

Childminding's Role in Early Childhood Education and Care

Creating societal awareness

This article aims to create societal awareness about childminding. It explores the various types of childminding provision that are currently available and what they offer to families and children. It also outlines the introduction of the National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) and what impact it may have for childminding in Ireland.

Childminding role and definition

In 2023, childminding emerged as a central topic of discussion in the context of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland. Recent increases in financial subsidies for families opting for Tusla-registered ECEC provision have influenced the discourse on childminders' potential role in government supports to families (CMI, 2023b; McQuinn 2023).

There has also been growing emphasis on the forthcoming regulations for childminding. With their introduction anticipated in 2024, it is imperative to cultivate public awareness about the nature of childminding and what it entails. This article explains the uniqueness of childminding while examining the need to consider childminders as equal partners in ECEC provision in Ireland.

Childminding stands out as a distinctive form of ECEC provision (TCD, 2021), with 16% of children requiring ECEC and benefiting from childminders (CSO, 2022). This underscores childminders' significant role in Irish society. A childminder is defined as 'someone who looks after other people's children in the childminder's own home' (CMI, 2023a).

There is confusion over the differences between childminders, nannies, and au pairs. Nannies and au pairs are directly employed by a family and work in the family's



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home. Centre-based provision is situated in a building outside the family home or in a separate area attached to the family home. In childminding, children have access to the family home and become an extended part of the childminder's family. Childminders in Ireland have advocated for recognition of the uniqueness of their profession rather than being compared to centre-based ECEC provision (O'Regan et al., 2022).

Childminder profiles

Gathering data on childminding in Ireland is characterised by uncertainty and variability (DCEDIY, 2023a). Childminding figures vary, with providers nationwide estimated at 13,000 (CSO, 2022) and 35,000 (DCEDIY, 2019). No two childminders are identical, and they offer great variety that may be influenced by contextual factors such as the type of family home, its location (e.g., urban or rural), and the type of provision offered. No childminder-specific qualifications are currently available; however, 68% of childminders in a recent survey had a qualification at level 5 or above on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (DCEDIY, 2023a).

Currently, less than 0.5% of childminders are regulated by Tusla (2022), which prescribes a maximum of six mixed-aged children (CMI, 2023a). Tusla (2023) mandates registration for childminders looking after more than four preschool-aged children. Tusla-registered childminders (TRCs) are classified as either ELC (0 years to primary-school age) or school-age care (SAC) childminders (primary school age to 15 years), following corresponding regulations. ELC childminders require an NFQ level 5 ECEC qualification or equivalent, while SAC childminders are exempt from formal requirements.

Despite their low numbers, TRCs offer diverse ECEC services, including full-day care, sessional services, part-time care, and SAC care. They may access government-funded programmes, including the ECCE Scheme and the National Childcare Scheme. Inspections entail Tusla assessing for quality and regulation, Pobal inspections for financial compliance, and Department of Education inspections for ECCE Scheme providers (DoE, 2023). Core funding, initiated in 2022, is under review in conjunction with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021–2028 (NAPC) (DCEDIY, 2021).

Childminder registration and options

For this overview, engaged childminders (ECs) (formally voluntary notified childminders) are described as currently exempt from registration with Tusla, as they care for fewer than six children of mixed ages and no more than three of preschool age (CMI, 2022). There are about 750 ECs in Ireland who are engaging with their county childcare committee (DCEDIY, 2023a), which

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involves notifying it of their intention to operate a childminding service. There are also childminders who are members of Childminding Ireland but do not engage with their county childcare committee.

ECs and CMI members must hold valid childminding insurance and have garda vetting. Currently no systems are in place for ECs to register with Tusla. Similarly to TRCs, ECs offer a variety of childminding services, but they currently cannot offer government-funded schemes.

TRCs and ECs are a minority in the broader childminding landscape in Ireland, though the exact figures remain uncertain. Many families use relatives for childcare or have ad hoc arrangements whereby the childminder may be operating without insurance or garda vetting (DCEDIY, 2023a). This type of provision poses a potential risk to the children and to the childminder. A change in legislation was therefore essential, and in 2023 the government approved the drafting of the Child Care (Amendment) Bill, allowing for the removal of the exemption of some childminders to register (DCEDIY, 2023b).

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Childminding is a flexible option for families for many reasons, such as non-traditional working hours and accommodating siblings together. Childminding is like an extension of the immediate family setting, where the same families may collaborate with childminders long-term and through important transitions in a child's life.

Childminding may benefit children who struggle in larger, centre-based ECEC settings, due to lower ratios, consistency of care, and a less-overwhelming environment (Cassidy, 2021). A recent survey found that 42% of childminders had experienced working with children in their setting who required additional supports (CMI, 2022). Access can be challenging, however, especially for children with physical disabilities, as each childminder's home varies, necessitating adaptations. Balancing full inclusion with home alterations can be complex, and the practical elements of alterations to a childminder's home will directly affect the childminder's family life.

Supports for childminding

Traditionally, childminding has lacked support in policy and society (DCEDIY, 2023c). However, Childminding Ireland has been a vital resource for childminders and parents for four decades. It offers diverse support, including training, financial advice, and policy insights, and it fosters a crucial community of practice to combat the isolation often experienced by childminders.

Childminders can also access their local county childcare committees, many of which have childminding development officers to help with business setup, policy updates, and financial supports. Minister O'Gorman recently increased

funding for the Childminding Development Grant due to oversubscription (DCEDIY, 2023c). The grant helps childminders establish their services, purchase equipment, and enhance their settings.

The National Action Plan for Childminding (2021–2028) was developed to outline steps towards the regulation and professional recognition of childminding in Ireland (DCEDIY, 2021). While its introduction is important, it is necessary to have meaningful consultation with childminders, acknowledging the variety of provision and how regulatory requirements may affect individual childminders. The DCEDIY (2021) acknowledged the importance of reaching childminders who have no engagement with support agencies. Regulations will affect childminders in various ways, and a one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice.

Concluding thoughts

Childminders play an indispensable role in Irish society. With impending changes for childminding in 2024, it is imperative to foster awareness about the identity and professional role of childminders. It is crucial that their diversity be recognised and that regulations mirror the distinct qualities of each setting. Any changes to childminding must be approached and developed with the utmost care, to ensure the preservation of this essential contributor and vital partner of ECEC in Ireland.

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SECOND SLIGO CHILDCARE FACILITY SIGNALS GOOD THINGS FOR ALL

Families in Sligo are celebrating the addition of 110 new crèche places following the opening of a €1.1m purpose-built childcare facility in the town.

Bridgestock Childcare opened the new Cre8ive Corner Crèche in Farmhill Manor on the Strandhill Road in Sligo in October 2023, providing 25 new jobs for early years educators and much-needed relief for working parents in the area.

Michael Gillen, CEO of Bridgestock Childcare, said: "The shortage of crèche places in the north-west and midlands puts undue strain on working families, restricts parents wishing to return to work, and inhibits the social development of children," Mr Gillen said.

"The opening of this new state-of-the-art facility in Sligo will go some way to alleviating that stress, while at the same time creating 25 new jobs for Early Years Educators."

"Bridgestock Childcare is moving now to increase its investment in childcare facilities into the future," Mr Gillen continued.

Good things for All

"This expansion means good things for parents and for children - but it also means good things for staff who will benefit from enhanced opportunities for career development," Mr Gillen concluded.



Early Childhood – My Wish List for 2024

Dr Rita Melia

Access to quality ECEC

Access for every child to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision, where each child's basic care and psychological needs are met, resulting in children having high levels of wellbeing and involvement in their play and learning.

Funding: children, families, professionals

Increased investment in ECEC in recognition of the cost of quality provision and the important role of ECEC professionals. Opportunities to support the ongoing professional learning and development of the sector, from initial training to lifelong learning.

Access and inclusion

Extension of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), working in partnership with parents to ensure that all children have access and opportunities to participate to their full potential. Recognition and support for the increasing cultural and diverse needs of children and families accessing ECEC provision.

Parental choice

Ensuring that parents' choice of childcare, whether provided by a childminder or in centre-based care, is funded and regulated, to ensure that all children have access to quality early-years experiences that meet the needs of children, parents, and families.

Sustainability, creative play, and learning for babies, toddlers, and young children

Embedding science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) through creative play and learning for children in practice and through the early years curriculum framework, Aistear, accessing both indoor and outdoor provision and promoting environmentally friendly practices and environmental responsibility.