

Choosing Childcare and Early Education: Information for Parents



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About This Booklet

This booklet for parents is intended to give information which will be helpful in making choices about your child's early years care and education.

- **It provides background information on Early Years – the organisation for young children, the lead organisation promoting the development of high quality early years provision throughout Northern Ireland.**
- **It contains a range of information outlining the types of provision that might be available and what they should provide.**
- **It gives information on the statutory regulations.**
- **It provides information on the Government Pre-School Education Expansion Programme.**
- **It outlines the importance of early years education which promotes the child's potential through a relevant broad based play curriculum.**
- **It makes suggestions on what parents should look for in a high quality early years setting.**

Most importantly this booklet acknowledges parents as the prime educators of their children and recognises that all parents will want to choose the best possible early years setting for their children.

Early Years Vision and Values

Our Vision

Children are:

- **Strong, competent and visible in their communities**
- **Physically and emotionally healthy**
- **Eager and able to learn**
- **Respectful of difference**

Our Values

We believe in:

- **Childhood - in its own right**
- **Listening to children – and those who care for them**
- **A strong voice for children**
- **Play, fun and creativity**
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- **Parenting**
- **Participation**
- **Community**
- **Partnership**
- **Inclusion and diversity**
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- **Excellence and evidence-based innovation**
- **Effective stewardship and governance**
- **A professional, committed and recognised workforce**
- **Valuing staff, members and their commitment**

About Early Years - the organisation for young children

Early Years is the largest organisation in Northern Ireland for young children. We are a non-profit making organisation and have been working since 1965 to promote high quality childcare for children aged 0-12 and their families.

On 1 November 2007 we changed our name from NIPPA to Early Years - the organisation for young children. When we started our work in 1965, NIPPA stood for Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association, but as our work developed, we realised that this did not fully reflect all that we do so we changed our name to NIPPA - the early years organisation. In 2005 we realised that our work had moved on again and after consultation with members and stakeholders, we voted to change our name to Early Years - the organisation for young children.

Currently Early Years provides information and training for parents, childcare providers, employers and local authorities. We hope this document will help you to find out more about early childcare and education.



Types of Early Years Provision

Early years provision is an umbrella term which is used to describe a range of different services providing care and education for young children.

In Northern Ireland early years provision is regulated through legislation; either under the Children (NI) Order (1995) or the relevant Education Regulations and DENI Circulars and Policies.

The range of early years provision is outlined in this information booklet and gives details of:

- ages of children
- adult/child ratios
- qualifications of staff
- relevant regulatory bodies
- cost to parents



Crèche

Crèche facilities provide a time-limited daycare option for parents and carers of young children and are mostly used by parents and carers attending education courses or other training. They can also provide parents and carers with the opportunity to take part in social or recreational activities.

Crèche facilities can operate in a range of settings for example an education centre, shopping centre, leisure centre or church hall.

The opening hours of the crèche may be flexible to meet the changing needs of parents and carers.

Ages of children: Crèches usually include a wide age range of children from young babies upwards.

Adult/child ratios: The recommended staffing ratios to ensure adequate staff cover are:

- 1 adult per 3 babies aged 0-2 years
- 1 adult per 4 children aged 2-3 years
- 1 adult per 8 children aged 3-12 years

Qualifications of staff: Crèches may be staffed by either paid staff or volunteers. There are no minimum qualification requirements.

Regulatory body: Crèches which care for children for more than two hours a day must be registered by the local Health and Social Care Trust.

Each setting will have an annual inspection by Trust personnel to ensure they are maintaining the registration requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. These reports should be available to parents.

Staff are required to have both health and police checks, which are carried out by Social Services.

Cost to parents: Some crèches may be provided free, for example, as a service to those attending training. More usually there is a small cost for parents.

Parent and Toddler Group

Parent and toddler groups are for parents and carers and their young children. The main aim is to provide a pleasant and supportive environment for parents and a stimulating play environment for babies and toddlers. Most groups aim to strike a balance between the adults' and the children's needs.

Parents and carers go along with their children often joining in the fun and making lasting friendships. The group usually meets in the morning once a week. Although this will vary from group to group, most will provide opportunities for:

- babies to play and explore in a safe area;
- free play with a good range of toys including larger equipment;
- a craft activity that may involve cutting, sticking or painting;
- singing time often at the end of a session to allow for clearing away of toys;
- a refreshment break for adults and children.

Ages of children: Under 4s with parents/carers

Adult/child ratios: These groups are parent run and the parent/guardian is responsible for looking after their own children. In addition to this:

- Some groups have a rota system with parents taking it in turns to set up, clear away and make refreshments.
- Most groups will have a main organiser who will welcome you and introduce you to the group.

Qualifications of staff: Some groups are run by:

- A committee of parents elected at an AGM who share the responsibility for its organisation.
- Church members leaving parents and carers free to enjoy time with their children.
- Children's centres, family centres or the local pre-school or nursery with staff on hand to offer support and advice if needed.

Regulatory body: These groups do not require registration with Social Services as parents are all present and responsible for looking after their children.

Cost to parents: There is usually a small fee to cover refreshments, insurance and equipment costs.

Pre-School Playgroup

A Pre-school Playgroup is a facility which provides early years education and care for children for a period of up to four hours a day, usually five days per week. Parents are not normally present during the session although most playgroups include and involve parents on their management committees.

Most playgroups are locally based and locally managed. A good quality Playgroup will provide a safe, well-planned environment, which encourages children to learn through a broad play-based curriculum.

Ages of children: 3-5 year olds

Adult/child ratios: There must be one adult for every eight children with a minimum of two staff members in each playgroup.

Qualifications of staff: Leaders should be qualified to a minimum of NVQ Level III in Early Years Care and Education or hold an equivalent qualification. Assistants should be qualified to a minimum NVQ Level II or equivalent. Early Years settings should recognise the importance of quality, trained staff.

Regulatory body: Playgroups must be registered by the local Health and Social Care Trust. Each setting will have an annual inspection by Trust personnel to ensure they are maintaining the registration requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. These reports should be available to parents. Staff are required to have both health and police checks, which are carried out by Social Services.

Playgroups which are able to offer funded places through the government's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland once in every three to five years. These reports can be accessed from the Department's website www.etini.gov.uk

Cost to parents:

Many playgroups are able to offer funded places through the government's Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (see the *Government Pre-School Education Expansion Programme* below for more information). In groups where funded places are not available, a charge will be made based on the number of sessions the child attends.

Daycare/Day Nursery

Daycare facilities provide an alternative home environment for children for more than four hours per day five days per week. Some include care for children after school hours. Opening hours can vary between 7:30am to 6:30pm.

Ages of children: From six weeks to school age

Adult/child ratios: The recommended staffing ratios to ensure adequate staff cover are:

- 1 adult per 3 babies aged 0-2 years
- 1 adult per 4 children aged 2-3 years
- 1 adult per 8 children aged 3-12 years

Qualifications of staff: Managers must have a relevant qualification, which is recognised by their local Health and Social Care Trust. 50% of daycare staff must be qualified.

Regulatory body: Daycare/Day Nursery facilities must be registered by the local Health and Social Care Trust. Each setting will have an annual inspection by Trust personnel to ensure they are maintaining the registration requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. These reports should be available to parents. Staff are required to have both health and police checks, which are carried out by Social Services.

Settings which are able to offer funded places through the government's Pre-School Education Expansion Programme are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland once in every three to five years. These reports can be accessed from the Department's website www.etini.gov.uk

Cost to parents: Parents have to pay for their child's place.

Some families may be able to access Family Tax Credit which provides support towards daycare fees. Contact Inland Revenue for further details.

However through the government's Pre-school Education Expansion Programme, a number of free part-time places are available for children aged 3-4 years

Nursery Schools and Nursery Classes

A nursery school is a facility which accepts children for a period of 2.5 hours per day up to five days per week. Some nursery schools offer a full-time placement (five hours).

Nursery classes are part of primary school. They accept children for a period of 2.5 hours per day up to five days per week.

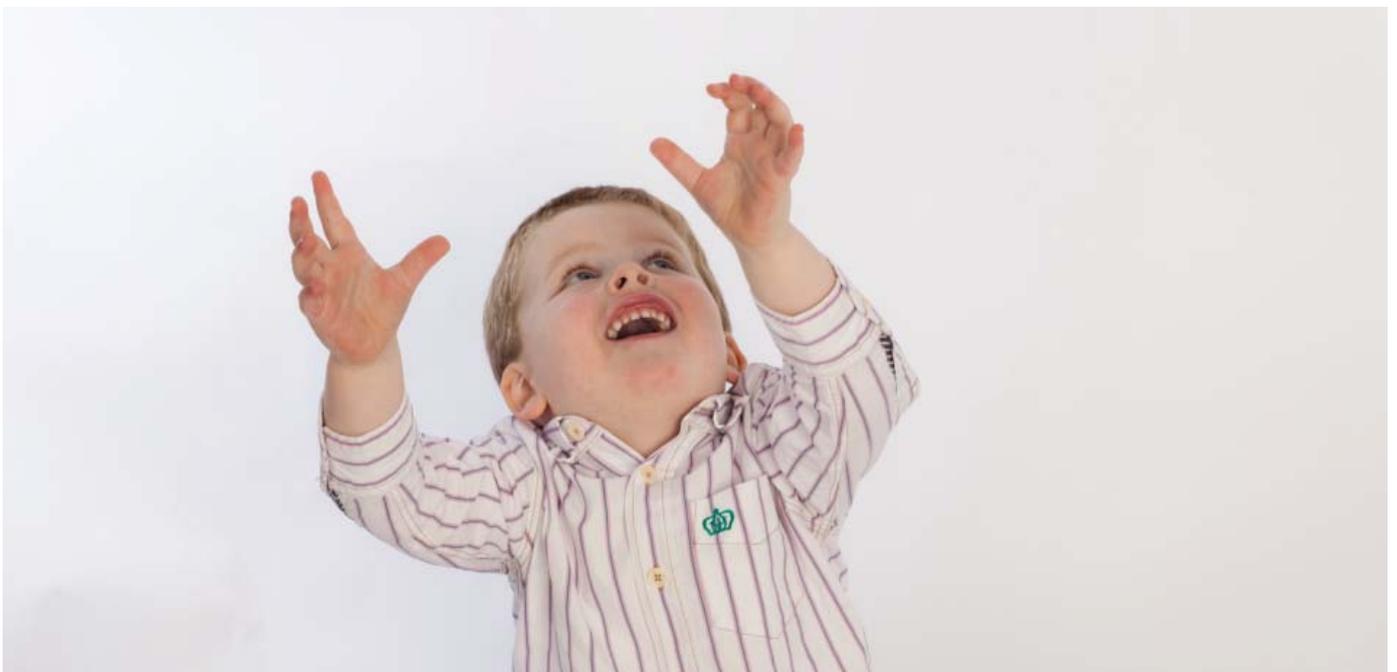
Ages of children: 3-4 year olds

Adult/child ratios: There must be one adult for every 13 children.

Qualifications of staff: Nursery schools and classes are staffed by qualified teachers and assistants.

Regulatory body: Nursery Schools and Nursery Classes operate under the local Education and Library Board. They are inspected by the Education and Training Inspectorate Northern Ireland once in every three to five years. These reports can be accessed from the Department's website www.etini.gov.uk

Cost to parents: Free to parents



Out of School Care

Out of School care can be a breakfast club, an after-school club, or a holiday scheme.

A breakfast club is a place where children can be dropped off before school, usually from 7.30 am or 8.00 am, and enjoy breakfast together.

An after-school club is a place for children to go after the school day is finished usually from 2.00pm to 6.00pm. The club may be in your child's school, another local school or different premises. After-school clubs provide opportunities for fun activities such as games, sport and craft activities. Some After-school clubs provide computers and also allow time for children to do their homework.

A holiday scheme operates in the school holidays and offers groups of children a range of organised activities, from art and crafts to outings. They are usually open between 8.30am and 6.00pm.

Ages of children: Children are usually aged between 4 and 11 years

Adult/child ratios: The minimum adult/child ratios are:

- One adult for every eight children aged 4-8
- One adult for every ten children aged 8-11

Qualifications of staff: Managers must have a relevant qualification, which is recognised by their local Social Services Trust. 50% of staff must be qualified.

Regulatory body: After-school clubs that care for children for more than two hours a day must be registered by the local Health and Social Care Trust. Each setting will have an annual inspection by Trust personnel to ensure they are maintaining the registration requirements of the Children (NI) Order 1995. These reports should be available to parents. Staff are required to have both health and police checks, which are carried out by Social Services.

Childminder

A registered childminder is a self-employed person who looks after one or more children under the age of 12, providing care and learning opportunities for other people's children within a domestic setting.

Ages of children: From birth to 12 years of age

Qualifications of staff: Childminders need wide knowledge about children's development and how to meet the needs of children of a wide variety of ages, cultures and family backgrounds. It is strongly recommended that Childminders attend a pre-registration course.

Regulatory body: Registered childminders are self-employed daycare providers who work in their own home to provide care and education for other people's children within a family setting. Unlike nannies and au pairs, they are inspected and registered by Social Services on a regular basis.

Registered childminders may be registered to care for up to six children between the ages of 0 to 12 years of age (including their own children). Only registered childminding is eligible for the Childcare Element of the Working Tax Credit for working parents.

A childminder **MUST BY LAW** register with the local Health and Social Services Trust. The purpose of registration is:

- To protect children.
- To provide reassurance to parents using childcare.
- To ensure that childminding services meet acceptable standards.

To achieve registration, a childminder is required to comply with standards of safety, equipment, numbers of children, etc. The home environment is checked to ensure that it meets the standards required and that it is suitable to care for children. References and health checks are required as are criminal record checks on all individuals in the household over the age of 10.

The Government Pre-School Education Expansion Programme

These requirements are currently under review and any changes will be made public by the Department of Education (visit www.deni.gov.uk for further details).

What is the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme?

The programme's objective is to provide one year of free pre-school education to every child whose parents want to avail of it.

All places made available under the programme will be part-time usually lasting 2.5 hours per day for up to five days per week over a 38 week period (ie the school year from September to June).

What is a Pre-School Education Advisory Group?

The programme is planned and implemented at local level by a Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG) in each of the five Education and Library Board areas. Each PEAG includes representatives from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors and is chaired by an officer or member of the Education and Library Board. PEAGs have overlapping membership with Childcare Partnerships.

Where is it available?

Free pre-school education places are available in a range of centres including nursery schools, nursery classes/units in primary schools and voluntary and private playgroups and day nurseries which are part of the Expansion Programme (these centres may also offer places for which parents pay).

All settings in the programme will be open for inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

Meals and Snacks

- All food should be healthy and varied.
- If your child has a special diet, suitable food should be available.
- If your child doesn't like certain food, this should be taken into account at snack times.
- The Early Years Workers should eat with the children and it should be made enjoyable.

The Importance of Play

Young children learn all the time from everything that happens to them and around them. The quality of their experiences and how they are assisted in understanding them promotes their development.

Children benefit from good quality early years experience, it enriches their learning potential and encourages their all around development.

Play is the natural way in which children learn. It is the way in which they explore the world. A group of children playing together with building blocks may learn to:

- Use spoken language to plan, organise, negotiate and agree.
- Develop their imagination.
- Count, recognise and compare sizes and shapes.
- Solve practical problems.
- Co-operate with each other.

It is important that children are encouraged to be 'active learners' – to find out about their world.

This means that play activities must be organised and offered to children in a way which promotes this exploration in a safe environment, where their learning opportunities are supported by adults who understand their needs.

Early Years – the organisation for young children supports the development of a broad-based play curriculum in its member groups.



High Quality Early Years Settings

Benefits

- A high quality early years setting will encourage a child's all around development – physical, intellectual, creative, social, moral and emotional.
- Children make progress when they are interested and involved in what they are doing.
- Children learn to concentrate if they are not interrupted in the middle of an absorbing activity.
- Children can recognise their own racial background, culture, social and family life in their surroundings and activities, where they are treated with understanding and respect. At the same time, they learn to understand and respect people who are different from themselves.
- Boys and girls are equally encouraged to develop initiative and their self-confidence grows through solving problems, making choices and taking responsibility.
- Children work and play on their own and also co-operate with one another.
- Children have a chance to see and do fresh things every week. They go on local outings and interesting visitors come to see them.
- Children with disabilities are included as part of the group and have extra support to meet their needs.

Features

- Each child is valued as an individual whatever their race, sex or other differences.
- Children can develop at their own rate.
- Skilled early years workers and teachers plan ways for children to learn. They support and guide them, monitor their progress and assess their achievements.
- Care and education always go together.
- A positive attitude to learning is valued as much as what is taught.
- Children learn through playing creatively and talking about their experiences.
- Care and protection are balanced with opportunities for being adventurous and developing a sense of independence.
- Parents and early years staff work together and share responsibility for a child's education.

Choosing a Setting

Being Made Welcome

- You should always find a welcoming atmosphere.
- You and your child should both be greeted and welcomed personally.
- If your child has special educational or medical needs, the staff should have the knowledge and skills to give the support needed.
- You should be offered the opportunity to stay with your child, especially while they are settling in.

Staff and Children

- The adults should enjoy being with the children and take an interest in their ideas and activities.
- All early years workers should provide warm attention to each child and treat them sensitively if they are upset.
- There should be evidence of the children talking with the adults and adults listening carefully, allowing plenty of time for children to explain themselves and give thoughtful replies.
- Early years workers should always speak calmly and quietly and explain the routines clearly and check that the children understand.
- Early years workers should give positive encouragement for good behaviour, and notice when a child tries hard.

Premises and Safety

- The premises should be bright, attractive, well kept, airy, with good natural light.
- The children should have a quiet, comfortable area in which to relax and rest.
- There should be enough indoor space for children to do large-scale building and to work at different levels – on the floor, at a table or easel.
- The toilets should be nearby and easy for children to use on their own. Toilet and kitchen areas should be clean and hygienic.
- The windows and doors should be childproof. Doors, gates and fences should always be secure. All early years workers should know where children are at all times.
- Only properly authorised people should be allowed to collect your child.
- If the early years workers have to clear everything away every day, this should not limit the activities they can provide for the children.
- There should be clear procedures for emergency medical treatment.
- The early years workers should carry out fire drills and maintain the fire equipment regularly.

Choosing a Setting (continued)

Books, Equipment and Materials

The books, displays and play equipment should reflect different races, cultures and lifestyles. Children should have the opportunity to learn about their own and other cultures through art, books, music and other activities.

The following should be easily available for children to use:

- Illustrated story books and factual books.
- Play equipment (indoors and outdoors), including a home corner and dressing-up clothes.
- Equipment for climbing, sliding and balancing.
- Living things to grow, look at and take care of.
- Small world materials such as dolls' house, garage, farm animals and so on, for imaginative play.
- Musical instruments, real and homemade.
- Materials for cutting and sticking, drawing and writing equipment, paint.
- Sand, water and clay with different tools.
- Woodwork and junk materials.
- Different kinds of bricks and blocks including Lego, Duplo and so on.
- Resources for science and technology.
- Table-top games and puzzles.



Early Years Accreditation Schemes

Early Years operates three accreditation schemes:

- **Early Years Accreditation for pre-school playgroups.**
- **All Ireland Centre of Excellence for daycare groups.**
- **High/Scope accreditation for groups delivering the HighScope curriculum.**

Settings which wish to work towards Accreditation follow a self-evaluative and reflective process which is assessed against standards. Strengths and areas for improvement are first identified through reflective practice and action planning is then promoted in order to monitor progress and raise quality.

Accreditation focuses on the importance of play using a child-centred approach. It ensures that equality is integral with quality in promoting positive expectations of children. Involving and consulting with children and families in the promotion of healthy eating and healthy living and general wellbeing encourages multidisciplinary working and partnerships in the safeguarding of children.

Developed in line with International Research on Best Practice in Early Years Care and Education, the Accreditation process ensures that service providers can have external verification on the high quality nature of their provision.

Staff and Parents

- Parents should have the opportunity to arrange a convenient time and place for a quiet private discussion about anything to do with their own child.
- Parents should have the opportunity to talk about family events which could affect their child.
- There should be arrangements to contact parents in an emergency, or if a child becomes, or continues to be, really upset.
- Parents should be aware of any records which are kept on each child's progress. Parents should be able to see their child's records and be involved in collating the information about their child.
- Parents should be consulted about arrangements, events and activities.
- If parents are interested in helping to run the group, they should have the opportunity to join a parents' rota or management committee.

early years

the organisation for young children

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