

The Vital Role of Parental Engagement in Early Learning and Care

Background

One of Friedrich Fröbel's key principles, 'Come, let us live for our children', encapsulates his belief in the importance of adults, particularly parents, being active in their child's developmental journey. In recent years, the Irish government has implemented policies and initiatives to support and encourage parental involvement during their children's formative years. (This article uses 'parent' to refer to children's primary caregivers and educators, including fathers, mothers, carers, and guardians.)

The first five years of life should provide every child with a good, strong, and equal start. This runs deep through *First 5* (Government of Ireland 2019), with an explicit focus on supporting parents in many of the objectives set out. The Review of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) Operating Model in Ireland (Indecon, 2021) recognises that a systems approach including meaningful parental engagement is characteristic of a fit-for-purpose operational model. *Supporting Parents* (DCEDIY, 2022b) reiterates parents' important role in a child's life and focuses on providing accessible and evidence-based parenting information, resources, and support services.

The importance of parental partnerships is not only recognised throughout policy but evident in the implementation of *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), the curriculum framework, and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006), the national quality framework. The Early Years Quality and Regulatory Framework, which sets out standards for ELC settings, emphasises the importance of collaboration and partnership between parents and educators.

A High-Level Policy Statement (DCEDIY, 2022a) underpins parent and family support policy. It emphasises the importance of proactive, evidence-based, integrated services, with children and their parents at the centre. The



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This article describes the importance of parental engagement during early childhood, with a focus on children with needs. It draws on survey data gathered from parents whose children accessed supports through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

Childcare Act 1991, amended by the Child and Family Agency Act 2013, provides the statutory basis for child protection and welfare functions of Tusla and other organisations. Additionally, initiatives like the Parent and Toddler Grant Scheme, the Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme, and the National Childcare Subsidy aim to facilitate parental engagement by providing parents with financial support and encouraging their active participation.

Overall, Ireland recognises the vital role of parents in shaping their children's early development. It has put in place policies and initiatives to foster parental engagement, aiming to create a supportive and enriching environment for all children to thrive.

Better Start AIM

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a model of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access and meaningfully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. It is a cross-government initiative led by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and administered by Pobal (IDG, 2015).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when ELC settings were closed, Better Start adapted the programme's delivery to engage more meaningfully and directly with parents who had applied for targeted AIM supports (Goodman, 2021). The adaptations have been retained, with the objective of delivering a more needs-driven response while enabling providers to choose from individual and blended mentoring supports.

Survey results

Each year, Better Start invites ELC providers who have engaged in supports through the Quality Development Service, the Learning and Development Unit, and AIM to complete a customer satisfaction survey. For the first time this year, parents were also invited, and 1,384 took part. The results may inform programme development, expansion, and implementation going forward – particularly given the recent adaptations made.

Parents shared feedback on areas including accessing information, applying for AIM supports along with their child's ELC provider, their involvement in plans to support inclusion at preschool, level 4 expert advice and mentoring, and expanding AIM beyond the ECCE programme.

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Applying for AIM support

Building partnerships with parents is a pillar in the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide. Application for targeted AIM support was mindfully designed to enable and empower parents and providers to apply jointly for support for the child. In the survey, 90% of respondents completed the Access and Inclusion Profile in conjunction with the preschool; of these, 84% said they were very satisfied or satisfied with the application process.

The benefits of this collaboration are fundamental to building a shared understanding of a child's strengths, interests, and needs. It gives space to acknowledge the diversity of families, and it provides an opportunity to communicate about the child's experiences, development, and learning in a transparent and respectful manner.

The main themes in parents' responses were the 'ease of application', the 'critical role of the preschool' during application, and the 'helpful discussion and support offered by the early years specialist'. Parents offered constructive feedback on the level of paperwork required and the confusion over the different supports available and the inconsistent terms used to describe the professionals who implement different aspects of AIM.

The application process was very quick, efficient, the early years specialist I met with was knowledgeable, kind and understanding.

The preschool helped make the process easy, but the application form is extremely intimidating, with language such as disability etc. that did not apply to my child. It scared us.

Very easy and supportive. Non-judgmental. Efficient.

Communication from AIM

Parental engagement is even more critical for children with disabilities (Rispoli et al., 2018). These children require more support and involvement from parents to ensure they have the best possible opportunities for growth and success (Acar et al., 2021).

To this end, Pobal and Better Start place a high value on sharing information consistently with parents and providers. Parents are notified, via an automated system on Hive, about the levels of support their child has been recommended; 72% of respondents said this was very informative or informative. But they said confusion can arise over what the different levels of AIM support mean. More broadly, parents desire more information about their child's inclusion and participation at preschool:

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I feel it would be beneficial to have an update on any further advice or support that's been given; other than my initial phone call with the specialist I haven't received any further information from them.

AIM level 4 advice and mentoring

Central to AIM level 4 is a dedicated national team of early years specialists who provide expert educational advice and mentoring to educators. Parental involvement is an important part of implementing this: 'experience indicates that parents and preschool practitioners often have good insight into what the child needs to participate in preschool, and their views and input are crucial' (IDG, 2015, p.42).

In the 2023 survey, many parents said level 4 had positively impacted their child's development, boosting confidence, communication skills, and inclusion; 65% said it was extremely or very useful. Over half (54%) engaged in telephone support, 39% met the specialist at the preschool, and 59% received updates from the preschool about the specialist support.

Over half (56%) of parents were unaware if 'My Inclusion Plan' existed for their child; 31% were aware of it, and 92% of these were involved in its development. Overall, parents want more information about the support their child is receiving and about plans for their child's inclusion. Over half (54%) were involved in setting goals for their child's participation in ECCE. The most reported focus of goals were 'communication' and 'social and emotional development'.

These findings provide valuable insights into parents' perspectives on level 4 support and its impact on children's inclusion in ECCE settings.

Expansion of AIM beyond ECCE

The 2023 survey examined the perspectives of parents and providers on expanding AIM supports to ECCE-eligible children beyond 15 hours a week. Of the 431 providers who participated, 93% have AIM support and 86% have availed of level 7 support. Most (84%) reported that children were currently benefiting from level 7 support, with 72% expressing interest in extension beyond 15 hours. Providers said 44% of children with level 7 support availed of additional hours in 2022/23.

Of 1,384 parent responses, 60% said their child received level 7 support; 28% said their child attended additional hours outside of ECCE (ranging from 1–35 hours a week during term time, 1–50 hours outside term time). Parents whose children don't currently avail of additional hours (62%) would be interested in extending AIM support beyond ECCE. When asked about additional level 7

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support outside term time, 36% of parents expressed interest in an average of 11 hours a week.

The findings highlight strong interest from parents and providers in expanding AIM level 7 support, particularly during ECCE term time. Relatively few providers (16%) believed that children would not use additional hours if available. These results suggest a promising outlook for expanding AIM support in response to demand.

Conclusion

For children with needs, parental engagement plays a crucial advocacy role in educational, care, and social settings. It gives these children emotional support and a sense of security. It fosters a nurturing environment where children can develop a strong sense of self-worth, confidence, and independence. Meaningful parental involvement is linked to parental advocacy for inclusive practices, raising awareness in the community, and working towards breaking down barriers and misconceptions about disabilities.

These parents contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate society that values everyone's abilities and potential, regardless of their needs. Better Start recognises the value and importance of partnering with parents and supporting ELC providers to build capacity in this construct of quality. Better Start is committed to delivering on government priorities for the Irish ELC quality and inclusion agenda, ensuring that meaningful parental engagement is engrained in this part of society.

The Better Start Access and Inclusion team would like to sincerely thank those who completed the survey. This feedback is invaluable in continuing to review and develop the programme to best meet the needs of children accessing and participating in their ECCE year.

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GEALACH AGUS GRIAN (Moon and Sun)

If you ever wondered how the *Gealach agus Grian* (moon and sun) came to live in the sky, this is the book for you. The answer is not as scientific as you might think! It's a simple case of two polar opposite best friends who needed their own space. If you know a child who shares a bedroom, he/she will love this funny, heartwarming tale!

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