

# Updating *Aistear*

## Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals

This template is intended to help you (and your colleagues) develop a written submission in relation to Updating *Aistear*. Please e-mail your completed submission to [aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### **Individual submission details**

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Date</b>	
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### **Organisation submission details**

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**Do you consent to this submission being posted online including your name and organisation\*?**

Yes

No

**Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).**

The Froebel Department of Primary & Early Childhood Education, Maynooth University offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in both early childhood and primary education and engages in research projects related to both sectors.

The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on *Aistear*: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. Section

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2 is structured according to the Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice. Each section is briefly summarised as a support for working on the submission.

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# Section 1

## **Please outline your overall comments and observations on updating *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework***

Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework has served the Early Childhood sector well since its publication in 2009, it provides a common reference point for understanding of curriculum, methodologies, and assessment for a range of settings providing care and education to young children in Ireland. It specifies the learning outcomes to guide curriculum development and planning for learning experiences focusing on the learning and development of children birth to six and positions play as the most appropriate methodology to meet these outcomes. The Aistear-Síolta guide has been an invaluable resource for educators of young children. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the process of updating Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

Given the many changes in society and the sector in general since Aistear's publication in 2009 and the recent publication of policy reports such as the *First 5* (Government of Ireland, 2018) and the *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) 2022-2028* (Government of Ireland, 2021), as well as new research on young children, it is now timely to review Aistear The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. In addition, given the recent Covid 19 pandemic and the effect on children's lives, it is important to reiterate and further develop the importance of play, connections with families and communities and children as citizens. We believe that an updated Aistear will strengthen pedagogical practices of educators in early years settings and primary classrooms to enhance children's learning and development.

### **Vision of Early Childhood Education in Ireland**

A clear vision for Early Childhood Education in Ireland should be presented which links to the Principles, Themes, Aims and Goals of Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework.

### **Language of Aistear**

There is a need to update the language of Aistear 2009 to be more respectful and inclusive using a Social Justice perspective.

For example:

- The term 'adult' in Aistear should be replaced with 'educator' to reflect the professional nature of the adults working in early years settings and primary infant classrooms.
- The language from children's perspective should change from children's needs to children's rights.
- He/she and his/her should be replaced by they/their

### **Focus on the Environment**

Clear guidelines should be presented in Aistear on the importance of the learning environment, both indoors and outdoors, both physical and cultural. Educators should be aware of the messages conveyed by the environment (hidden curriculum). Links to The Universal Design Guidelines for Early Learning & Care Settings (DCYA in collaboration with CEUD-NDA, 2021) would support educators in early years settings and primary infant classrooms to consider the appropriateness of their physical environment for the inclusion of all children.

### **Play Reimagined**

While Aistear 2009 had a major focus on play, this now needs to be updated to include the clearer definitions of what play is and is not, children's right to play, the role of the educator, provocations in play. emergent interests, risky/adventurous play, outdoor play, etc.

### **Focus on Babies and Toddlers**

The revised Aistear should also consider more on pedagogical practices and concrete examples for educators working with babies and toddlers. Aistear 2009 provided more support for the older age groups. This is particularly important because in recent years

many early years settings stopped taking babies and toddlers in favour of the funded ECCE years, resulting in a dearth of experience in settings to provide for the learning and development of this age group.

### **Presentation of Aistear**

Consideration should be given to the presentation of the revised Aistear website, so that it is user friendly and encourages educators to explore and interact with clear links to the Primary School Curriculum and related documents. With developments in IT since 2009 and many educators enhanced IT skills since the Covid 19 pandemic, there are opportunities to develop Professional Development programmes to meet the needs of all educators that was not possible in 2009.

## Section 2

### **Principles of Aistear**

Aistear is based on 12 Principles of early learning and development. Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the Principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development. The Principles can be accessed [here](#).

**Please give your feedback in relation to updating the Principles of Aistear. Please indicate what is working well with the principles and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

The 12 Principles of early learning and development rightly focus on children and their lives in early childhood, children's connections with others and how children learn and develop. Unfortunately, the Principles have not been the focus for educators when looking at Aistear, as the Themes, Aims and Goals tend to be focused on more. We suggest that the Principles need to be given equal importance and be updated and emphasised more to allow educators to reflect on how the Principles impacts how the Themes, Aims and goals are used in their practice in early years settings and primary infant classrooms.

While Aistear2009 Principles highlight the educator's role in supporting children's early learning and development, more detailed explanations are necessary to enhance educators' understanding of their pedagogical role in doing this.

Follow up professional development webinars and workshops are needed to facilitate the implementation of the revised Aistear, especially in primary infant classrooms where implementation of Aistear was limited to play time with a time limit.

Paid professional development time (non-contact) also needs to be allocated to all Early Years services to ensure that professional development is prioritised.

The 12 Aistear Principles are presented in three groups, the third of which notes communication and language as a constituent of how children learn and develop. However, there is also much scope for language and communication to be reflected in the first and second groups of principles. The first group concerns children and lives in early childhood of which language is a significant part (their uniqueness and citizenship, equality, and diversity). The second group concerns children's connections with others in terms of relationships, namely, parents, family, community, and the educator's role. All relational interactions are embedded in language, culture, and context. Across the principles, children's home languages should be embraced, as this clearly links with children and lives, children's connections and communication and learning within how children learn and develop.

# Section 3

## Themes of *Aistear*

*Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework presents children’s learning and development using four Themes. These are:

1. Well-being
2. Identity and Belonging
3. Communicating
4. Exploring and Thinking.

The themes describe what children learn—the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims. Each aim is divided into six learning goals. *Aistear*’s Themes can be accessed [here](#)

**Please give your overall feedback in relation to the themes of *Aistear*. Please indicate what is working well with the themes and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

The four themes of *Aistear* are equally relevant as they were in 2009, however there is a need to update the examples and better link each theme to dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding.

### **Well-being**

The theme of well-being needs to be embedded across all themes and not presented as a stand-alone theme. However, additional elements need to be considered. Post pandemic, well-being has come to also include ‘mental’ well-being and this needs to be reflected within the language of *Aistear*. The development of dispositions such as resilience and independence have been highlighted as essential requirements both for the children and the educators alike. As children and educators spent more time outdoors, environmental awareness came to the fore. All of these support children’s well-being and should be reflected in the updated *Aistear*, taking account of our new normal.

### **Identity & Belonging**

The theme of *Identity and Belonging* especially needs to be revised to have a more Social Justice perspective and see the child as having agency. Educators must also look at their own Identity



and Belonging and identify their own biases. They must also become knowledgeable about other beliefs, family structures, languages, cultures etc, to better support the children in their care. Links to the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines* (Department of Children & Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016) can support this.

## **STEM**

There needs to be more visibility to STEM related exploration for young children, not just in *Exploring & Thinking* but across all 4 themes. The availability of unit blocks in all early years settings and primary school classrooms should be prioritised as well as access to natural environments for all children in seamless provision.

## **Themes and Language**

In terms of the four interconnected Themes of Aistear 2009, each holds a distinct connection for language potential, inclusive of, but not exclusive to, the theme of *Communicating*. In *Identity and Belonging*, the child is supported by the educator to express themselves creatively and through a variety of types of play. In addition, as noted earlier, language and cultural identity are clearly linked, making languages relevant across this theme. As part of *Exploring and Thinking*, children make sense of their world, questioning, and investigating through the formation, testing, and refinement of ideas through play. The first language acquired by the child and “shaped their identity is the default medium of their discursive thinking and is thus their primary cognitive tool” (Little & Kirwan, 2020) and as such is central to this theme. *Communicating* offers children access to multiple modes of expression for different purposes, including non-verbal communication, includes the use of the body, as well as the voice in creative and imaginative expression. The role of the educator involves the support of children’s creative expression, from art, to cookery, to scientific exploration and storytelling, all of which require language to support. Again, a focus on embracing multiple languages within *Communicating* could be considered. Respect and affirmation of home languages is a core component of *Well-being*, as failure to do this disrespects the child’s identity and can lead to resentment in future years (Little & Kirwan, 2020).

## **Play & Language**

Based on children's cognitive development, play and language develop interdependently (Mhic Mhathúna, 2012). The complex act of language learning as a shared process of meaning-making is intrinsically linked to pretend play, where the given context demands specific language usage. The multiple modes of expression sustained by pretend play, while prioritising oral language, also uses a variety of other communication tools, from mime to writing.

Language is practised in meaningful ways, enabling its consolidation and construction in pretend play. The learning experiences play presents can lead to new language use as through role-playing children access different language registers. Socio-dramatic play presents creative opportunities for language demand and development as "language has to meet the challenge play provides" (Toye & Prendiville, 2000:88). Supportive educators observing play can pose questions and challenges which invite flexible and critical thinking, and creative expression.

Meta-linguistic awareness is associated with the mastery of written language and can be developed through engagement in 'role speech', by using vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation to suit a specific role (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Emergent literacy skills, including the fundamental skill of composing or developing narrative are prioritised in pretend play. Pretend play offers children the opportunity to fashion narrative and improvise play scripts, with strong connections to emergent literacy (Tovey, 2013).

# Section 4

## Guidelines for Good Practice

*Aistear* has four sets of guidelines, focusing on different aspects of practice:

1. Building partnerships between parents and practitioners
2. Learning and developing through interactions
3. Learning and developing through play
4. Supporting learning and development through assessment

These describe how the adult can support children’s learning and development across *Aistear’s* principles and themes. *Aistear’s* Guidelines for Good Practice can be accessed [here](#)

**Please give your overall feedback in relation to updating *Aistear’s* Guidelines for Good Practice. Please indicate what is working well with the guidelines and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

The 4 sets of guidelines have guided the early years and primary infant sectors in the 13 years since its publication. It has helped to establish play as the primary way that children learn and acknowledges observation as a key assessment tool in early years in keeping with Friedrich Froebel’s philosophy. However, it now needs to be updated to take account of new publications, policies, and context.

### **Building partnerships between parents and practitioners**

This needs to be renamed to ‘Building partnerships between parents/carers and educators’ to reflect changing contexts. The concept of partnership needs to be extended to include other professionals, agencies and the link between primary schools and early years settings to better support young children’s learning and development. During the Covid pandemic, parents/guardians were not allowed into early years settings and primary school. Therefore, it is particularly important to rebuild this partnership going forward.

### **Learning and developing through play**

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This needs to be updated to include the clearer focus and definitions of what play is and is not, children's right to play, the role of the educator, provocations in play. emergent interests, adventurous play, outdoor play, etc.

### **Supporting learning and development through assessment**

Updating these guidelines to reflect a broader range of assessment tools and pedagogical documentation would further support educators to document children's learning & development. Providing links to exemplars of these tools would benefit educators in moving away from more template tools.

### **Diversity, Inclusion & Equality**

An updated set of guidelines on Diversity, Inclusion & Equality is essential to support educators in their practice using Aistear in line with The Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA, 2016).

## **References**

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Tovey, H. (2013). *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*. (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.) Oxfordshire, England: Routledge Company.

Toye, N. & Prendiville, F. (2000). *Drama and traditional story for the early years*. Oxfordshire, England: Routledge Company.

### **Data Protection**

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