

Introducing the Updated *Aistear*

Key messages informing the curriculum framework

Background

Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework was introduced to the early childhood sector in 2009, marking an important shift in early childhood education and care in Ireland. It established a vision of the confident and competent child from birth and provided a framework to support and nurture learning and development in early childhood. Much of what we have come to know and understand about *Aistear* provides the solid foundation of the updated framework (Government of Ireland [GoI], in press). The update was necessary to respond to changes in Irish society, advances in policy and research, and the professional profile of educators engaging with *Aistear*.

In line with the processes of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), the consultations sought to incorporate the many voices of those who could inform and inspire the NCCA's work (French & McKenna, 2022; Carolan et al., 2023; O'Toole et al., 2023; O'Toole et al., 2024). These voices provide insights into the life experiences of babies, toddlers, and young children; what care and education looks like in the setting-based and home learning environments; the supports and guidance that are essential for learning and development; and the importance of relationships.

Findings from focus groups, questionnaires, and written submissions led the NCCA to delve deeper to understand what *Aistear* needed to do to support the learning and development of babies, toddlers, and young children. Targeted focus groups with families and educators living and working in areas of social disadvantage provided perspectives that informed how *Aistear* could provide meaningful and participatory learning experiences. Feedback from educators in diverse settings gave insight into how



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This article illustrates the interconnectivity between the vision, principles, and themes of *Aistear* through discussion of the rights of babies, toddlers, and young children, the role of the agentic educator, the importance of relationships, and the value of play. These concepts will be developed further through consideration of the new *Guidance for Good Practice for educators engaging with the updated *Aistear* framework.*

Aistear could be understood in different learning environments to respond to the rights, needs, and wants of children.

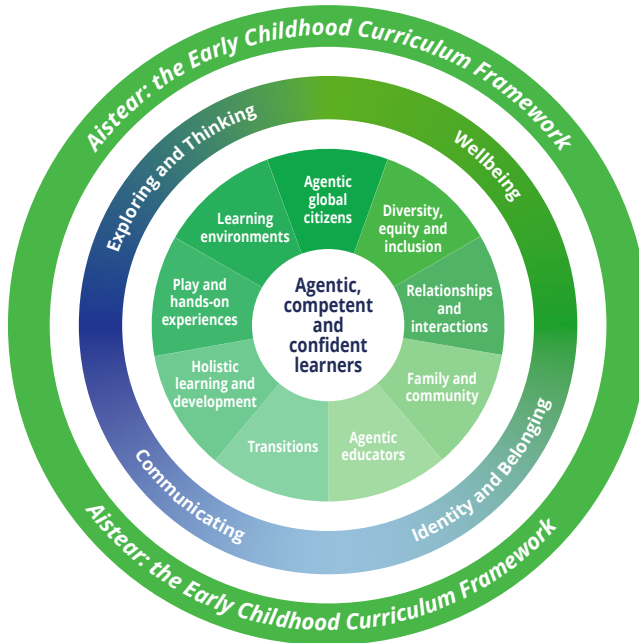


Figure 1: Aistear's contents

Vision

The updated *Aistear* (GoI, in press) foregrounds a rights-based approach and celebrates a vision of the baby, toddler, and young child as agentic, competent, and confident (Figure 1). Being agentic means they have voice and influence over their own learning (Lundy, 2007; DCYA, 2015). This vision places real value on creating time and space for kind and loving interactions and relationships with the children's educators. That kindness is interwoven throughout the principles of *Aistear* and brings meaning to an understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the framework.

The child-voice statements in the principles present the rights of each baby, toddler, and young child, while simultaneously drawing attention to the educator's role in supporting and nurturing early learning and development. Equity is understood in the way educators notice what is important and what is fair for each child, responding to their unique life stories.

The updated Aistear celebrates a vision of the baby, toddler, and young child as agentic, which means they have voice and influence over their own learning.

The vision of the educator presents them as agentic, competent, confident, and reflective. Within this vision, educators genuinely believe in the competencies of babies, toddlers, and young children, holding them in a respectful and protective space. *Aistear* places value on the centrality of such relationships and the importance of nurturing care in early childhood. It recognises the educator's intentionality in planning a curriculum through which every child can thrive and flourish.

Slowing down and being present with children is valued and recognised as crucial to learning and development.

Important messages from the principles in *Aistear* about children's rights, inclusion, relationships, and play are interwoven throughout the themes of Wellbeing, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Through the aims and learning goals, babies, toddlers, and young children are supported to reach their potential through participation in an emergent and inquiry-based curriculum, underpinned by play and relationships, in meaningful and enjoyable ways.

There is an understanding of the learning environment as encompassing not only the physical space and resources, indoors and outdoors, but also the daily routines and the important relational space that nurtures friendships and connections. An understanding of slow relational pedagogy is embedded in the framework, taking inspiration from research (French & McKenna, 2022). Slowing down and being present with children is valued and recognised as crucial to learning and development. Learning experiences are noticed throughout the daily routines: how a baby is supported to feel secure, being held in their key person's arms; how a toddler learns to make healthy choices in nutrition by helping at mealtime; and how a young child and their key person learn about life on land by watching a snail crawl across a rock.



Figure 2: Play and playful experiences

Free play, guided play, and educator-led playful experiences provide a basis for daily routines (Figure 2). By noticing what is important and meaningful for children, educators can nurture learning and development. Nurturing is about recognising, naming, and affirming learning, and encouraging active participation in everyday experiences and opportunities.

Goals

Aistear's Guidance for Good Practice (Gol, in press) presents a reflective cycle of planning and assessing which describes how educators can notice, nurture, respond to, and reflect on learning and development (Figure 3). The updated learning goals describe opportunities in daily routines and provide inspiration for learning about sustainability, nature, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and maths), literacy, language, and the arts. Through intentionality and pedagogical knowledge, the educator knows the value of preparing the environment and setting out and setting up provocations to support children to be curious about our world.

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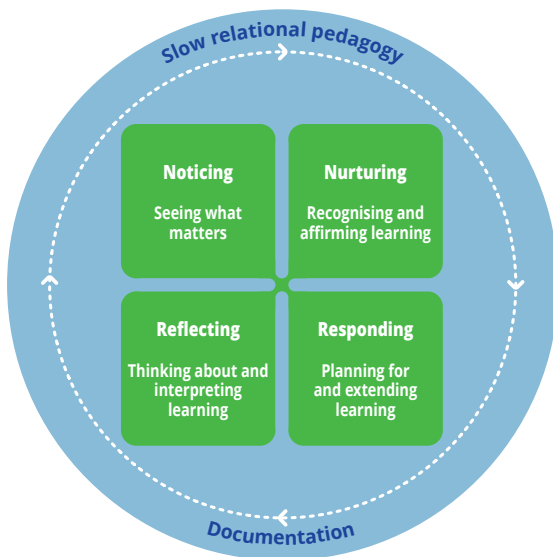


Figure 3: Reflective cycle of planning and assessing

The updated *Aistear* is inspirational and aspirational. It has been developed with an understanding of the crucial importance of positive experiences in early childhood, and the central role of the educator in supporting babies, toddlers, and young children during this time. Updating *Aistear* has provided a strong basis to ensure it will continue to impact positively on the early learning and development of agentic, competent, and confident

children, supported by agentic, competent, confident, and reflective educators.

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