

This article identifies the value of the free Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme and explains areas where improvement would be welcome from a parent's perspective. It illustrates how the curriculum met the evolving needs of a preschooler who loves hedgehogs, and it documents a parent's journey from preschool in America to a community-based ECCE programme in rural Ireland.

The children huddle together on the couch of the preschool; my daughter is in the middle, leading the story on hedgehogs. I hear her cackles ring through the halls; my daughter loves preschool, and she wants to be a scientist. I know as a mother that I made the right decision to send her to preschool in Ireland.

We lived happily in a small apartment in Boston until the pandemic hit and my career as a Celtic singer ended. I had no work, and my return to Ireland was inevitable. I enrolled as a student at the local institute of technology. My first task was to navigate my daughter's care and education.

Finding all the information and figuring out my entitlements regarding the free preschool year and the National Childcare Scheme was a daunting task. Surely a one-stop-shop approach and an available computer for parents to enrol would help remedy the situation and make enrolment easy. Thankfully, a friend guided me through the process. If my first language was not English, I cannot even imagine how it would have gone. Knowing this highlights the need for intervention at school level or a mobile van that offers parents information and help to get services.

Attending preschool became an invaluable source of social, emotional, and educational sustenance for my daughter. She made great friends, and though she couldn't have play dates at home, she had them at school. She shared her new conversations, experiences, and the signposts of loving interactions with staff. She showed off her masterpieces, crafts, new literacy, confidence, and knowledge at home like badges of honour. My daughter adored her preschool teachers, and they were very perceptive of her moods: they knew when she was sick, tired, or full of beans. I always felt that she was safe and her wellbeing was in good hands.

We first came to the topic of inclusion in her preschool. There was a child with special needs in her class, and my daughter gravitated towards her

The Hedgehog and Me

A parent's view of early childhood education and care in Ireland



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wholeheartedly. She learnt to help her in many ways, whether it was walking, playing with her, picking up things that she dropped, being attentive to what she could and could not do, or sincerely reminding other children to watch out for her. Inclusion is an integral stride in our educational system. In these treasured learning moments, children learn that it is okay for people to be different, so she is learning how we all can include everyone at any time.

My daughter comes home with pieces of information about her explorations, such as learning about hedgehogs. She shows me drawings and a burrow made from a tissue box. She tells me they eat so many slugs that Granny would love them. She makes connections to Granny going out with the torch every night to ward off the slugs from the strawberries, to the hedgehogs being Granny's best friend because they keep the slugs away. This illustrates that critical thinking has become a major part of her learning and development.

My first encounter with Aistear, the early childhood curriculum framework, was because of my daughter's interest in hedgehogs at her preschool. As a curious parent, I researched the video aimed at parental guidance to find out more. It took me a while to understand the curriculum. Expecting templates home, I was in for a surprise; my daughter's art was authentic and free-flowing, expressing the idea of a hedgehog.

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Everything clicked when I compared her work at the beginning of the year with the end-of-year offerings: this showed the progression of her skills, as the eyes on her hedgehog were perfectly aligned. The learning story about the hedgehog and photographs of making the burrow on the preschool wall shed light on my understanding of the curriculum; my child's interests are honoured.

Preschool teachers are truly amazing human beings, and their role deserves more respect in the community. My admiration and gratitude for my daughter's level of care and education are tremendous. Sometimes I have wondered how the teachers get to meet the needs of every child in the class, as the class sizes were quite big for preschool.

During the height of the pandemic, I laughed when my daughter instructed me on the way to wash my hands. 'No, Mummy, you put water on your hands first and then soap,' she exclaimed. I laughed to myself. Who is the parent now? The influence of my daughter's education is evident when I hear her sing a new song, use a new turn of phrase, and say, 'Look what I learnt today, Mummy.' Just seeing my child beaming with the sheer joy of preschool experience gives me great pride in Ireland's early-years education.

Sadly, because of Covid-19, there was no avenue for my daughter to meet other children or have play dates except at school. Probably one of the positive things that came out of the pandemic is transitions. Dropping her at the school gate meant she understood that she was in school once she entered. It helped avoid the teary goodbyes or tantrum episodes, and I am guessing the peaceful transition was less disruptive for other children in the class, as they tend to mimic the behaviour they see.

To my delight, as I am very conscious of what my daughter eats, her preschool room took a strong stand on nutrition and was strict on treats and sugary drinks. She savours every minute of preschool and gives off if I pick her up before tea at 3 p.m. Her previous preschool in Boston provided all the snacks and drinks, so in Ireland I got in the groove of searching out healthy snacks for her lunchbox. Sometimes I wonder if parents should pay a little more for a healthy snack at school instead of the bounty of lunchboxes lining the hallway. Friday is 'treat day', and my daughter reminds me to put her favourite snack in the lunchbox. Healthy eating in young children is known to have long-lasting implications for adult health.

One of the most surprising leaps forward in education in Ireland is outdoor play. Meeting my daughter outside, weather permitting, made me feel she was healthy and getting ample opportunities to run off steam. Seeing the level of activities outside amazes me, and I believe that Covid-19 may have helped propel outdoor activities for the better. I love to see her riding the red bikes and engaging in risky play. I believe we can and should do more of this; nothing beats fresh air for a child's wellbeing. Having an element of risky play is important, as it helps children take calculated risks and builds their resilience.

It has been a difficult year in terms of communication, presenting challenges for parents and teachers. Life is busy with a child; I drop her off, uttering a few words to her teacher, and dash to work. I would love more opportunities to have in-depth conversations with the preschool teachers about my daughter's learning and development. Not to overburden them with an extra workload, but if more resources could be allocated to working with parents, I believe the results would speak for themselves.

In America, the teachers held a conference with parents about each child's development before the mid-term break. The preschool gave us a development assessment form to fill out with our child over two weeks, and they gave us a kit to work with the child. The survey aims to identify if the child needs help with fine motor skills, so that the parent can work at home with the child. I found this approach beneficial, where the preschool teacher related the area of learning that I could and should work on with my daughter.

It was hard to go from the Saturday morning playgroups, meeting all the parents in Boston, to knowing no one in Ireland. I remember the vibe when I came to the preschool, and it had a great atmosphere. Unfortunately, parents needed a mask and rarely entered the gates, so making friends with them was challenging. Parents need more opportunities to meet, converse with, or make friends with other parents – perhaps a pizza night in the schoolyard, or offering more support to parents with their child's curriculum. My heart goes out to parents from other countries trying to fit in and do the best for their children; there are a lot of missed opportunities to include them.

Thinking about Boston, I miss the Saturday playgroup and meeting with parents for coffee and bagels. Still, I do not miss the traffic, the rushing

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around, and the steep price tag attached to preschool education. Early childhood education in Ireland is on the right track – I attribute a great deal of my daughter’s learning and development to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Improvements in parent–teacher and parent–parent relationships would greatly benefit us as a community, as would improvements in intervention services available at school level.

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Through the past year’s experience, I realised that the ECCE is a vital free programme and made my transition from abroad to home possible and worthwhile. Now I get to spend quality time with my daughter and support her love of hedgehogs. The learning journals are a wonderful form of communication, documenting her journey through preschool. We spend magical evenings sitting by the fire, looking at the photos and drawings that she loves, and talking about her accomplishments as a preschooler.

Today she wants to be a scientist, and who knows what she will want to be tomorrow, but the one thing I know is that she is engaged in a quality curriculum that takes heed of her evolving interests: hedgehogs. The ECCE program builds her self-esteem, creating awareness of the world around her, exploring new things, and most of all making great friends in her community. As a parent, I am grateful that she has quality interactions with all her dedicated teachers in a supportive environment and a wonderful community-based ECCE programme in rural Ireland.

