

Better Start Access and Inclusion Model

This article explores how Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) has demonstrated flexibility in the delivery of universal and targeted supports under level 4, Early Years Educational Advice and Mentoring.

Introduction

In 2015 the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) set up an interdepartmental group to agree a model to support the participation and inclusion of children with a disability into the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. This model was innovative, as it brought together several different government departments and agencies to work on the same vision.

While the group 'acknowledges the huge benefits to children with disabilities of attending mainstream pre-schools, it also recognises that a small number of children will continue to require specialist pre-school services due to very complex needs arising from their disability' (DCYA, 2015, p.5). It agreed a model of supports to develop the capacity of the sector over a three-year period. This model would include universal supports and more targeted supports for children with complex needs arising from a disability (ibid.).

The model (Figure 1) was developed from a strengths-based perspective. It is based on the strengths and abilities of a child with a disability and does not focus on their diagnosis. Nor does a child require a diagnosis to avail of supports under this model, because it is recognised that many children may not have a formal diagnosis by the time they attend preschool (ibid.).

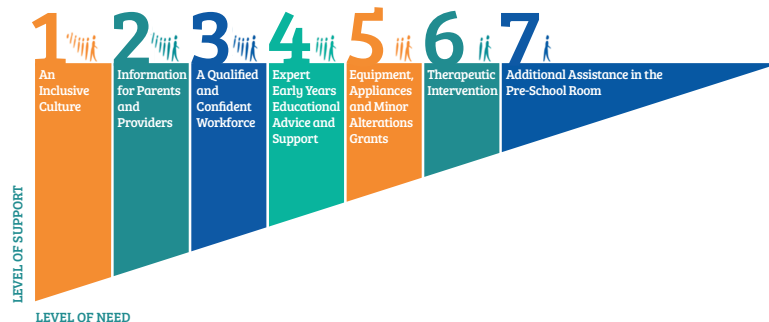


Figure 1. The Access and Inclusion Model: seven levels of universal and targeted supports



Delia Goodman
Better Start National
Manager

The role of Better Start AIM

Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) provides universal and targeted supports based on the model (levels 3, 4, 6, 7), to help individual children with disabilities to access their local preschool and participate meaningfully in the free preschool (ECCE) programme. A national team of AIM early years specialists (EYSS) provide expert educational advice and mentoring to early years educators under level 4 of the model (Expert Early Years Educational Advice and Support).

The EYSS work with early years educators to build their capacity and confidence to aid a child's active participation in an ECCE setting. Early years specialists, in partnership with early years educators, use the national early childhood frameworks of Síolta and Aistear to develop specific strategies (universal or targeted) and goals documented in 'My Inclusion Plan' for the individual child, while creating an inclusive setting for all children. This is done through mentoring and coaching to enable educators to reflect on their practice to enhance what they already know and do.

Better Start's mentoring model (Figure 2) is defined as:

a supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist. This relationship is based on the values of respect, openness, and a commitment of both parties to quality early learning and care experiences for children. The process is reflective, strengths-based and tailored to the individual context of each early years setting.

This provides opportunities for lasting change. The flexibility of this model of mentoring gives early years educators the opportunity to reflect on their own practice. In doing this it can open new possibilities and expand and enhance skills, as noted by Vivien Whitaker (2009, pp.100–101): 'creative methods (in mentoring and coaching) tend to open new possibilities and encourage expansive mode of thinking'.



Figure 2: Visual representation of Better Start mentoring model

Expansion of AIM

The AIM programme has grown significantly, from supporting over 2,000 children in 2016 to over 5,000 children currently (Figure 3). Applications for AIM came in steadily at first, and over the years the numbers have increased. This can be attributed to more awareness of the model and the value of quality inclusive practice to support children and families. This growth has meant an increase in the numbers of Better Start EYSs to ensure the provision of educational advice and mentoring to educators.

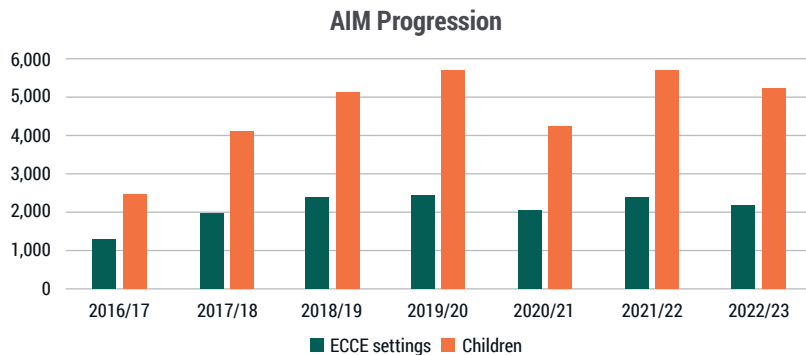


Figure 3: The number of children and ECCE settings availing of AIM from 2016 to the current year

As the ECCE landscape has developed, the AIM programme has continued to adapt how universal and targeted strategies are implemented. In 2018 the Better Start Early Years Learning and Development Unit was launched, tasked with coordinating agreed continuous professional development (CPD) under level 3 of the model, and providing a programme of training to ECCE service providers and early years educators to build their skills and knowledge about disability and inclusion.

Early years specialists, as part of AIM level 3, deliver Hanen Teacher Talk training to early years educators (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). Educators learn practical, interactive strategies to help children interact and communicate during everyday preschool activities. In 2020, with a global pandemic and health restrictions in place, the Better Start model of mentoring was adapted to offer blended mentoring, using online methods of communication such as emails and video calls, and face-to-face meetings. This enabled EYSs to continue to provide mentoring supports during restrictions, with Hanen Teacher Talk being able to move to online delivery.

Using blended mentoring has changed how an observation can be conducted to identify the needs of a child and ascertain the level of AIM support required. A service observation review (SOR) was developed to help early years educators observe a child using the Access and Inclusion Profile while face-to-face visits were limited.¹ With health restrictions now lifted, the SOR and blended mentoring methods will continue, allowing EYSs to

cut down on wait times due to availability of the service provider or EYS, and enabling them to manage the number of applications for AIM more efficiently.

Figure 3 shows the programme continuing to grow, with a 25% increase in applications for level 4 compared to the end of September 2021. What was not anticipated was the number of multiple applications received from individual settings. This has led to the development of a working group, who have identified ways that level 4 expert educational advice and mentoring can be provided to these settings.

This involves bringing settings together to provide input on universal resources to support a child's access and participation in preschool. These resources include Visual Schedules, First/Then, and Choice Boards, as well as promoting a Key Person approach and the role of an inclusion coordinator (INCO) in the development of My Inclusion Plan.²

AIM EYSs are currently piloting the use of these resources through the delivery of workshops either online or face to face. The pilot is in its early stages, and a review will take place at the end of 2022. Feedback from attendees and from EYSs delivering the pilot is positive. Describing what is working well, one EYS noted in an internal survey:

Bringing everyone together and discussing the importance of a consistent approach (visuals).

From workshops on My Inclusion Plan, early years educators said they had 'a greater understanding of it' and 'more clarity on the AIM model and the role of the INCO' (EYS internal survey response).

Conclusion

Since the development of the Access and Inclusion Model, Better Start AIM has shown flexibility in adapting and enhancing the delivery of mentoring and coaching to early years educators based on the changing needs of the ECCE programme, while continuing to respond to the high levels of AIM applications.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is committed to the review and evaluation of AIM. An end-of-three-year evaluation took place in 2021, commissioned to seek the views of children, parents, ECCE providers, and stakeholder organisations on the model, and to examine the wider impacts of AIM. The findings will inform the continuous implementation and possible expansion of AIM. We await the evaluation results and look forward to the future developments of AIM.

REFERENCES

Better Start National Early Years Quality Development (2020) *Better Start Mentoring Model Theoretical Framework*. Dublin.

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) (2015) *Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with Disability: Report of the Inter-Departmental Group*. Dublin: DCYA.

Garvey, B., Stokes, P., and Megginson, D. (2014) *Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. London: Sage.

Government of Ireland (2019) *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy For Babies, Young Children and Their Families 2019–2028*. Dublin: Government Publications.

Megginson, D. and Clutterbuck, D. (2009) *Further Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring*, 1st ed. Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.

Parsloe, E. and Leedham, M. (2009) *Coaching and Mentoring: Practical Conversations to Improve Learning*, 2nd ed. London: Kogan Page.

Shrestha, C.H., May, S., Edirisingha, P., Burke, L.L., and Linsey, T. (2009) 'From face-to-face to e-mentoring: Does the "e" add any value for mentors?', *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20(2), 116–124.

Weitzman, E. and Greenberg, J. (2002) *Learning Language and Loving It: A Guide to Promoting Children's Language and Literacy in Early Years Settings*. Canada: Hanen Centre.

Whitaker, V. (2009) 'Offering creative choices in mentoring and coaching'. In: Megginson, D. and Clutterbuck, D. (Eds.) *Further Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring*, pp.100–115. Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.

ENDNOTES

1. An Access and Inclusion Profile is jointly completed by the service provider and parent. It is used to ascertain a child's abilities and needs to enable them to access and participate in the ECCE programme.
2. My Inclusion Plan is a resource for early years educators to plan for a child's inclusion in their ECCE setting, in partnership with the child's parent/guardian or carer and relevant professional working with the child.

Better Start's mentoring model is defined as a supportive, relationship-based learning process between an early years educator and an early years specialist.
