



Each framework has a clear and specific purpose. *Síolta* focuses on all facets of quality within ECCE settings including learning and development while *Aistear* helps adults provide appropriately challenging, positive and enjoyable learning experiences for children from birth to six years. In fulfilling these purposes, each framework plays a role in promoting and enhancing quality provision on a national level. In this way, the frameworks complement and support each other.

With regard to the targeted age range, both frameworks focus on children aged birth to six years and both distinguish the age groups within this range similarly:

- Babies - birth to 18 months;
- Toddlers - 12 to 36 months;
- Young children - 2½ - 6 years.

Both frameworks are directed at practitioners who have responsibility for the care and education of children within the age range birth to six and both can be used in all early years' services. *Aistear* also supports parents in their role as educators.

Table 1: Comparison of *Síolta* and *Aistear*: Purpose, audience and children

Framework	Purpose	Age	Early years settings	Audience
<i>Síolta</i>	Improve the overall quality of early childhood services for children and families.	Birth-6 years	Early years settings including infant classes in primary school	Practitioners who care for and educate children from birth to six years. Other professionals who work with children and their families
<i>Aistear</i>	To provide challenging and enjoyable	Birth-6 years	All early years settings including children's own	All adults who care for and educate children from birth to six

	experiences so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with others.		homes and infant classes in primary school	years—parents and practitioners. Other professionals who work with children and their families
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Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework is based on 12 principles and celebrates early childhood as a time of being, and of enjoying and learning from experiences as they unfold. This early learning also lays important foundations for later learning. Because early childhood marks the beginning of children’s lifelong learning journeys, this framework is called Aistear, the Irish word for journey.

Principles of early learning and development

Aistear is based on 12 principles of early learning and development. These are presented in three groups:

1. The first group concerns children and their lives in early childhood: The child’s uniqueness, equality and diversity - children as citizens.
2. The second group concerns children’s connections with others: Relationships, parents, family and community - the adult’s role.
3. The third group concerns how children learn and develop: Holistic learning and development, active learning, play and hands-on experiences, relevant and meaningful experiences, communication and language - the learning environment.

Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the principle from the child’s perspective. This explanation highlights the adult’s role in supporting children’s early learning and development.

Purpose of Aistear

Aistear is the curriculum framework for children from birth to six years in Ireland. It provides information for adults to help them plan for and provide enjoyable and challenging learning experiences, so that all children can grow and develop as competent and confident learners within loving relationships with others. *Aistear* describes the types of learning (dispositions, values and attitudes, skills, knowledge, and understanding) that are important for children in their early years, and offers ideas and suggestions as to how this learning might be nurtured. The Framework also provides guidelines on supporting children's learning through partnerships with parents, interactions, play, and assessment.

In supporting children's early learning and development *Aistear*;

- identifies what and how children should learn, and describes the types of experiences that can support this,
- makes connections in children's learning throughout the early childhood years and as they move from one setting to another,
- supports parents as their children's primary educators during early childhood, and promotes effective partnerships between parents and practitioners,
- complements and extends existing curriculums and materials,
- Informs practice across a range of settings, disciplines and professions, and encourages interdisciplinary work.

Síolta Principles

As a means to articulate the framework and to focus the actions and activities of Síolta, 16 standards were developed to encompass the ethos.

1. **Rights of the child:** Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.
2. **Environments:** Enriching environments, both indoor and outdoor (including materials and equipment) are well maintained, safe, available, accessible, adaptable, developmentally appropriate, and offer a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.

3. **Parents and Families:** Valuing and involving parents and families requires a proactive partnership approach evidenced by a range of clearly stated, accessible and implemented processes, policies and procedures.
4. **Consultation:** Ensuring inclusive decision-making requires consultation that promotes participation and seeks out, listens to and acts upon the views and opinions of children, parents and staff, and other stakeholders, as appropriate.
5. **Interactions:** Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/adult) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.
6. **Play:** Promoting play requires that each child has ample time to engage in freely available and accessible, developmentally appropriate and well-resourced opportunities for exploration, creativity and 'meaning making' in the company of other children, with participating and supportive adults and alone, where appropriate.
7. **Curriculum:** Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.
8. **Planning and Evaluation:** Enriching and informing all aspects of practice within the setting requires cycles of observation, planning, action and evaluation, undertaken on a regular basis.
9. **Health and Welfare:** Promoting the health and welfare of the child requires protection from harm, provision of nutritious food, appropriate opportunities for rest, and secure relationships characterised by trust and respect.
10. **Organisation:** Organising and managing resources effectively requires an agreed written philosophy, supported by clearly communicated policies and procedures to guide and determine practice.

11. **Professional Practice:** Practising in a professional manner requires that individuals have skills, knowledge, values and attitudes appropriate to their role and responsibility within the setting. In addition, it requires regular reflection upon practice and engagement in supported, on-going professional development.
12. **Communication:** Communicating effectively in the best interests of the child requires policies, procedures and actions that promote the proactive sharing of knowledge and information among appropriate stakeholders, with respect and confidentiality.
13. **Transitions:** Ensuring continuity of experiences for children requires policies, procedures and practice that promote sensitive management of transitions, consistency in key relationships, liaison within and between settings, the keeping and transfer of relevant information (with parental consent), and the close involvement of parents and, where appropriate, relevant professionals.
14. **Identity and Belonging:** Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practice that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self- and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.
15. **Legislation and Regulation:** Being compliant requires that all relevant regulations and legislative requirements are met or exceeded.
16. **Community Involvement:** Promoting community involvement requires the establishment of networks and connections evidenced by policies, procedures and actions which extend and support all adult's and children's engagement with the wider community.

Early childhood is a significant and distinct time in life that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported in its own right. Early childhood, the period from birth to six years, is a significant and unique time in the life of every individual. Every child needs and has the right to positive experiences in early childhood. As with every other phase in life, positive supports and adequate resources are necessary to

make the most of this period. Provision of such supports and resources should not be conditional on the expectations of the economy, society or other interests. The child's individuality, strengths, rights and needs are central in the provision of quality early childhood experiences.

The child is an active agent in her/his own development through her/his interactions with the world. These interactions are motivated by the individual child's abilities, interests, previous experiences and desire for independence. Each child is a competent learner from birth and quality early years experiences can support each child to realise their full potential. Provision of these experiences must reflect and support the child's strengths, needs and interests. Children have the right to be listened to and have their views on issues that affect them heard, valued and responded to.

Parents are the primary educators of the child and have a pre-eminent role in promoting her/his well-being, learning and development.

Quality early childhood care and education must value and support the role of parents. Open, honest and respectful partnership with parents is essential in promoting the best interests of the child. Mutual partnership contributes to establishing harmony and continuity between the diverse environments the child experiences in the early years. The development of connections and interactions between the early childhood setting, parents, the extended family and the wider community also adds to the enrichment of early childhood experiences by reflecting the environment in which the child lives and grows.

Responsive, sensitive and reciprocal relationships, which are consistent over time, are essential to the wellbeing, learning and development of the young child.

The relationships that the child forms within her/his immediate and extended environment from birth will significantly influence her/his well-being, development and learning. These relationships are two-way and include adults, peers, family and the extended community. Positive relationships, which are secure, responsive and respectful and which provide consistency and continuity over time, are the cornerstone of the child's well-being.

Equality is an essential characteristic of quality early childhood care and education. Equality, as articulated in Article 2 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and in the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, is a fundamental characteristic of quality early childhood care and education provision. It is a critical prerequisite for supporting the optimal development of all children in Ireland. It requires that the individual needs and abilities of each child are recognised and supported from birth towards the realisation of her/his unique potential. This means that all children should be able to gain access to, participate in, and benefit from early years services on an equal basis.

Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.

Diversity is a term which is generally used to describe differences in individuals by virtue of gender, age, skin colour, language, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, religion, race or other background factors such as family structure, economic circumstances, etc. Quality early childhood environments should demonstrate respect for diversity through promoting a sense of belonging for all children within the cultural heritage of Ireland. They should also provide rich and varied experiences which will support children's ability to value social and cultural diversity.

The physical environment of the young child has a direct impact on her/his well-being, learning and development.

The child's experiences in early childhood are positively enhanced by interactions with a broad range of environments. These include the indoor and outdoor, built and natural, home and out-of-home environments. The environment should be high quality and should extend and enrich the child's development and learning. These experiences stimulate curiosity, foster independence and promote a sense of belonging. The development of respect for the environment will also result from such experiences.

The safety, welfare and well-being of all children must be protected and promoted in all early childhood environments.

The promotion of child well-being is a characteristic of a quality environment. This involves the protection of each child from harmful experiences and the promotion of child welfare. Additionally, the opportunity to form trusting relationships with adults and other children is a key characteristic of quality. Promotion of safety should not prevent the child from having a rich and varied array of experiences in line with her/his age and stage of development.

The role of the adult in providing quality early childhood experiences is fundamental. Quality early childhood practice is built upon the unique role of the adult. The competencies, qualifications, dispositions and experience of adults, in addition to their capacity to reflect upon their role, are essential in supporting and ensuring quality experiences for each child. This demanding and central role in the life of the young child needs to be appropriately resourced, supported and valued.

The provision of quality early childhood experiences requires cooperation, communication and mutual respect.

Teamwork is a vital component of quality in early childhood care and education. It is the expression of cooperative, coordinated practice in any setting. Shared knowledge and understanding clearly communicated among the team within the setting; with and among other professionals involved with the child; and with the parents is a prerequisite of quality practice and reflects a "whole-child perspective". This also ensures the promotion of respectful working relationships among all adults supporting the well-being, learning and development of the child. Such teamwork, coordination and communication must be valued, supported and resourced by an appropriate infrastructure at local, regional and national levels.

Pedagogy in early childhood is expressed by curricula or programmes of activities which take a holistic approach to the development and learning of the child and reflect the inseparable nature of care and education.

Pedagogy is a term that is used to refer to the whole range of interactions which support the child's development. It takes a holistic approach by embracing both care and education. It acknowledges the wide range of relationships and experiences within which development takes place and recognises the connections between them. It also supports the concept of the child as an active learner. Such pedagogy

must be supported within a flexible and dynamic framework that addresses the learning potential of the 'whole child.' Furthermore, it requires that early childhood practitioners are adequately prepared and supported for its implementation.

Play is central to the well-being, development and learning of the young child. Play is an important medium through which the child interacts with, explores and makes sense of the world around her/his. These interactions with, for example, other children, adults, materials, events and ideas, are key to the child's well-being, development and learning. Play is a source of joy and fulfilment for the child. It provides an important context and opportunity to enhance and optimise quality early childhood experiences. As such, play will be a primary focus in quality early childhood settings.