) younger brother Seán (2 years 3 months old) comes back to the table, and James hands out some shapes to Seán. Seán wants a red roller. Seán bangs the red roller on the clay on the table. James tells Seán to roll out the clay using the roller. Seán just bangs the clay with the roller.

(Childminder Holly's home)

Researcher: And what do you like, Riley [2 years old]?

Riley smiles and looks to Childminder Faith.

Oisín (3 years old): I think Riley likes Paddington.

Riley is now sitting on Childminder Faith's lap. Faith had made a face out of the clay and is asking Riley to point out the nose, the ears, and the mouth. Riley points to them all. Then Faith says, 'Where is Riley's eyes?' Riley points to her own eyes. Faith asks Riley where her ears are, and Riley points to her own ears.

Oisín to Riley: Where's your mouth?

Riley points to her mouth and smiles at Oisín.

(Childminder Faith's home)

It is noteworthy that Riley and Oisín are not siblings.

### Child-childminder dyad

Also notable is the 'relationship-driven' role of the children themselves, where they initiate warm and meaningful interactions with their childminder. Aistear (NCCA, 2009, 2024) has long underlined the integral role of positive loving relationships in early childhood. The child participants shared several key insights on their experiences of relationships with their childminder in each of the focus groups. For example:

**Observation:** Zoe (1 year old) was sitting on Childminder Joy's lap having a story read to her. Zoe is enjoying the story and looks up at Childminder Joy and smiles.

(Childminder Joy's home)

**Observation:** George (2 years old) comes over to Joy with a small hairbrush for Joy to brush his hair. George sits in front of Joy and sits so still to have his hair brushed. Childminder Joy: Yes, George really loves having his hair brushed.

(Childminder Joy's home)

**Observation:** George walks over to the table, picks up some clay, and drops it by accident on the floor when he is walking. Childminder Joy says, 'That's OK', and George repeats it after her, 'That's OK', and smiles.

(Childminder Joy's home)

Elsa (5 years old): I made a rabbit.

Elsa continues to work with the clay.

Elsa: It's for you, [researcher] and [Childminder Joy].



Similarly, the childminders demonstrated the central role played by warm and meaningful interactions with the children in developing this emotional bond with children. As the researcher asked the children about their likes and dislikes, the following took place:

Researcher: And what do you like, Riley?

Riley (2 years old) smiles and looks to Childminder Faith.

Childminder Faith (trying to coax Riley to speak): Riley, tell [researcher] that you like Paddington.

Riley: Paddington Bear.

Childminder Faith: And Riley dressed up as Paddington Bear for her birthday, didn't you, Riley? And you had Paddington Bear on your cake?

Riley looks to Childminder Faith and smiles. Riley has just turned two years old, and Childminder Faith is very tuned in to Riley's communicative ways.

(Childminder Faith's home)

**Observation:** Riley is picking little pieces off the larger piece of clay and dropping them on the table. Riley looks to Childminder Faith. Faith smiles at Riley. Riley continues to pick out little pieces of clay and drop them on the table.

(Childminder Faith's home)

**Observation:** Seán (2 years 3 months old) and Eoin (1 year 10 months old) are sitting next to Childminder Holly. Seán is sticking the clay onto Childminder Holly, and Childminder Holly is being playful with him, and tickles him, asking, 'Why are you sticking the clay onto my arm?' Seán laughs.

(Childminder Holly's home)

While several of these contributions are non-verbal, Aistear (NCCA, 2024) emphasises that 'babies, toddlers and young children learn through loving, trusting and respectful

relationships and through *súgradh* (play), *spraoi* (fun), exploration and *comhrá* (conversation) in multimodal ways' (NCCA, 2024, p. 6). In the interactions above, some of the children chose to sit close by or on the laps of their childminders, which itself reflects a sense of safety being met. The young participants are also observed looking to the childminders for support or at least acknowledgement of some kind, which is met with smiles and reassuring responses. This aligns with Aistear's focus on the importance of reciprocal relationships and the key-person approach,<sup>1</sup> which 'have a profound impact on learning and development' (NCCA, 2024, p. 17). Additionally, Aistear (NCCA, 2024, p. 7) emphasises that 'respecting and being attuned' to the baby, toddler, and young child 'is central to the educator's role'.

Aside from nurturing reciprocal relationships with their childminders, the child participants also described enjoying positive relationships with the childminders' family members, most notably their pet animals:

Researcher to Oisín (3 years old): What do you like to do here in Childminder Faith's house?

Oisín: I like to give the dog dental sticks. [The dog is the family pet.]

(Childminder Faith's home)

**Observation:** As the childminder says the dog's name, the dog comes over, wagging her tail as if she knows we were talking about her. The children laugh at the dog wagging her tail.

(Childminder Lily's home)

**Observation:** Lottie (2 years old) hears the dog bark and goes over to tell the dog to 'lie down'. Rose (4 years old) says the dog is four years old, the same age as her, and reminds the researcher, 'It is a girl dog.'

(Childminder Lily's home)

It is interesting to note Rose's observations that the dog is the same age as her and is female. Additionally, children clearly expressed and showed an awareness of age and differentiation in their families and childminding communities. Age appears to be a significant identity marker.

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<sup>1</sup> The key-person approach ensures that each baby, toddler, and young child is assigned a named person – this may be an early years educator or childminder – who is primarily responsible for creating a close relationship with them and their families (NCCA, 2024).

Researcher (to James, 4 years 10 months old): Do you have any sisters?

James: Yeah. Ellen.

Researcher: How old is Ellen?

James: She is five and the biggest kid in our house, and I'm the second biggest kid here in [Childminder Holly's house]. The biggest kid is Erica [Childminder Holly's daughter], and the second biggest is Seán [2 years 3 months old], and Eoin [1 year 10 months old] is the smallest kid.

Knowledge of other children and awareness of 'big school' also implicitly suggest awareness of age differences among the child participants.

Ryan (4 years 6 months old): My two brothers are in big school.

(Childminder Helen's home)

The children also discuss their positive relationships with the childminders' human family members. For example, in Childminder Faith's home, one child shares his thoughts on the childminder's older daughter:

Researcher: What about here in Childminder Faith's house, who would you like to sit beside?

Oisín (3 years old): Ah, Niamh [12 years 10 months old, and childminder's daughter].

Researcher: Why do you like to sit beside Niamh?

Oisín: She's nice.

Researcher: Who do you think Riley [2 years old] likes to sit beside?

Oisín: Ah, I think she likes Childminder Faith.

(Childminder Faith's home)

In Childminder Holly's home, the children spoke about her husband:

Researcher: Will you be playing football?

James: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

James turns to Childminder Holly and asks Holly, 'Will you be there?' Holly responds, 'If Twinkle has training, I'll be there.' [Twinkle is Childminder Holly's daughter.]

James to Childminder Holly: But the other day when I saw Tommy [Holly's husband], I did not see you.

Childminder Holly: Tommy and I take turns going to training, so it was Tommy's turn, and you were chatting to Tommy the last time, weren't you?

James: Yeah, and Seán [James's brother] was sitting on Tommy's chair.

Childminder Holly reminds the researcher that Tommy is her husband.

James: He's my husband too [laughs].

(Childminder Holly's home)

The above extracts provide insight into the different experiences of positive relationships that the children enjoy in their Childminding community and with their childminders' extended family members, including pets. Aistear underlines how 'babies, toddlers and young children learn and develop within loving relationships where their individual life stories are acknowledged with kindness and consideration' (NCCA, 2024, p. 10).

## Discussion

These findings provide several key insights relevant to the research question on how children and childminders perceive and experience relationships in mixed-age groupings in their close Childminding community.

Firstly, these findings draw attention to the relaxed nature and familiarity shared between community members, placing emphasis on the role of positive, secure, adult-child relationships in each of the home settings. As in studies by Tonyan et al. (2015, 2017) in California and by O'Regan (2020) in Ireland, the findings in this theme reflect the Close Relationships cultural model of praxis, particularly the central role played by warm and meaningful interactions within and between the small groups of children and childminders in the development of emotional bonds and warm relationships. This is evident through interactions between the children and the childminders, which highlighted a sense of security and nurturing. For example, several of the younger participants sit on their childminders' laps, remain close by during the activities, or look to the childminders for reassurance.

Significantly, the present findings also highlight the central role of the children themselves where they initiate warm and meaningful interactions with the childminder. This can be seen with participants as they choose to sit on their childminder's lap, communicate with eye contact and facial expressions, and initiate interactions by bringing objects in their environment (e.g., hairbrush) to the childminder.

The data provides clear examples of how children can and do define their own participation through 'relationship-driven learning', and in their everyday lives with their childminder. This was evidenced through how comfortably these children initiated

interactions with their childminder in different ways (eye contact, gestures, actions, and vocally), and expressed their preferences, interests, and needs. The findings also chime with Aistear's view of babies, toddlers, and young children as 'competent, confident and agentic global citizens'. Many of the children were observed 'being agentic', meaning that they made choices about and in their learning, and they influenced the activity and their participation in it. In doing so, they also appeared to experience being heard and respected by educators, and in this case the researcher, who supported children's active participation.

Similarly, the findings highlight the childminders' role in nurturing close relationships and emotional bonds with children. This is evident through the childminders' warm and meaningful interactions with the children, identifying a sense of comfort, security, and warmth. Some of the childminders were observed reassuring the children with smiles and putting them on their lap to support a sense of nurturing security in the research space. The childminders also share their accounts on the sense of familiarity in their groups, particularly in relation to their understanding of individual children's preferences, interests, and needs. Childminder Joy describes how George loves to get his hair brushed, while Childminder Helen acknowledges that Nial does not want to take part in the research activity.

Also notable, therefore, is the 'relationship-driven' role of the childminders themselves in knowing each of the children and what is done with that knowledge to nurture their sense of membership, inclusion, and participation in their small community. For example, some of the childminders' understanding of the individual children in their groups also acts as an interdependent support for the children to share their perspectives in the research space. Childminder Faith and Oisín (3 years old) support Riley (2 years old) to share her input and her like of Paddington Bear. Nial (6 years old), on the other hand, chooses not to engage, which is equally respected. Likewise, Zoe (1 year old) sits comfortably and reads a story with Childminder Joy, while the others make different clay objects. The closeness between the children and childminder, alongside the childminders' in-depth knowledge and understanding of individual children, shows the supporting nature of an interdependent role between them to elicit perspectives and views that may otherwise have gone unheard during the research.

The findings suggest that children and childminders' interactions mutually influence the development of emotional bonds and warm relationships.

The findings on interactions also evidence how childminders are responsive to the children's different interests, communication preferences, and developmental phases that span different age groups in a home environment. These positive interactions appear to contribute to these babies', toddlers', and young children's experiences of feeling 'valued, respected, empowered, cared for, included and agentic' (NCCA, 2024, p. 22). These findings align with 'relationship-driven learning', where childminders get to know each child 'inside-out', which fosters child-led activities (O'Regan et al., 2023). Regarding the research question, these findings, therefore, suggest that 'relationship-driven learning' is one of the ways these childminders build relationships with, in, and between mixed-age groupings.

The children also share their accounts on the sense of familiarity in their groups. They express their knowledge and understanding of other children's (and childminders') preferences, interests, and needs. Children's knowledge of others appears particularly strong between sibling dyads in the home settings. The findings share similarities with findings of Theobald et al. (2024), where children (5–6 years) characterised friendships as including others in play, having concern for others' wellbeing, and giving support. In the present study, this is evident in sibling relationships. Regarding the research questions, additionally, children clearly expressed awareness of age differences, for example, James's narrative about 'the biggest kid[s]' and 'the smallest kid' in Holly's house.

The findings under the subtheme of close relationships highlight the values in the community and at the same time highlight the elements in the environment that make it a safe, comfortable space overall. Also relevant to the children's experiences of relationships in the Childminding setting is those they have with the childminders' family members (including pet animals), which can be considered as a further layer of the overall participatory community being put forward. The findings evidence intergenerational and 'more than human' interactions, indicating signs of a community

across a range of mixed ages. Therefore, these findings suggest that a community exists in each of the home settings.

The ecocultural framework situates Childminding communities in a specific ecological context that is geographically located and is bounded by a physical environment consisting of social systems that reflect the cultural elements of those living and interacting within that ecosystem or setting (Nsamenang, 2015). The present findings suggest that the cultural values evident in routine practice and interactions include inclusive participation (specifically regarding the fulfilment of individual and group needs) and mutual influence. These findings align with and point to an emerging sense of community, which is an ongoing process consisting of four essential components: membership, mutual influence, inclusion (fulfilment of individual and group needs), and emotional connections formed through shared experiences (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). To that end, the findings evidence a close relationship-driven model that is embedded in the Childminding communities, which is also significant to how the children's participatory rights are enacted and therefore suggests a relational-based approach.

## 4.2 Friendships and sibling relationships

Building on the previous theme, this theme explores the children's ideas and experiences of friends and sibling relationships, outlining the characteristics of friendships in the mixed-age settings. Figure 3 (see page 14) illustrates the sibling relationships of child participants in each home-based setting.

It is significant to note that the researcher asked children about friends directly to understand their peer relationships and experiences in their mixed-age communities. Some children also used the term 'friends' spontaneously in response to other questions. For example, in Childminder Joy's home, when asked what makes them happiest, Anna (4 years old) replied: 'Playing with Zoe and all of my friends.' Anna and Zoe (1 year old) are sisters.

Researcher: Do you like having your sister here in your childminder's house?

Anna: Yeah.

Researcher: What's the best part about it?

Anna: I love playing with her.

(Childminder Joy's home)

Dialogue unfolded from the question 'Do you have a best friend?' Two children responded yes and talked about friendships outside the childminder community.

Researcher (to Niamh): Have you got a best friend, Niamh?

Niamh (12 years 10 months old): Yeah – Hanna.

Researcher: Hanna's your best friend. Is she in your school?

Niamh: Oh, no. Her mom is my mom's friend. I don't know where she lives.

Childminder Faith: Hanna's mom is my best friend. We were in college together, and she lives a few miles away from our house. Niamh does not know the name of the area.

Researcher: Ah, I see.

Researcher: Do you see Hanna very often?

Niamh: No, not really.

Researcher: What do you like to do when you meet your friend Hanna?

Niamh: Play football and Minecraft.

Researcher: Oh, that is very nice. Are you good at football, Niamh?

(Childminder Faith's home)

Researcher: Do you have a best friend?

Oisín (3 years old): Yeah. Edward. Edward, he's my cousin.

Researcher: Edward is your cousin. Why is Edward your best friend?

Oisín: Because he just is.

Oisín: He always takes the balls off me.

Researcher: He always takes the ball off you.

Oisín: Yeah, Peppa Pig balls.

Researcher: Peppa Pig balls. And he's a best friend because he does that.

Oisín: But I don't want them.

Researcher: OK, you don't want the balls.

(Childminder Faith's home)

During the following dialogue, James talks about both his brother and friends. James (4 years 10 months old) immediately started making the clay into a figure, describing that he was adding 'curly hair'.

Researcher: Who are you making?

James: Seán. [James's brother, 2 years 3 months old]

Researcher: Why did you make Seán?

James: 'Cause I love him so much.



Siblings and cousins were also considered friends. When asked, 'Who's your best friend here in Holly's house?', James initially named his brother, Seán, but went on to talk about friends outside of the Childminding community:

James: Seán.

Researcher: Your brother Seán. And what about this little guy here? [pointing to Eoin]

James: Will I tell you what my favourite thing on my Daddy's farm is?

Researcher: Yes.

James: Mud.

Researcher: Why do you like mud?

James: 'Cause I throw snowball mud things at my friends when we are having a party. We have a snowball party.

Researcher: Oh, yeah. A snowball party, and you throw mud at your friends. That's very nice.

James: And my friend is Dara, not my brother, and Martin is my other friend, and Harry [1 year 6 months old] is my friend.

Researcher: You have lots of friends.

James moves away from the table to pick up some shapes to use with the clay. When he returns, the researcher asks James what he likes about his friends, but James doesn't respond to the question. As the conversation evolves, the researcher asks, 'And tell me this, if you were to pick somebody to play with all day long, who would you pick?'

James: Obviously Mikey, Mikey my friend.

Childminder Holly: Mikey goes to playschool with James.

It is interesting how, when questioned further, James returned to focusing on his brother.

Researcher: But who would you like to play with here all day in Childminder Holly's house?'

James: Seán.

Researcher: I think you like your brother very much.

James: Yeah, I obviously love him so much, I love him all the way to Kilkenny.

(Childminder Holly's home)

While some children identify friends outside their Childminding communities, in contrast, Anna identifies a child within the home setting:

Researcher: You can make anything you want. But if you could think about something or someone that you really like, maybe your best friend or somebody you'd like to make out of the clay, you can choose.

Anna (4 years old): I know Amelia is my best friend.

Elsa (5 years old): I like Amelia as well.

Researcher: Oh, Elsa, so Amelia is your best friend as well.

Childminder Joy: We all play together. We are all best friends here. Amelia comes here as well but is not here today.



**Observation:** Anna describes what she has made – candy cane and a cake – and is pretending to put lots of candles on the cake. She is adding 'strawberries', 'sprinkles', and 'Smarties'. She pretends to cut up the cake into slices.

**Observation:** Elsa turns to Anna and says, 'Anna, let's put sprinkles in this bowl.' They talk a lot about Amelia and discuss keeping some cake for her and bringing her to their sprinkle party.

Elsa (showing us what she made from the clay): I made Amelia.

Researcher: Can I take a picture of Amelia?

Elsa: Yeah.

The theme of friendship and siblings continues when the researcher asks Anna, 'What makes you happiest when you're here?' Anna responds, 'Ah, playing with Zoe and all of my friends'. Zoe (1 year old) is Anna's younger sister.

In Childminder Lily's home, Pam (5 years 6 months old)

also identifies her younger brother as her best friend in the childminding community:



Researcher: Who's your best friend here, Pam?

Pam: Jack. [Pam's 2-year-old brother]

Researcher: Why is Jack your best friend?

Pam: I don't know.

Researcher: Is it because he likes to come into your room to sleep?

Pam: No. He loves me and Rose [sister, 4 years old] the same amount.

Researcher: If you were to make a person out of the clay, who would you make?

Pam: Em, Jack.

Researcher: Why would you make Jack out of your clay?

Pam: I like him.

Researcher: Well, that's a very good reason, Pam.

(Childminder Lily's home)

In Childminder Helen's home, Ryan (4 years 6 months old) chooses a younger peer:

Researcher: Who would be your friend at this time?

Ryan: Hmm . . . Harry (1 year 6 months old).

Researcher: Ryan, why is Harry your best friend at this table?

Ryan: I like Harry because, Harry because, he likes the kitchen and he likes the washing machine.

While Ryan chooses a younger boy in the group based on shared interests in toys, Eve (3 years old) articulates how gender plays a role in her choice of friend.

Eve: Ah, Aly [2 years old], she is my best friend 'cause she is only a little girl. Harry is not my best friend, 'cause he is only a boy. Boys are not my best friend.

Eve walks away from the table.

Childminder Helen: Nial, would you like to tell [researcher] who is your best friend?

Nial (6 years old): Ryan [4 years 6 months old] is my best friend.

Childminder Helen: What are you making in the hallway?

Nial: I'm making a town. I haven't quite finished it yet, I just need some vehicles and one more human. I have a toy human, and Ryan has brought in some stuff that we could use to make a business. Two men are running the business. The business mows people's lawns. It also cleans up things, scoops up things where they don't belong.

What is interesting about Nial's choice of friend is that Ryan is the boy in the group who is closest to Nial's age. In the following play encounter, Ryan and Nial are playing cooperatively, deciding how and what to play. However, Nial appears to be taking a leadership role. He also confidently shares his 'funds of knowledge' that have been

learned from his family as he directs their play and learning and shares these funds of knowledge with others.

**Observation:** Nial and Ryan are still playing with the town made out of bricks, with cars and toy people still in place. Ryan says Jimmy and Jonathan are here, their friends. Nial says these are just toy friends, but he has lots of real friends. Nial names the town that he built as 'Ballygowan', because his dad works in that town, 'the real Ballygowan'. Nial turns to Ryan and says, 'Ryan, I think three houses is enough.' But Nial then says, 'We have to build a house, 'cause if they didn't have a house they would have to sleep on the ground or in the machinery.' Nial says a one-storey house is called a bungalow. Nial seem to know a lot about houses. He says his Granny lives in a bungalow.

(Childminder Helen's home)

James (4 years 10 months old) also offers to take on a responsible role with his sibling Seán (2 years 3 months old).

Researcher (to James): I know you have such a wonderful time here in Childminder Holly's house. But if you were to change anything, what would you change?

James: Ah, a nappy.

Researcher: Oh, you would change a nappy. Have you ever changed Seán's nappy?

James: No, but I would.

James (to Seán): Would you let me change your nappy, Seán?

Seán: No.

Researcher: Seán, would you not let James change your nappy?

Seán: No.

Seán marches round the floor saying, 'No, no, no.' Eoin (1 year 10 months old) joins in, and both toddlers run around the room, shouting, 'No, no, no', laughing.

(Childminder Holly's home)

## Discussion

The *Aistear Guidance for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2024, p. 13) highlights that 'making *cairde* (friends) and being together nurtures a sense of self, being valued and belonging', which also aligns with the previous theme of community. Early friendships with others are celebrated in Aistear and are considered to have a 'profound impact on learning and development' (NCCA, 2024, p. 17).

The theme 'friendships and sibling relationships' illustrates the value of the mixed-age groups, where siblings experience being together in a home environment, particularly from the perspectives of the children themselves. These findings shed light on children's friendships within and outside the Childminding communities, as well as sibling and peer relationships between mixed ages. The updated Aistear (2024) has raised the profile of children's friendships, following a consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children that highlighted the significance of friendship for young children and their capacities to form and maintain them (e.g., O'Toole et al., 2024).

The significance of friendship for young children is well established in research, which shows how toddlers and young children define and develop friendships (Corsaro, 2003; Theobald et al. 2024; Carter and Nutbrown, 2016). As previously mentioned, Theobald et al. (2024) found that children (5–6 years) characterised friendships as having shared interests, including others in play, having concern for others' wellbeing, and giving support. Corsaro's (2003) work with children in preschools provides insight into factors that impact on how children make friends, which included gender, size of peer group, community beliefs, and available time and opportunities. Theobald et al.'s (2024) and Corsaro's (2003) research raises questions and tentatively offers further support for the current findings.

Children in this study described having friends, which is significant. Friends and friendships appear to be based on being siblings and having shared interests and – although less evident – possibly gender. Friendships between siblings in this study correlated with having concern or love and support, rather than shared interests. There also seems to be an age correlation, given that children talked about friends outside the mixed-age Childminding community who were in the same school or class. At the same time, for friendships in the homes, the conditions present in the small home-based community and learning environment perhaps provided time and opportunities for friendship-building. This finding shares similarities with the Aistear consultation (O'Toole et al., 2023, p. 73), where a child in a Childminding setting also used the term 'friend' in reference to a younger peer. Together, the evidence in the consultation and the findings in this study suggest that the Childminding environment may shape opportunities for forming and maintaining friendships, as described above.

The research findings highlight how the children enjoy close relationships across ages and, importantly, the value that children themselves place on sharing their environment and experiences with their siblings. As mentioned, there is limited research with children about their experiences of childminding (Ang et al., 2017), and about sibling relationships in mixed-age groups in ECE settings. The significance of sibling relationships for children in these findings, therefore, is relatively unique.

### 4.3 Play encounters

The third theme identified during the data analysis was play encounters, with aspects of play being shared by both the children and childminders. Notably, the data extracts that follow show many play encounters between children of mixed ages. This section begins with a discussion on the enjoyment of play. It highlights the children's contributions on what they enjoy playing, which sheds further light on their interests and preferences. The childminders also share their insights. The second subtheme looks at playing with others and the role of peer relationships and interactions. This leads to examining what types and forms of play take place in the different childminder groups and is followed by an analysis of the mixed emotions of mixed-age play. The section concludes with a discussion of the childminder's role in supporting mixed-age play.

#### Enjoyment of play

Eve (3 years old): I like to play.

(Childminder Helen's home)

Pam (5 years 6 months old): The swing makes me happy.

Rose (4 years old): The trampoline makes me happy.

(Childminder Lily's home)

James (4 years 10 months old): Outside. I like running outside and playing Power Rangers and going on the ponies as well.

(Childminder Holly's home)

Niamh (12 years 10 months old): Yeah, they are dices. I like playing board games.

(Childminder Faith's home)



**Observation:** Riley (2 years old) is on the floor. She has a little dinosaur in her hand and is moving it up and down on the floor, and she is making a little *grrrr* sound.

Researcher: What does Riley like to play with?

Childminder Faith: She likes the connect magnets; she is just figuring out how to connect them. She likes playdough and, Riley, you like colouring with the crayon, don't you? And what's your favourite thing outside? The water table?

(Childminder Faith's home)

Alongside play being a human right under the UNCRC (UN, 1989), Aistear describes how play supports children 'to be *sláinte* (healthy) and *sona* (happy), creative and imaginative, and lays the foundations for becoming effective communicators and explorers' (NCCA, 2024, p. 19). The childminders also had perspectives to share on the enjoyment of play in their groups; for example:

Childminder Lily: They [children] play most, they love the garden.

### Playing with others

The importance of playing with others was aptly conveyed by Anna (4 years old):

Anna: I don't like. I don't like. I don't like. I don't like playing on my own.

Researcher: Tell me. Why?

Anna: Because, because it's boring.

In another interaction, in response to what makes her happiest in Childminder Joy's home, Anna replied playing with her sister Zoe and 'all of my friends'. Many of the children also discussed who they enjoyed playing with.

Eve (3 years old): Nial. I like to play with Nial [her brother].

Nial (6 years old): I only like to play farms with Ryan [4 years 6 months old], because we are both farmers.

Anna and Eve both point out that they like playing with their siblings. Ryan implies that he likes playing with Harry (1 year 6 months old) based on their shared interests:

Ryan: I like Harry because, Harry because he likes the kitchen and he likes the washing machine. . . . It's a toy washing machine.

(Childminder Helen's home)

In the following conversation, Pam speculated that Jack would choose Lottie (2 years old) to play with. Pam (5 years 6 months old), Rose (4 years old), and Jack (2 years old) are siblings.

Researcher (to Pam and Rose): Who do you think Jack would pick to play with here?

Pam: I think Jack would pick Lottie.

(Childminder Lily's home)

Although no explanation was given, Pam's speculation raises the question of whether this choice was age-related.

The childminders also noted how and with whom the children like to play. Childminder Holly noted sibling connections and emphasised interests, while Childminder Faith considered age or development as factors.

Childminder Holly: Eoin [1 year 10 months old] and James [4 years 10 months old] have a real interest in tractors and vehicles and trains. And so I see now, even just in the last few weeks, they're spending a bit of time together. Whereas before, James would have kind of gravitated toward Seán [2 years 3 months old] more. But Eoin's interests are coming out a bit more and he started to talk a bit more now, so James has been spending more time playing with Eoin now.

Childminder Faith: I find now that Oisín [3 years old] plays with Riley [2 years old], because she is now two and their play has changed.

In the extracts above, the child participants refer to playing with their siblings. They also mention common interests, namely farms, tractors, vehicles, and trains, as a reason for playing with someone. Both mixed ages and genders play together in these groups, although there is evidence of the same genders playing together in the

following extracts. Aside from the children enjoying playing with certain people, these observations show how and what they liked to play.

**Observation:** Elsa (5 years old) is now putting a plastic toy saucepan on the table and said she is making soup and adding lots of vegetables. Anna (4 years old) is now helping Elsa to make the soup, adds the spatula to stir the soup. Zoe (1 year old) comes over to have a look.

Anna: How about putting in our favourite ingredients?

Elsa: Anna, let's put sprinkles in this bowl.

(Childminder Joy's home)

**Observation:** Lottie (2 years old) is in the sand tray now and she's playing, picking up some sand with a little spoon and has a cup in her hand, where she puts the sand and calls it ice cream. Jack (2 years old) comes back into the sand tray again with a plastic ice cream cone. He fills it up with sand and gets out of the sand tray again, going back to the playhouse.

(Childminder Lily's home)

**Observation:** James (4 years 10 months old) has moved over onto the mat to play with some little cars. He has cars and a tractor and Seán (2 years 3 months old) is going off on his little bike for a cycle and Eoin (1 year 10 months old) is sitting with little teddies. Seán gets off the bike and goes over to James to join him in play. Eoin then joins the two boys, and they all sit playing with the small trucks and tractors.

(Childminder Holly's home)

**Observation:** Riley (2 years old) has a little car, and she is rolling it up and down the floor. Oisín (3 years old) is watching her. Next, Riley is on all fours. Oisín copies her. They are facing away from each other and looking under their legs at each other, laughing. Oisín runs a little car under his legs to Riley, and they play this little game for a few minutes.

(Childminder Faith's home)

These excerpts shed light on children's play interests and show that many of the above examples involve interactions between children of mixed ages. The above data can be considered examples of 'free play', which Aistear describes as opportunities where 'babies, toddlers and young children can immerse themselves in deep learning and joyful explorations' (NCCA, 2024, p. 19). The *Aistear Guidance for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2024) describes free play as 'child-initiated and can involve risk, challenge, joy, *dóchas* (hope) and deep engagement' (NCCA, 2024, p. 21). This is a relevant point when considering the extracts above, with what forms of play are happening within

the umbrella of 'free play'. For example, several different types of play could possibly be identified above, namely spectator play, parallel play, and co-operative play.

Free play also helps babies, toddlers, and young children to 'develop socially and emotionally and to have empathy and compassion' (NCCA, 2024, p. 19). Childminder Helen describes the emotional connection amongst the children in her home:

Childminder Helen: It's brilliant to see them. While I know they can fight and all that, but you see, you see, Nial [6 years old], he loves Harry [1 year 6 months old], and Harry, he's just mad about Nial and he stands at the door and he's coming in from school time and Harry dances. And they're all the same with Aly [2 years old].

Researcher: And they're not related to each other at all, are they?

Childminder Helen, No, they're not relations at all. No. Even if one of them falls or are crying or upset, they'll all be over, 'What's wrong?' 'I'll help you or Helen quick.' 'He has a sore leg.'

#### Mixed emotions of mixed-age play

This section discusses the children's contributions on the above aspects of play in relation to conflict and emotions amongst the children in mixed-age groups.

Niamh (12 years 10 months old): Once, Oisín (3 years old) got in the way of the PlayStation; he ran into it and switched it off in the middle of my game.

Researcher: How did you feel about that?

Niamh: Cross.

(Childminder Faith's home)

James (4 years 10 months old) expresses his dislike when his younger brother Seán (2 years 3 months old) cries, but also offers a sensitive, empathetic response:

James: I like playing with him, but I don't like it when he cries.

Researcher: What do you do when Seán cries?'

James: I say to him, Are you OK? And when he's happy, when he's better, I say, Seán, do you wanna go and play?

(Childminder Holly's home)

The following interaction stemmed from a child-initiated conversation about a feelings box/resource.

Researcher: What about you, Elsa? Do you ever get angry?

Elsa (5 years old): I get angry when somebody pulls. It's mostly George [brother, 2 years old].

(Childminder Joy's home)

In another encounter, emotions are further elaborated in terms of frustration caused from sharing their learning spaces with children of different ages.

**Observation:** Nial (6 years old) was helping Ryan (4 years 6 months old) to put a roof on the house he made out of plastic bricks. The house was forming part of their town, with houses and roads. The houses had people figures in them. The boys had cars, trucks, and tractors lined up along the houses and some on the roads. Harry (1 year 6 months old) walked over to the play town that Ryan and Nial had made, as he was trying to reach a tractor on the pretend road. He lost his balance and knocked over one of the houses.

Nial: But Harry nearly destroyed our houses.

Researcher: What do you think about Harry?

Nial: I don't think he is that good because he's always getting into mischief.

Researcher: Nial, how does it make you feel when Harry wrecks your creations?

Nial: It makes me feel mad, it makes me want to shout, and Harry is just annoying.

Researcher: Do you know how old Harry is?

Nial: He's only one.

Researcher: If you could pick a different one-year-old, who would you pick?

Nial: I don't know if I would pick any one-year-old. . . . I wouldn't pick any two-year-old except Aly, because she's a good two-year-old, she does not wreck our creations, and I would pick my sister Eve as a three-year-old and Ryan as a four-year-old.

(Childminder Helen's home)

It is, therefore, significant to gain further insight from the childminders in terms of the frustration caused from sharing their learning spaces with children of different ages.

Childminder Holly also gives an account of this:

Childminder Holly: James (4 years 10 months old) really enjoys one-to-one attention, which is obviously not as easy with two smaller ones who have a lot of practical needs. So there's lunches and nappy changes and maybe teething or, you know, just upsets. So I find that sometimes challenging. And again, just in the afternoon sometimes, although it has gotten better because their nap times have shifted, but there was a lot of waiting, so I was waiting for someone to wake up, waiting for them to have their lunch. Maybe a nappy change would happen, and James would feel maybe the frustration, and sometimes I did think during the year if I had another person his age, the afternoons would go really smoothly.

## Childminders' role to support mixed-age play

This section discusses the role of the childminders in supporting play in mixed-age groups.

**Observation:** Harry (1 year 6 months old) gets up to move, and I (researcher) follow Harry back to the playroom. Harry walks back to the table in the playroom and moves in close to Aly (2 years old) and tries to take Aly's googly eyes from her clay. Aly gets upset, and Childminder Helen helps to guide Harry to other googly eyes on the other side of the table.

(Childminder Helen's home)

**Observation:** Seán (2 years 3 months old) gets off the bike and goes over to James (4 years 10 months old) to join him in play. Eoin (1 year 10 months old) then joins the two boys, and they all sit playing with the small trucks and tractors. Then a little tussle breaks out between Eoin and Seán; they both want the same truck. Childminder Holly goes over to help them negotiate and points out Eoin's favourite truck. James gets involved and asks the two boys to follow him as he sits on a small tractor. The three boys get on sit-and-ride toys and drive around the furniture following each other.

(Childminder Holly's home)

Childminder Holly: We've done so much, you know, work over the last nine months on turn-taking and we can't just take something you want from somebody else. And it's been a long process, but I can definitely see the effects now in the last few weeks in particular. There's a lot more turn-taking, I can even hear them saying to each other, 'It's my turn in the next turn.' So yeah, they're starting to understand turn-taking. There is still hit and miss, and sometimes they still fight over things, but I can see it's starting to take place.

These extracts demonstrate the childminder's role in supporting children's social development and the necessity of negotiating different needs and expectations during mixed-age play. This role could be akin to that of the key-person approach (NCCA, 2024) described in Section 3.2.

Aistear also emphasises the role of interactions to support babies, toddlers, and young children's social and emotional learning and development (NCCA, 2024). Likewise, some of the childminders also discuss the benefits of learning in a mixed-age group:

Childminder Lily: If we are doing baking, then there might be just one to mix with the spoon, the little ones might be just looking while the older ones take turns with the spoon, mixing the ingredients. But everything starts small, and as the children grow, they figure out that actually I can do it, learn from each other.

Additionally, the childminders discuss the benefits of having siblings of mixed ages in the group:

Childminder Holly: Well, I do think for them as for, as brothers, as family, the benefit is that they do have a person, you know, they have an attachment person from home that they feel connected with. And particularly I suppose for James [4 years 10 months old] with Seán [2 years 3 months old]. But for Seán with James, if Seán was having a tricky day or sometimes if he wakes up from his nap, he'll say, 'I want James.' And James will come and he'll give him a cuddle and then spend a few minutes with Seán. So, finding his balance [referring to Seán], you know, and then in a kind of wider way, I think it's been good for them [James and Seán] to have to kind of learn to incorporate Eoin [1 year 10 months old] into things.

The above extract demonstrates the benefits of a mixed-age group in terms of sibling attachment and social learning (NCCA, 2024). This finding shares similarities with previous research, as does young children looking up to or learning from older children, discussed further below. However, in this example this may be considered as a benefit from the younger child's perspective more so than the older child's, as shared above. Similar involvement from the childminders to support mixed-age play was also identified amongst other groups.

## Discussion

When considering the research question of how children and childminders perceive and experience mixed-age groups in home settings, these findings provide some valuable insights. For instance, this third theme of play encounters provides insight into the children's perspectives of what they like and dislike in a mixed-age setting. To begin, several children have given account of enjoying playing and give examples of the swing and a notable regard for outdoor play.

This leads to a further analysis of what and who they like to play with, although it is unclear whether it is age, relationship, interests, or gender that significantly impact the children's decisions on this. For example, in three of the extracts above, the participants are playing with their siblings. Anna and Eve say they like playing with

their siblings. Responding to a question on friendship, Ryan implies that he likes playing with Harry based on their shared interests. Other children also mention common interests – farms, tractors, vehicles, and trains – as a reason for playing with someone. Equally, both mixed ages and genders play together in these groups. However, several groupings are either girls or boys exclusively, and Eve (3 years old) clearly articulated that ‘boys are not my best friend’. From the childminders’ perspectives, Childminder Holly emphasises interests while Childminder Faith considers age or development as factors.

It is not clear from the above what the exact deciding factor is for the children when they choose who to play with. Instead, it appears that a combination of these factors might impact their play choices, and this may be unique to each child. These are therefore valuable perspectives put forward by the children when considering the overall area of supporting play in Childminding settings.

The *Aistear Guidance for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2024) emphasises the importance of time and space to support play. This is a relevant point when considering the extracts above, and the forms of play happening within the umbrella of ‘free play’. For example, several different types of play could possibly be identified above, including spectator play, parallel play, and co-operative play.

Aistear (NCCA, 2009, p. 55) portrays spectator play as when ‘the child watches others playing without joining in’, and parallel play as when ‘the child plays side by side with another child, often with similar materials, but without interacting’. Co-operative play is described as when children ‘interact, take turns, share and decide how and what to play’. Anna (4 years old) and Elsa (5 years old) are evidently involved in co-operative play as they decide what to cook together, while Zoe (1 year old) engages in spectator play and watches them. Similarly, Riley (2 years old) and Oisín (3 years old) also engage in a form of cooperative play with their legs and the car. It is unclear what level of interactions are taking place with James (4 years 10 months old), Seán (2 years 3 months old), and Eoin (1 year 10 months old) and the trucks and tractors to determine whether it is cooperative or parallel or if both forms of play are happening. Lottie (2

years old) and Jack (2 years old), on the other hand, are clearly engaging in parallel play and enjoying individual projects in the sand.

Positive relationships and interactions also contribute to children's wellbeing, which Aistear describes as 'enhancing babies, toddlers and young children's sense of wellbeing, *sonas* (happiness), attachment and *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together)' (NCCA, 2024, p. 22). From the childminders' perspectives, several speak about how well the mixed ages of children get along and the emotional connections the children have with one another in their groups. They also discuss the role of peer learning and how the young children pick up skills from watching the older children.

That said, the childminders also give an account of the mixed emotions that come with mixed-age groupings and share their insights on 'tussles' and annoyance when someone's play gets interrupted. There are also insights on the difficulties of meeting the individual needs of the mixed ages in regard to, for example, napping, school drop-offs and pick-ups, and age-appropriate play. Descriptions from the childminders also indicate how they manage these difficulties and negotiate mixed-age interactions by intervening or by distracting individual children. Another significant finding is that the older children in particular share their frustrations of their play being disturbed by the younger children and describe getting cross and annoyed by this.

Aistear places emphasis on how great 'care and time are taken to foster and support connections within and between the baby, toddler and young child's social worlds' (NCCA, 2024, p. 17). The extracts shared under this theme demonstrate the childminder's role in supporting children's social development and the necessity of negotiating different needs and expectations during mixed-age play. This role could be akin to that in the 'key person approach' (NCCA, 2024) described in the previous theme on 'sense of community'. Supporting babies, toddlers, and young children through conflict is also described under the learning goals of the Aistear theme *Identity and Belonging* as developing 'a sense of social justice and fairness, be aware of and respect their own and others' needs, rights and feelings while also developing the skills of co-operation, responsibility, negotiation, problem-solving and conflict resolution' (NCCA, 2024, p. 25).

These findings also suggest a relationship-driven, rather than rights-based, approach. Reflecting on the frustrations and constraints that some children articulate and experience, a question that arises from the research data is whether the children are experiencing rights-based relationships between peers. Also, in relation to the research question, would an explicit rights-based approach support how childminders nurture children's relationships with and among children across mixed ages? If emphasis was placed by childminders on the children's right to play, for example, this may support childminders to recognise 'frustrations' as a matter that affects children's rights and reach a decision on support strategies that meet the children's best interests. This, however, also requires consideration of the children's individual and collective rights.

#### 4.4 Real-life learning, flexibility, and participation rights

The fourth theme is real-life learning, flexibility, and participation rights and the many different learning opportunities that children in childminding settings experience. In the discussion is an analysis of how transitions, both micro and macro, can be considered a form of everyday, real-life learning. This analysis explores how childminders support transitions from home to preschool or school and how such transitions can also impact children's needs and wishes. This discussion is continued by exploring the theme of freedom and flexible routines also as conditions for real-life learning experiences, including how children's rights can be realised in home-based settings. It is important to note that this section draws primarily from the perspectives of the childminders.

##### Real-life learning

Examples of real-life learning, which O'Regan et al. (2023, p. 911) describe as 'learning opportunities presented by real life experiences as they arise', were evident in the following narratives.

Researcher: What do you think is the hardest part for your childminder, Joy, having you here in her house?

Anna (4 years old): I don't know.

Elsa (5 years old): Having us here all day.

Researcher: Do you both help Childminder Joy?

Childminder Joy: The girls are just great for helping me to tidy up – once they know what their job is, they just do it.

. . .

Childminder Joy: If we were having dinner in my house, what dinner do you love to have?

Anna: Kedgeree and couscous.

Elsa: I like it too.

Anna: But I don't like cottage pie.

(Childminder Joy's home)

Childminder interests are also sources of real-life learning for children. Childminder Joy explained how she enjoys cooking and prides herself on providing the children with healthy and diverse meals:

Childminder Joy: I love cooking, so I've no problem with mealtimes, and I love giving the kids good food, and they always have good food when they come here. So I'd batch-cook different meals, like cottage pie, spaghetti bolognese, or lamb and couscous. Or meatballs. . . . It's one of my selling points that they get good, healthy food here.

Aside from having the opportunity to try different meals, the children in this group were also involved in the food preparation:

Childminder Joy: But the general day-to-day, cooking and everything like that, I let the kids do it with me. If they are able, they'd help peel potatoes and everything like that. Obviously, nothing dangerous.

These examples can be termed 'real-life learning', as the children in this example are learning about different food, tastes, and indeed food preparation, which readily align with both the *Exploring and Thinking* and *Communicating* themes in Aistear (NCCA, 2024).

The last example and those that follow also align with 'Relationship-driven learning', where children benefit from the childminder's particular interests (O'Regan, 2020). In Childminder Holly's home, the children also had an opportunity for some real-life learning:

Childminder Holly to Eoin (1 year 10 months old): Did you tell [name of researcher] all about the hens? Eoin collects the eggs every morning. . . . We have hens at the back,

and he loves going out in the morning and collecting the eggs. Don't you, Eoin? Eoin is the first to arrive here in the mornings.

Coincidentally, there are also hens at Childminder Faith's house:

Oisín (3 years old): There is a hen in the garden.

Childminder Faith: We need to catch the hen and put her back behind the gate. Will you help me, Oisín?

Oisín chases after the hen; the hen runs fast. Oisín chases the hen in through the back door of the house; he crouches down and picks up the hen.

Oisín: I got her.

Childminder Faith: OK, I'll take her now, Oisín, and can you open the gate for me?

Oisín: Yep.

Oisín opens the gate and childminder Faith puts the hen back outside of the garden.

Connecting with hens in the examples above can, for instance, offer endless real-life learning such as 'animal care, life cycles, food sources alongside an overall understanding of co-habiting with other species', which align with Aistear's emphasis on sustainability, described as 'when children learn to care for themselves, others and the environment' (NCCA, 2024 p. 32).

Several examples were also evident of children bringing their own interests stemming from real-life learning into the community. For example, when Ryan made a light bulb because he likes bulbs, as discussed in the first theme, Childminder Helen explained that 'Ryan's dad is an electrical engineer'. Similarly, Nial involves his funds of knowledge connected to his father in his play. During the play episode described under theme 2, Nial named the town that he built as 'Ballygowan', reflecting a 'real Ballygowan', because his dad works there.

These children showed '*muinín* (confidence) and self-assurance in directing their own learning and sharing their funds of knowledge with others'. 'Funds of knowledge refers to the valuable skills, knowledge and interests that babies, toddlers and young children learn from their families and communities' (NCCA, 2024, p. 32). In this study, these children's interests and funds of knowledge that have been learned from family life became apparent as they explored the clay and in their free play. These examples draw attention to children's interests in and mutual influence on activities and

interactions in their communities, which serve to benefit other members and a child-led or emergent curriculum.

Some of the groups also made trips out to the community. Trips included attending activities organised by the local County Childcare Committees, and going to the library, the local supermarket, and toy shops:

Childminder Faith: Library's a great place to explore and discover. And the children I mind now got into a habit of going to the library with me. And now they actually ask can they go to the library. It's kind of a free activity, and it's a safe place for kids to be.

Childminder Lily uses a seven-seater car to bring the children to several different activities during the week:

Childminder Lily: Tuesday, we go to a place. That's just like a parent and toddler group. So that's more free-for-all.

Researcher: And do you drive to these places?

Childminder Lily: Yeah, I have a seven-seater car and all the child seats, so I can take the children.

Childminder Lily also spoke about attending playgroup sessions in the local area that she attends on Monday and Friday mornings with two younger children, Lottie (2 years old) and Jack (2 years old), while Rose (4 years old) and Pam (5 years 6 months old) are in preschool. The playgroup sessions are facilitated, and the children engage in activities, art, toys, puzzles, etc. and get a snack to eat (crackers, cheese, and yogurt). Likewise, the children in Childminder Helen's house take trips out into the community:

Researcher: What does a typical kind of day look like for the children?

Childminder Helen: So in the morning we have play time, get settled in, and then generally half nine, ten, we have a snack. We'll have more play, and we could go out to the park then, depending on weather, or we could go do shopping.

Researcher: So you take them shopping with you?

Childminder Helen: Yeah, yeah. Three of us, me and the three small ones, went shopping to Dunnes on Monday. One in the trolley and two came walking alongside me, they were delighted with themselves, picking up all the stuff. And yesterday I just had the two girls; we went off to the toy shop over in [name of county]. Yeah, we loaded up 'cause our grant money all came in. So we loaded up with all this stuff. All delighted with themselves getting to pick out everything that they wanted.

In the excerpt that follows, Elsa (5 years old) expressed a family story, while Childminder Joy explained how Elsa noticed family connections while out in the community:

Elsa: I'm making my granddad Matt [pseudonym]. He has no hair. [See clay image.]

Childminder Joy: Elsa calls her granddad Mattie.

Joy tells a story about when she was out walking with the children, and they saw other people running and having fun, and Elsa said just like her Granddad Mattie.

Elsa: Granddad has a water gun. He gives piggyback and wheelbarrow rides.



(Childminder Joy's home)

In terms of facilitating children's choice-making and supporting their participatory rights in decision-making on matters that affect them (UN, 2009; DCEDIY, 2021), the following examples were shared:

Childminder Lily described how the children can choose whether to go on outings with her: I bring the children down to my mam, just down the road, and the children would tell their parents when they come to collect them. And the children, the older ones, will let me know if they like going or not. So it depends on whether the children are happy to go also.

Childminder Helen: And yesterday I just had the two girls; we went off to the toy shop. Yeah, we loaded up 'cause our grant money all came in. So we loaded up with all this stuff. All delighted with themselves getting to pick out everything that they wanted.

Childminder Lily: And I'd batch-cook. So there'd be stuff that's frozen, or there's times when they might choose what they want to have for dinner. I might say to the children, 'What would you like for dinner?' And they'll say something, and we can do it, because I like to give them choices, and I like to cook.

## Transitions

The data provides insight into how children and childminders perceive transitions and the supportive role of the childminder in this process.

Researcher: Ryan, are you going to school yet?

Ryan (4 years 6 months old): I'm going to school very soon.

Researcher: Ryan is going to school very soon. Wow. Are you prepared?

Childminder Helen: Ryan, tell [researcher] what you did yesterday.

Ryan: I went to school to meet my teacher.

Childminder Helen: Ryan, tell [researcher] what your new teacher's name is.

Child Ryan: Ah, she is Miss Maple [pseudonym].

(Childminder Helen's home)

Aistear reiterates how 'supporting transitions also requires shared responsibility between families, childminders, educators, settings and schools in the best interests of the baby, toddler and young child' (NCCA, 2024, p. 18). How positive transitions were supported by childminders was discussed in the semi-structured interviews with the childminder and researcher. The following contributions were shared by Childminder Helen:

Childminder Helen: Well, let's say when Harry [1 year 6 months old] was starting, so they kind of come in and out for about a week, two weeks, maybe in and out. The mummies come in with them, and they come in at different times.

Researcher: All right, so you transition the children into your home by offering different starting times before they start full-time?

Childminder Helen: Yeah, like that. I'm very lucky, 'cause they are all mad about babies. They love babies. Even Aly's [2 years old] baby brother comes in now in his car seat to collect, and they're all over and they're all baby-calling and they just can't wait for him to start.

Similarly, Childminder Holly describes how she supported transitioning from home:

Childminder Holly: With Seán [2 years 3 months old], I did a settling-in time. Because Seán's mom had mentioned that Seán was quite attached to her, and so in September he was 18 months, and he loves his mommy. So to help Seán settle in, I just took him for a couple of hours one morning, and again his mum was fantastic because she was like, 'I trust you that you can take care of Seán', and she said, 'I'll see you later, Seán' and headed off. So that helps, that she wasn't unsure, and that helped the settling-in process a lot.

Childminder Lily occasionally takes time to meet families externally and build rapport before the child starts with her:

Childminder Lily: Sometimes I might meet them [parents and child] at the park to get to know me. And it depends on their age.

Aside from the emotional support needed for these types of transitions, some of the childminders provided practical help for families in terms of the physical transitions to either playschool or school, as described by the following participant:

Pam (5 years 6 months old): Usually, we take the car. I used to most of the time, I used to use my scooter, but then I stopped.

Researcher: Why did you stop taking your scooter to school?

Pam: Well, we have to wake up early and go to bed early. So now Mum drives us to school and Childminder Lily collects us from school.

...

Researcher: Oh, and how do you get to school, Rose [4 years old]?

Rose: In the car.

Childminder Lily: Sometimes we walk to the school. It's not far; I help Rose's mom out by dropping Rose some mornings, and if the weather is bad, we go in my car.

(Childminder Lily's home)

Furthermore, to support the needs of the mixed ages in her home, Childminder Holly gives an account of how they manage their transition to school in the morning:

Childminder Holly: Well, we have got a nice little routine there. So, yeah, there's a whole kind of little transitional process in the morning of going to school about getting ready for the car and they all help each other. We discuss are they going to bring something in the car, and then they have a playlist in the car that they've created. So they, you know, they have their songs on it. So we wonder together what song is going to come on first on the playlist, and things like that, and so it runs smoothly.

Childminder Helen describes the benefit of bringing the younger children on the school pick-up as a means of supporting their own preschool transitions over the next couple of years:

Childminder Helen: We all just go in the car, and we all pick them up, and they're all delighted, and they all wave to everybody at playschool. And a benefit of that is then these are so familiar with the playschool they're going to be heading on to, 'cause they're going in and out with Ryan all the time. And they know the teachers. They know the classroom.

While the above extracts give insight into how the childminders can support positive transitions, it is equally important to analyse how the practicalities also impact the children in the group. For example, Pam (5 years 6 months old) mentions that she no longer uses her scooter to go to school and must go to bed and get up early. It is unclear from the data whether this is something that Pam is unhappy to do, but it is worth noting when interpreting the overall question of the supportive role of transitioning and childminders. Additionally, Childminder Holly discusses how

younger children's naps are accommodated when collecting older children from school:

Childminder Holly: Then for pick-up I usually time it so that the two boys are ready for their nap [Eoin, 1 year 10 months old, and Seán, 2 years 3 months old]. As we're going in the car and so then they nap. You know, it doesn't always work that way, but they nap, and I can pop in and get James [4 years 10 months old], and then we come home and then they [Eoin and Seán] transfer into their little beds and they have a snooze, and James gets a little bit of time to himself.

Childminder Helen describes how, at times, the children in her home need to wait:

Childminder Helen: Yeah. Two want to go outside. One wants to go to bed. You can't. You may just wait until one has gone down, and then we can organise it.

Childminder Holly also gives an account of this:

Childminder Holly: . . . two smaller ones who have a lot of practical needs. So there's lunches and nappy changes and maybe teething or, you know, just upsets. So I find that sometimes challenging. And again, just in the afternoon sometimes, although it has gotten better because their nap times have shifted, but there was a lot of waiting, so I was waiting for someone to wake up, waiting for them to have their lunch. Maybe a nappy change would happen, and James would feel maybe the frustration, and sometimes I did think during the year if I had another person his age, the afternoons would go really smoothly.

These extracts identify how the needs and wishes of the children, such as sleeping, can be impacted. While this could be considered a common occurrence when managing the needs of mixed-age groups of children, it is again relevant when determining how positively transitions are being supported in relation to both individual children and the group.

### Freedom and flexible routines

Aistear describes children's participatory rights as when 'babies, toddlers and young children are involved in decision-making, their views are listened to, taken seriously and given due weight with the intention of leading to an outcome or change' (NCCA, 2024). This subtheme sheds light on the role of flexibility in Childminding settings to support this. The previous extracts and those that follow offer insights into 'what a day looks like' from the childminders' narratives.

In relation to having time to play, Childminder Joy gave an account of the flexibility of Childminding when it comes to supporting play:

Childminder Joy: If we're still playing, we can continue to play. We don't have to stop, or we don't have a slot that we can go out into the garden, and we can go out whenever we want, so more freedom.

This flexibility was also observed in the data regarding snack time:

Oisín (3 years old): I didn't eat my smoothie yet.

Childminder Faith: OK, if you want your smoothie now, you can have it.

Childminder Faith goes to the fridge and gives Oisín his smoothie. Oisín leaves the table and sits on the chair next to the window and drinks his smoothie.

(Childminder Faith's home)

Childminder Lily also describes the benefits of having a flexible routine in her home:

Childminder Lily: We can just get up and go on a whim. Go out splashing in some puddles. Or we can just make a milkshake, or do messy play. Whereas there's so many boxes to tick in other forms of childcare [centre-based]. That everything is just stifled a bit, like the spontaneity is just stifled a bit. We talk about child-led play and everything, but really there's lots of limits in the big facilities or the big purpose-built centres. So I do think that the relaxed environment here has a massive amount to play, so it's a combination of all those things.

Aistear considers babies, toddlers, and young children as 'active participants and agents of change in their own lives' (NCCA, 2024, p. 5). This means that their views must be respected 'in matters affecting them and providing choice so they are involved in decision-making' (NCCA, 2024).

Childminder Lily gives an account of how this looks in daily practice with her group of children:

Childminder Lily: When I say a relaxed environment, what I mean is relaxed, as in we have freedom, I suppose, is a better way to say, just the freedom of doing what we actually please at a time that we please, or we don't have to have dinner at this particular time. If we're still playing, we can continue to play.

The children in Childminder Faith's home also share their insight into this:

Oisín [3 years old]: Riley [2 years old] is going outside.

Childminder Faith [to Finn, 3 years old, and Oisín]: Do ye want to come outside too with Riley?

All three children go outdoors with Childminder Faith. Niamh [12 years 10 months old] goes to the sitting room.

(Childminder Faith's home)

These extracts demonstrate the flexibility in the Childminding day or agenda to change plans and support children in decision-making and see their influence in a meaningful manner. This was also highlighted in the first theme under children's interests, influence, agency, and participation. The flexible nature of the day's agenda also puts forward how a rights-respecting culture can be promoted, with children choosing when or what to eat and when to go outside to play.

### Discussion

This data aligns with O'Regan's (2020) and O'Regan and colleagues' (2023) real-life learning model of practice, which emphasises providing an array of experiences that cater for children's individual needs, interests, preferences, and capabilities.

Opportunities to engage with and in local communities outside of the home are also highlighted under the Aistear themes of *Exploring and Thinking*, *Communicating*, and *Wellbeing* (NCCA, 2024, pp. 16–17). Aistear underlines the necessity for children to 'see themselves as part of the community by coming to know the features and people of the locality, to know their responsibility to care for and look after the environment and know *meitheal* (community spirit of coming together) in their lives' (NCCA, 2024, p. 24). Insights into daily routines and activities shared by both the children and childminders demonstrate how this is readily done in a home-based setting. For example, Eoin collects the eggs every morning in Childminder Holly's home. The children in Childminder Helen's home often take trips into the community, such as going to the park or doing the shopping. Likewise, the younger children in Childminder Lily's home attend weekly playgroup sessions while the older ones are in playschool or primary school.

The flexible nature of the day's agenda also puts forward how a rights-respecting culture can be promoted. This includes the children choosing when to go out to play, when to eat, and, in certain groups, what to eat. For example, Anna and Elsa give an account of the food they like (kedgerie and couscous) in Childminder Joy's home,

while Joy herself discusses cooking with the children and supporting them to taste different food. Again, this aligns with O'Regan et al.'s (2023) concept of 'relationship-driven learning', which offers children opportunities to benefit from the childminder's interests.

Also relevant to real-life learning in a childminding context is the area of transitions. The childminders discuss how they support individual transitions. For example, Childminders Helen and Holly both describe how they supported Harry and Seán to transition comfortably from home. Different accounts on transitioning to playschool or primary school were also given, including a discussion on the practicalities of managing individual children's needs during transitions. Childminder Holly describes a positive routine of getting ready for the trip in the car with all the children by choosing what songs to play on the journey. Childminder Helen describes a benefit of bringing the younger children to the schools to support their later transitions by getting to know the location and the teachers there. However, Childminder Holly also explains that she needs to time the younger children's naps to suit the transitions, and they often sleep in transit.

In contrast to the findings that suggest the flexible nature of the day's agenda supports a rights-respecting culture, arguably these transition tensions identify contention over whether the individual needs and wishes of the mixed ages are being fully met. In Childminder Lily's home, for example, Pam shares that she now needs to go to bed and get up early and no longer goes on her scooter to get to school. It is unclear whether this is a positive or negative experience for Pam, but it does give a deeper insight into how the childminders and children experience transitions across their day.

Elsa suggests that 'having us here all day' is the hardest part for Childminder Joy. This aptly captures the importance of the whole day and its rhythm for the Childminding community. The above extracts offer insights into the flexibility and freedom of Childminding routines, which suggests that each day perhaps looks somewhat different and yet has continuities, for example through established transition routines. Much of this data is from the childminders' narratives, which raises the question of

how children shape the rhythm of the day. This question is in part addressed through the previous themes, where there was evidence of children influencing interactions, relationships, and play encounters. In the present theme, Oisín (three years old) reminds Childminder Faith that he 'didn't eat his smoothie yet', and Childminder Faith goes to the fridge and gives Oisín his smoothie. Riley (2 years old) leads the transition to 'outside', with Childminder Faith then inviting the other child to join.

The findings also show that children have different interests, needs, and preferences, which requires, as Childminder Helen suggested, that 'You may just wait' and 'then we can organise it'. This implies that 'organisation', freedom, and flexibility are factors in mixed-age communities, including on the part of children. Collectively, the findings suggest that both the children's and the childminders' interests can play central roles in shaping the emergent curriculum in these settings.

## 5. Towards a Participatory Community Model

The study aims to explore children's and childminders' perspectives and experiences of mixed-age groups of children in childminding settings in Ireland. The overarching research question it sought to explore was: How do children and childminders perceive and experience mixed-age groups in home-based settings?

Regarding this question, children and childminders appear to experience mixed-age groups in home settings through a combination of the close relationship and real-life learning models identified by O'Regan (2020). Building on these ideas, the children's and childminders' perspectives point to the possibility of a participatory community cultural model, highlighting how participation and relationships shape children's experiences, and, significantly, how children, through their multiple interests, needs, and preferences, shape the interactions, relationships, play encounters, and rhythm of the day – macro transitions to a lesser degree – in their close communities in home-based settings.

*Close relationships:* The relational closeness between the childminder and child alongside the in-depth knowledge and understanding that the childminders have for individual children, and among the children, demonstrate the supporting nature of an interdependent role between members of the group.

*Community:* Firstly, the community refers to the intergenerational, more than human, mixed-age group in each home. As noted earlier, although it is complex to define, McMillan and Chavis (1986) conceptualise a sense of community as an ongoing process consisting of four essential components: membership, influence, inclusion, and shared experience. Ecocultural perspectives (Gallimore et al., 1993; Weisner, 2002) extend this understanding by situating community within culturally and ecologically shaped niches, meaning each community is influenced by the cultural values and real-life conditions in which people live and interact, which affect and form shared routines, relationships, and opportunities for learning and development in children's and families' specific social and environmental contexts. The findings in this study suggest that the cultural values evident in routine practice and interactions

align with the components of membership, influence, inclusion, and shared experience identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

*Participation:* From a rights-based perspective, participation means more than taking part in activities or society in general; it is a process of participation 'with purpose', and the purpose is for children's views to influence decision-making on the matters affecting them (Lundy et al., 2024). The UNCRC does not explicitly mention a right to 'participation'; rather this term is widely used to describe the ongoing processes for implementing Article 12, 'which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes' (UN, 2009, para. 3).

In this study, the children provided clear examples of how they can and do define their own participation, in both the research context and their everyday lives with their childminder. For instance, this was seen with the younger participants as they choose to sit on their childminder's lap, and with the older ones when choosing what toys they would like to buy for the group. The findings also give evidence on the element of child participation and agency in the individual communities, for example, how the children choose to engage with the clay, make something with it, pretend it is food in the home corner, or indeed not play with it at all. This also sheds a light on the level of flexibility as another element in Childminding practice relevant to realising child participation and supporting children's learning in a mixed-age grouping.

Overall, there is strong evidence of a relational-driven approach rather than a children's human rights-based one. It is however noteworthy that in this relationship-driven model, participatory rights were evidently enacted. Whilst not explicit, this lays a strong foundation for participatory rights. Nevertheless, the children and childminders appear to experience mixed-age groups in home settings through a relationship-driven participatory community cultural model.

## 6. Implications

### Children's human rights

Aistear is a rights-based curriculum framework, and the *Aistear Guidance for Good Practice* (NCCA, 2024) emphasises the importance of time and space to support play. The flexible nature of the day and routines observed in this research suggest how a rights-respecting culture can be promoted in daily childminding practice.

This research suggests that children could benefit from understanding children's human rights, while childminders' professional identity and confidence may be strengthened by fostering their understanding of the potential alignment between their practices and Aistear's rights-based approach (NCCA, 2024).

### Relationships

The research findings highlight the potential benefits of mixed-age groupings, including opportunities for children to enjoy close relationships across ages and generations. The findings share similarities with previous research with childminders (e.g., O'Regan, 2020) by demonstrating the benefits in terms of sibling relationships in home-based settings. Importantly, the findings shed light on the value that children themselves place on sharing the environment and experiences with their siblings. This finding suggests that sibling relationships should be considered in decision-making across all forms of ECEC services. Recognising the significance of these relationships in curriculum planning and enrolment decisions may enhance children's sense of well-being and experiences of transitions.

The examples presented in this study suggest that friendships can and do occur across age differences. For some children, fostering close friendships may have been possible due to the small group and close relationships. However, identifying the factors that facilitate connections between mixed-age children remains an important avenue for future research.

## Complexity

These findings contribute, albeit in a limited way, to the research that highlights benefits for social learning of mixed-age groups, particularly in terms of younger children learning from elder members of the childminding communities (e.g., Fitzpatrick and Halpenny, 2023). At the same time, however, the research also raised questions: What are the benefits, from the older child's perspective, of being in mixed-age group communities in a childminder's home? What kinds of practices and strategies do childminders need to adopt to support children's learning and development, particularly older children in the mixed-age collective?

This research suggests that further research is required with older children on their perspectives of mixed-age groups in childminding. Also, the kinds of support required by childminders in the context of mixed-age groupings should be considered, particularly in relation to older children.

## Navigating conflict

Several challenges can be identified from the findings of this research with mixed-age groupings in childminders' homes, including the navigation of conflict and emotions encountered during mixed-age play during play and transitions. The children's experiences raise the question: How can older children's rights to education and play, without disruption, be further supported? These findings and questions have implications for the role of childminders to support mixed-aged play.

Hicban et al. (2025) argue that educators play a crucial role in supporting children in mixed-age settings by helping them interpret social cues and understand the intentions behind others' actions and activities. The present study's findings also highlight the significance of childminders' intentional and supportive presence in such environments. Incorporating training on scaffolding techniques, as suggested by Hicban et al. (2025), and slow relational pedagogy into professional development opportunities could further enhance childminders' professional skills to help children navigate and benefit from mixed-age play, interactions, and relationships. Additionally, children and childminders could benefit from learning about rights-based conflict-resolution approaches that promote respect for the rights of others and support

children to co-navigate emotions and resolve peer conflict, particularly during free play.

#### Multiple interests, needs, and transitions

These findings also highlight the multiplicity of interests and needs interacting in these home-based settings, and how community members know each other well. This study therefore contributed to showing the feasibility of child-led, emergent curricula that are aligned with individual and collective interests, curiosities, and needs in small communities in home-based settings, as set out in Aistear. At the same time, navigating diverse needs and transitions posed challenges, as well as some benefits, for both children and childminders. Mitigating these tensions may require additional, context-specific practice guidance that draws on the correlative Aistear Principles, particularly related to 'Transitions', adapted for home-based settings. Such guidance, and creating opportunities for collaborative learning among childminders in similar contexts, could help childminders to navigate these challenges by supporting reflective practice and the sharing of practical strategies.

#### Transitions and mobility

In a similar vein, childminders' transport options appear to be a very practical transition issue for mixed-age groups regarding not just numbers of seats but the right kind of vehicle. What are the implications for childminders and children who walk or rely on public transport, in urban and rural areas? This question raises resourcing implications for childminders.

#### Diversity

Given that caregiving practices are shaped by cultural and ecological contexts, as highlighted by ecocultural theory, differences in cultural caregiving practices between childminders and families may significantly influence the quality of care and relationship-building. Home-based childminding offers a unique lens to explore these dynamics. While this research could not explore such dynamics, future research could investigate how childminders and families navigate differences in cultural caregiving practices, routines, and values. Such studies could examine strategies for negotiation,

adaptation, and mutual understanding, and explore their impact on child well-being and relationships and partnerships in diverse communities.

## Conclusions

This research report explored children's and childminders' perspectives and experiences of mixed-age groups of children in Childminding settings in Ireland. The findings have provided new insights into and evidence of what children's experiences and pedagogical practice for mixed-age groups look like in home-based settings.

This research could benefit children who attend both home and centre-based Early Years and School Age Care settings, in terms of practice, environments, relationships, and interactions. For this reason, implications are practice-based actions addressed to childminders, educators, practitioners, and managers working with mixed-age groups. The implications are relevant to professionals beyond Childminding, because mixed-age groupings of children are also present in centre-based settings. As suggested by Hicban et al. (2025, p. 372), the implication is that centre-based ECEC managers and educators could 'consider how a more diverse-age environment might enrich the experiences of all children'.

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