

# Updating *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

## Introduction

*Aistear* is now 14 years old, having been published back in 2009. In the years since, *Aistear* has made a significant contribution to the learning, development, and wellbeing of thousands of children from birth to six years old in Ireland. It was the first curriculum framework introduced in Ireland, supporting the development of emergent and enquiry-based curriculum in a range of settings.

Ireland is now more socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse than ever before. Since *Aistear* was published there has been considerable change in early childhood provision in Ireland in terms of national developments, policies, and strategies; curriculum and assessment developments; and children's lived experiences. There is a need to see how the framework might be updated so that it continues to support high-quality learning and development experiences for the country's babies, toddlers, and young children.

This article describes the process so far in updating *Aistear*, beginning with Phase 1, which included consultation and an update to the research base. It then provides an overview of Phase 2, including the proposals for an updated *Aistear* and an outline of the consultation on those proposals.

## Phase 1 consultation strands and findings

Phase 1 of updating *Aistear* took place between May 2021 and April 2022 and consisted of two strands:

1. Consultation with (a) the early childhood sector, and (b) babies, toddlers, and young children
2. A literature review to support the updating of *Aistear*'s Themes.



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This article from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) describes the Council's work since May 2021 in updating *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009). It briefly references the rationale for updating *Aistear* before describing the updating process and the proposals for the updated framework.

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The consultation asked two key questions:

- » What is working well with *Aistear*?
- » What needs to be enhanced or updated?

### *The early childhood sector*

Stakeholders, including educators, parents, support agencies, and those involved in further and higher education, were invited to share their views through online focus groups, questionnaires, written submissions, and an invitational consultation event. Feedback was analysed to identify the main themes in responses to the two key questions.

The findings indicated that *Aistear's* Principles remain relevant. However, due to a strong sense that the Themes sometimes overshadow them, findings suggest enhancing the connections between the Principles and the Themes, while making the Principles more visible and prominent.

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The findings also highlighted broad agreement that *Aistear's* four Themes (Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking) have stood the test of time and have had a positive impact on babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development. Across the four Themes, areas identified as needing to be updated were: child agency; diversity, equality, and inclusion; relationships; and play.

Feedback also indicated the need to reduce the number of Learning Goals and their level of detail. In general, the Guidelines for Good Practice received positive commentary and were viewed as a useful resource in working with *Aistear*. In considering the need for future resources, it is clear from the findings that practical resources for educators in working with *Aistear* are considered to be essential.

### *Babies, toddlers, and young children*

The consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children was undertaken by a consortium of Maynooth University, Stranmillis University College, and Early Childhood Ireland. This consultation was innovative and groundbreaking in its design and in respecting the rights of all children to have their voices heard and responded to in matters affecting them. Using participatory action research, it took place in early childhood settings, including childminder and home environments, and was carried out by the educators working daily with the children. It focused on noticing and observing the children's reactions and responses to elements of *Aistear* in action.

The consultation reaffirmed the importance of viewing children as 'capable and competent' learners; respecting all children as citizens with rights and

responsibilities; and the role of the educator in facilitating and responding to the voices of babies, toddlers, and young children in the different ways they communicate. These voices communicated the importance of relationships and interactions with their families, friends, and the wider community. Babies, toddlers, and young children also emphasised the importance of play, self-direction, and access to rich indoor and outdoor learning environments.

Recommendations for how *Aistear* may be enhanced included a greater focus on: citizenship and responsibility; relationships; diversity, visibility, and inclusion; engagement with families and visibility in communities; role of the adult; and creativity.

### *Literature review to support the updating of Aistear's Themes*

A team of researchers from the Institute of Education, Dublin City University, conducted a literature review to update the research base that informs the Aims and Learning Goals of *Aistear's* Themes.

The review's findings affirmed the role of educators in providing quality curriculum experiences which are challenging, authentic, and meaningful. They highlighted the importance of nurturing relationships and slow relational pedagogy, compassion, empathy, adventurous play, inclusion, sustainability, and children's agency through social justice. The findings indicated a lack of visibility of babies and toddlers in the literature on curriculum and learning. In addressing this, a chapter was dedicated to this younger age group to ensure they were visible throughout proposals for updating *Aistear*.

The review also provided key trends for consideration that could enhance the Aims and Learning Goals in an updated *Aistear*. Across the four Themes, commonalities in key trends were evident and included a greater focus on sustainability; children's agency; social justice and citizenship; rights-based participation; children's digital lives; play and risky play; and intentional and guided pedagogies.

Both the consultation findings and the information from the literature review were fundamental in preparing for Phase 2 of Updating *Aistear*, which will be discussed next.

## Phase 2 consultation proposals and strands

### *Phase 2 consultation proposals*

The NCCA distilled all the information from Phase 1 and developed a set of proposals for an updated *Aistear*. These proposals build on and update the

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original framework and were the basis for the Phase 2 consultations, which took place in autumn 2023. The proposals are structured in two sections:

- » *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*
- » *Supporting Aistear.*



Figure 1: Structure of the updated *Aistear*

### *Updated Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

The updated framework is made up of the Vision, Purpose, Principles, and Themes. The proposed Vision presents an even more respectful and empowered view of the baby, toddler, and young child and that of the educator. (In the proposals, 'educator' is used to refer to all those who work with *Aistear* to support babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development, including early years educators who work in professional roles, parents, childminders, and other adults.)

Responding to the findings from the consultation for more visibility of the youngest age groups, the proposals specify babies, toddlers, and young children throughout. The proposed image of the baby, toddler, and young child presents them as agentic, competent, and confident. The proposals also include an image of the educator as competent, confident, agentic, and reflective.

The proposed Purpose of *Aistear* is to support babies', toddlers', and young children's learning and development. In doing so, it reaffirms parents as the primary educators of their children; promotes partnerships with families and communities; supports transitions; supports educators and practice in various contexts; and embeds appreciation of our cultural and linguistic history and story by introducing terms and phrases *as Gaeilge* (in Irish).

*Aistear's* Principles have been updated to reflect the information gathered in Phase 1, particularly inclusion and a rights-based approach, and reframed from twelve into nine. The Themes have been retained but updated as described above. The number of Learning Goals has been reduced, but they remain intentionally broad, observable statements to support holistic learning and development. The Principles are now interwoven with the Themes, with key messages from the consultation embedded throughout the Framework.

### *Supporting Aistear*

This is made up of:

- » Part A – *Guidance for Good Practice* proposes a set of big ideas, focused on *Aistear's* Principles and Themes. These big ideas are intended as a platform to update and extend the current Guidelines for Good Practice in the *Aistear* Toolkit.
- » Part B – *Supporting Educators* draws attention to wider conditions necessary to support *Aistear's* Vision and Principles.

The *Guidance for Good Practice* expands on some of the important ideas introduced in the Principles and Themes. It also reflects other important messages, or big ideas, from Phase 1, as well as from research and wider societal and policy changes.

Overall, greater attention is drawn to the vital importance of *interactions and relationships* between babies, toddlers, young children, parents, educators, and other important people and places in their lives. There is a clear focus on building these trusting relationships through a slow, relational pedagogy. The importance of a key-person approach and of fostering connections with friends, communities, and neighbourhoods is emphasised.

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Babies, toddlers, and young children are further acknowledged as *citizens with rights*, so that they can have greater influence on decisions that affect them by expressing their views and having their views given due consideration. There is a focus on them as agents of and for change, as global citizens, with acknowledgement of their emerging responsibilities for themselves, others, and the environment.

*Diversity, equity, and inclusion*, including diversity of age, gender, family status, ethnicity, religion, worldview, and membership of the Traveller community, are evident in the proposed updates. There is a focus on respecting and celebrating diversity while also noticing and valuing our similarities and connectedness. Aligning with the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations Development Programme, 2015), there is a focus on identifying and addressing barriers to meaningful participation for all babies, toddlers, and young children.

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The update retains, encourages, and enhances *learning through play and hands-on experiences*, both indoors and outdoors. Responding to the Phase 1 consultation findings, there is a greater emphasis on outdoor play, learning through engagement with nature, and opportunities for 'risky adventurous play'.

Proposed updates include supporting *continuity of experience and progression in learning* through, for example, alignment between *Aistear* and the Primary Curriculum Framework (Department of Education, 2023). The update indicates clearly the importance of supporting all transitions, both daily and between settings. Proposals also refer to a cycle of noticing, observing, documenting, assessing, planning, implementing, and reflecting in practice.

In relation to supporting educators, in the Phase 2 consultation, the NCCA gathered feedback from stakeholders, education partners, educators, and parents to identify practical ways that settings can be supported in a comprehensive manner as they become familiar with and begin to use an updated *Aistear*.

#### *Phase 2 consultation strands*

The proposals for an updated *Aistear* were published in autumn 2023. A broad range of data collection methods were used to ensure that all stakeholders could provide feedback, including questionnaires, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, and written submissions. A second consultation with babies, toddlers, and young children on the proposed updates also took place. Following the Phase 2 consultation, it is envisaged that the NCCA will complete its work on the updated *Aistear* in mid-2024.

## Conclusion

*Aistear*, the Irish word for 'journey', is the name given to Ireland's *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. A memorable and worthwhile journey entails countless adventures, explorations, and discoveries, along with inevitable challenges. So in living up to its name, *Aistear* continually seeks to enhance our babies', toddlers', and young children's learning journeys, providing them with rich and wide-ranging experiences within loving relationships.

As we journey further into the 21st century, may *Aistear* continue to be embraced by the early childhood sector and in doing so positively influence the early learning and development of our agentic, competent, and confident babies, toddlers, and young children, through the support and commitment of a competent, confident, agentic, and reflective early childhood profession.

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