

Voice of the Provider: Post-Covid-19 Practice in Early Childhood Education

Positive changes made in our setting because of the pandemic



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This article offers insights into the changes introduced in an early years education setting as a result of Covid-19 and related restrictions. It reflects on the impact of these changes, which include outdoor learning and a strict infectious-disease policy, and describes the positive response from parents and children.

Introduction

After qualifying as a Montessori teacher from St. Nicholas Montessori College, Ireland, in 2009, I started my early years education career in a lovely nursery school in London. I stayed there for five years before returning to Ireland, where I worked as a room leader in the Montessori room in a very busy crèche in Mayo. The opportunity then arose for me to run my own early years setting in my home county of Wexford, where I am now the owner and manager of Little Breeches Preschool & Montessori.

Covid-19 has had a huge impact on the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector in Ireland. Having come through this difficult time for early years practitioners, children, and their families, I think many positives have come from the changes that were implemented in all early years education settings across Ireland to help us overcome the global pandemic that we found on our doorstep.

In early 2021, when we were preparing to reopen our setting, many documents and advice were circulated to all providers of early years education in Ireland. These documents, checklists, and forms became the basis for how we would operate upon reopening. They helped guide us in the right direction, so that we could do our utmost to keep the children and their families safe, as well as the practitioners and all staff linked to our setting.

When we reopened in March 2021, did we think we would still be carrying through the changes we implemented now, near the end of 2022? I imagine that most providers would say no, but here we are. A lot of the changes we made have had a very positive impact on our setting, and I believe that many settings would feel the same as we do.

Dealing with staffing issues

Little Breeches Preschool & Montessori is a play-based sessional preschool with strong elements of the Montessori philosophy. It is a warm, supportive, and inclusive environment that strives to allow children to be independent and explore their needs and interests. We place the children at the heart of all we do.

Because of our small setting, we were lucky that 'play pods' were never something we had to explore as a result of the restrictions and guidelines, so we did not have to stress about setting up pods or staffing them. However, as a small setting, we did not have the staff to cover some sessions because of Covid-19. This was the case for many providers, as Covid-19 often spread from staff member to staff member, leaving us with no other option than to close for a day or two, which was very stressful at the time.

But having come through the pandemic, I have learnt not to stress over issues that are out of my control. If I have a staffing issue now, I know that this is okay and if we need to close for a day, that is exactly what we do. Thankfully, we have very understanding parents! A good positive to take from a very testing time.

Embracing outdoor learning

The amazing outdoor area and garden that surrounds us was a lifesaver during the early days of reopening, and we have developed a real appreciation for it. Our outdoor area is vast and contains many beautiful features that

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develop a sense of wonder and awe in the children. It also helps them build their investigational, social, and physical skills.

Based on the public health guidelines, we spent most of our sessions outdoors in early 2021. We brought aspects of the indoors out and made the children feel that we had extended our classroom to the outdoors. This is something we continued even when restrictions were lifted. We spend 75 per cent of our session outside now, much to the children's delight. Their learning and development have become very natural, and their interests and needs have become more obvious to us as practitioners.

As we enter winter, we have found that the children's health has benefitted from the time spent outside. The level of sickness is lower than before Covid-19, and the children's increased energy levels and desire to learn from their exploration are very noticeable. Parents and children have supported this adaptation being continued and are positive about the impact it is making. One parent said:

Having such a fantastic space outdoors and utilising it, especially during the height of the pandemic, made me feel at ease with my child attending and his health and wellbeing being looked after. I thought this

helped with keeping Covid-19 numbers in the setting down and helped to stop the spread of Covid-19. I am still so pleased to see that the setting has continued with this and they spend a large amount of their session outdoors.

Building trust with parents

We have continued to have the children dropped off to the gate, rather than to the inside door, which has benefitted the children's confidence and independence coming into the setting. Under a watchful eye, the children enter the garden independently and enter their session with ease and very little resistance. Parents have spoken about the ease of this transition and the benefits that they see for themselves and their child. One parent said:

It is wonderful how she can enter the garden with such enthusiasm every day. She does not look for help with her bag or reassurance in going in. She adapted to this change with ease, and it has benefitted her overall confidence and self-esteem. It has also made my life much easier, and I do not have to hang around for 10–15 minutes now every morning.

One of the difficulties that all settings faced during the Covid-19 restrictions was how we had to be very observant of the developing symptoms of the virus, and alert to the children's changes during their time with us. Being strict with parents, and having to ask them to collect a child for a symptom that may have been overlooked, was very hard – not only on us, the practitioners, but also on the children and families. But it is something we have continued to monitor closely, and we have continued to implement a strict infectious-disease policy.

Has this strict policy reduced the spread of common colds and coughs that children get every winter? Perhaps not, but I feel it has continued to boost the confidence that parents have in us to keep their children safe and healthy while in our setting. It has led to most parents being more vigilant of their child's overall wellbeing now, and they are still cautious when deciding whether to send their child to preschool if they are unwell or displaying any symptoms. We have also continued with our hand hygiene and coughing and sneezing etiquette. This has become second nature to the children, and I think they will be a generation who will never forget how to follow good personal hygiene, especially around others.

When Covid restrictions were in place and social distancing was a major factor, we encouraged parents to book an appointment with us if they wished to speak to us about their child or any issues that may have arisen. Obviously, day-to-day information was passed on to the parent or caregiver, but we discouraged conversations at the gate that may have required more time or attention. We have also continued to adapt and carry through this change in our setting. We have found that it has improved communication

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between the practitioners and the parents, and it has helped us to overcome problems seamlessly and comfortably.

Listening to little voices

We asked our group of children whether they could identify what changes we made because of Covid-19 and what they felt were the best changes to our school. The answers included: 'We cough into our elbow so our friends do not get sick', 'We have to wash our hands *all* the time!', 'We get to play outside when we come to school', and 'I love that we can run down the hill when we come to school.'

We are so grateful that children are resilient, strong, and brave and that they always look to the positives of every situation. We learnt so much from the children in our school when weathering the storm of a pandemic that rocked our country. Simple guidance and flexibility were required when steering them through the changes to our routine and procedures, but by the end, it was the children who steered us in the right direction. They showed us that the changes and adaptations we had made to our school were positive and have made us develop into a stronger setting where the children's wellbeing is the main focus.

Some changes due to COVID identified by the children:

"We cough into our elbow so that our friend won't get sick."

"We have to wash our hands all the time!"

"We get to play outside when we come to school."

"I love that we can run down the hill when we come to school."
