

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

Individual submission details

Name	
Date	
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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).

OMEP is an international, non-governmental and non-profit organisation with **Consultative Status** at the **United Nations** and **UNESCO**. **OMEP** is represented in 67 countries including **Ireland**.

OMEP Ireland is dedicated to promoting the well-being of all children (birth to eight years) and their right to high quality early childhood education and care

Our aim is to **promote the optimum conditions for all children from birth to eight years**, in order to ensure their well-being, development and happiness, both within their family unit and the wider communities in which they live.

OMEP Ireland assists in undertakings that have the objective of improving early childhood education and care in its broadest interpretation.

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

Introduction

OMEP Ireland perceive *Aistear* as a valuable document that has stood the test of time since its introduction in 2009. We believe that the strength of *Aistear* lies in its reflection of multiple perspectives that question the *taken for granted* and strive to meet the changing needs of our early years communities of practice. We very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to updating the framework.

While *Aistear* is as relevant today as it was in 2009, much more is now known about how children learn and develop and the factors that affect this in the early childhood period from birth to six. Equally, children live in an increasingly heterogeneous society, and they are living in the digital age. Throughout the years, the Irish Government has sought to address this altered reality, by introducing a multitude of initiatives directed at enhancing the quality of children's experiences in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. As indicated in the following section, which explore some key policy developments, these various initiatives have significantly altered the ECEC policy/practice landscape resulting in considerable implications for updating *Aistear*.

Policy Initiatives 2010 – 2021, and their implications for the Early Childhood Education and Care Landscape

The UN (2015) Sustainable Development Goals recognise the importance of early development and learning, stating that children should have access to organised learning at least one year before starting school. Furthermore, and in keeping with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making advises that "Children and young people will have a voice in decision-making in early education, schools and the wider formal and non-formal education systems." (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

(DCEDIY) 2019, p.3). While acknowledging the challenges in engaging very young children in decision making, the Strategy recognises “that young children are experts in their own lives, with a competence to communicate a unique insight into their experiences and perspectives, and are also skilful communicators employing a range of languages to articulate their views and experience (DCEDIY, 2019, p.15). These perspectives are mirrored in many of the ECEC policy initiatives introduced in Ireland between 2010 and 2021 (see Table 1), which have altered the ECEC policy and practice landscape in a myriad of ways.

Table 1. Overview of Key ECEC Policy Initiatives 2009 - 2021

Year	Initiative
2010 2016	Universal ECCE scheme
2014	Establishment of Child and Family Agency
2015	The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015 – 2020)
2016	Access and Inclusion Model
2016	Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter
2016	Childcare 1991 Early Years Services Regulations 2016
2016	Early Years Education Focused Inspections 2016 + proposed extension to infants and toddlers (pilot 2021)
2018	First 5. A Whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families
2019	National Childcare Scheme
2020	Covid 19 Health and Safety Measures
2020	Draft revised Primary School Curriculum 2020

The ECCE scheme, first introduced in Ireland in 2010, enables all young children aged from 2 years 8 months and 5 years 6 months to avail of free universal pre-school for 15 hours per week, 38 weeks per year, for the two years before they begin primary school. As a direct result of the ECCE scheme, the age profile of children commencing primary school has been rising. Prior to the introduction of the scheme in 2010, almost half (46.5%) of children starting school were four years old. In 2020, this figure stood at just under 17% of junior infants (Department of Education 2021). All settings participating in the ECCE scheme are required to adhere to the principles of the practice frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*. In addition, and at the request of the DCEDIY, the Department of Education has

since 2016, been undertaking early years education inspections of these settings. In other words, the Department inspects the educational provision for children aged from 2 years 8 months and 5 years 6 months. Currently however, the Department of Education is currently piloting EYEI in settings providing care and education for infants and toddlers under the age of 2 years and 5 months.

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) introduced in 2016 gives children with disabilities the opportunity to benefit from the ECCE Scheme with their peers. The Model operates Universal and Targeted supports. Universal supports are designed to create a more inclusive culture in settings through the Leadership for Inclusion in Early Years Care (LINC) Level 6 Special purpose award, Equality Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training as well as CPD in areas of diversity and inclusion. Where universal supports are insufficient to meet the needs of an individual child, targeted supports are available to ensure the child can meaningfully participate in pre-school.

The Early Years Services Regulations, 2016 introduced a mandatory training requirement for all educators working directly with children in ECEC settings. Since 2016 therefore, educators are mandated to hold a minimum QQI Level 5 qualification in early childhood education and care. Data from the 2021 Early Years Sector Profile indicates that 97% of those working with children in ECEC settings are qualified to Level 5 or higher. Moreover, the number of educators holding a degree level qualification (L7/L8) has steadily increased throughout the last decade from 12% in 2012 to 34% in 2021.

As stated previously, the majority of children now avail of two years of free pre-school before starting primary school. Consequently, the school starting age has increased. The transition between educational settings (pre-school and primary school) now has greater significance in terms of:

1. How children experience the educational continuum as they transition from one educational setting to another
2. Expectations of children as they transition to school

Increasingly Heterogeneous Society

In 1996, just over 53,000 (1.5 per cent) of residents were born outside of Ireland; by 2016, this had increased to just under 540,000 (11.3 per cent) (Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2016). In their Population and Migration Estimates report for the year April 2020 to April 2021, the CSO indicate that there were 645,000 non-Irish nationals living in the country in April 2020, accounting for one in eight (12.9%) of the total population. An estimated 35,000 non-Irish nationals arrived to live in Ireland between April 2020 and April 2021. Although travellers represent just 1% of the population in Ireland, they are the most marginalised and disadvantaged people in Irish society (Department of Justice and Equality (DJE), 2017). In contrast to the general population, most Travellers in Ireland are young, with 60 per cent aged under 25 (Central Statistics Office (CSS) 2016) and two thirds of these under 15 years of age (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2020). In 2003, the Pre-school for Traveller: National Evaluation report recommended that early years setting should work in partnership with parents to develop policies that were sensitive to Traveller culture (Department of Education and Science (DES) 2003). However, Quinlan (2020) asserts that students, particularly post-primary school students, experience discrimination and isolation in school. Contrary to Article 2 of the UNCRC, indigenous children, which includes traveller children, are particularly at risk of experiencing serious discrimination in accessing their rights, including in education. In fact Quinlan (2020) argues that the invisibility of Traveller culture within the curriculum negatively impacts on students sense of identity and belonging, and contributes to experiences of discrimination and disadvantage (Quinlan, 2020). The UNCRC ‘General Comment No. 1 (2009) explains that children from minority backgrounds require special measures to fully enjoy their rights. In Ireland, the Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill (2018) proposes to formally introduce Traveller culture into the primary and post-primary curriculum. Overall, the diversity of Irish society is reflected within children’s communities, early childhood settings and schools. Consequently, the education system, including early childhood settings, faces the challenge and opportunity of acknowledging, welcoming and including children and families of diverse cultures, languages and outlooks.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

The context of children's day-to-day lives within their families and communities influences their experiences and outcomes during the lifespan. These contextual factors include the socio-economic status and other characteristics of the child and his/her family (Phair, 2021). It is widely acknowledged that children thrive in caring families, where they feel safe and where their learning and development is supported through positive consistent relationships with parents, siblings and other family members. Longitudinal studies, including Growing Up in Ireland and the Millenium Cohort Study in Scotland reinforce the importance of the home learning environment on children's development and learning. Both studies found that parents' active engagement with their children was positively linked to their child's development.

However, for many children, and for many reasons, children do not enjoy a positive home environment, and are exposed to and live through adverse early childhood experiences (ACES). The term, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) was coined by researchers, Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues, in their study conducted from 1995 to 1997. ACEs refer to traumatic experiences in a person's life occurring before the age of 18. These include:

- experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect;
- witnessing violence in the home or community;
- having a family member die by or attempt suicide.

In addition, aspects of the child's environment that can challenge their sense of safety, include children's experiences of

- substance misuse;
- mental health problems;
- instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling or other member of the household (Butler, 2020)

Today, much more is known about how ACEs, such as how being born into poverty affects child outcomes. For example, Social Justice Ireland (2021) hold that the effects of child

poverty are deep and long-lasting. Child poverty continues to be an issue in the Irish context, with the CSO reporting that there were just under 630,000 people still living in poverty in 2019. Of these, 230,000 are children, of whom 4,000 are children who are homeless (Social Justice Ireland, 2021). Poverty and other forms of disadvantage and adversity often have a disproportionate impact on children's development and negatively affect long-term outcomes, including educational attainment, and physical and mental health (Ibid. 2021).

Phair (2021) states that socio-economic status has a pervasive influence on children's later outcomes (p.22). She further states that growing up in a low socio-economic family is one of the most significant risk factors for poor development throughout childhood and into adulthood, across a range of domains (Ibid.). In addition to having a higher likelihood of low birthweight, children from low socio-economic status are also more likely to experience ongoing poor health, low educational attainment, and greater risks in adulthood of unemployment, criminal behaviour and reduced well-being (Watson, Maître, Whelan and Williams, 2104).

For children impacted by trauma, their bodies and brains are primed for physiological state of fear and survival (Butler, 2020; Jedd *et al.*, 2015). They therefore tend to perceive certain situations as threatening and respond accordingly in a state of fight, flight or freeze. Consequently, children with trauma history can see a situation, such as a transition, as a threat to their safety. Toxic stress profoundly alters the development of a child's brain; it affects the immune system, with research showing a correlation between early adversity and poorer outcomes later in life. ECEC teachers must advocate and create early learning environments that are predictable, providing consistent care, and promoting responsive relationships and feelings of physical and emotional safety – all the requisites for trauma-sensitive learning environments. High quality ECEC experiences are rooted in empathy, compassion, and validation of children's lived experiences, as is a trauma-sensitive approach. However, a trauma-sensitive approach means understanding three things.

- Understanding the prevalence and impact of trauma and ACEs;
- Understanding the role trauma plays in people lives, and most importantly,

- Understanding that any healing from trauma can only come from responsive relationships (Butler, 2020)

Moreover, a trauma Sensitive approach necessitates the implementation of *The Key Person approach* (Goldschmied, & Jackson, 1994), which involves a key person supporting the child and the family as they initially transition to the ECEC setting. This person continues to be the key person for the child for routine care and emotional support, leading to strong and responsive relationships with children and families. As birth to 5 Matters (2021) advocates, The key person helps the child to feel known, understood, cared about, and safe (www.birthto5matters.org.uk)

Unfortunately, ACEs occur across all cultural, racial and economic groups, and in the general population, many children will have experienced at least one ACE. Despite this prevalence, Speck notes that 60% of teachers have no relevant training on the needs of children who have experienced trauma, while Butler (2020) suggests that for those working in the ECEC profession, the number may be significantly higher.

Digital Age

Alongside increasing multi-culturalism, children are growing up in the Digital age. Brito, Dias and Oliveira (2018) suggest that children born in 2010 versus 2000 are more likely to be socialised in digitally rich family contexts, where parents are experienced digital users who adopt active digital parenting techniques. Citing Mascheroni and Olafsson (2016), Bohnert and Gracia (2020) indicate that children are increasingly exposed to a multitude of digital technologies at a very early age. Indeed it has been suggested that pre-school aged children become familiar with digital devices before they are exposed to books (Brody, 2015; Hopkins, Brookes and Green, 2013). In this regard, initial findings from the OECD, International Early Learning and Well-being study, being undertaken in England, Estonia and the US, indicate that the majority (83%) of five-year-olds in the study used a digital device at least once a week and 42% did so on a daily basis (OECD, 2020). According to Ramey (2016) 21st century teaching and learning in early childhood is about fostering ways of thinking and promoting dispositions that support success in an age driven by rapidly changing and expanding technologies. Likewise, the Partnership for 21st Century

Learning (2017) indicate that in addition to fostering skills of critical thinking, collaboration, communication, creativity, and social-emotional development, early childhood is also the time to develop children’s technology literacy. This is vital to prepare children for the challenges and demands of the future (Ibid).

Education for Sustainable Development

Global awareness of climate change, loss of bio-diversity, inequity and natural disaster-related refugees, toxification of water, soils, air and bodies (Wals, 2017) is ubiquitous. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 4, focuses upon quality education, with Goal 4.7 calling upon all the nations of the world to ensure that:

All learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and nonviolence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development (UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Project 2016, p. 7)

Early childhood has considerable potential in fostering positive dispositions, values, attitudes, skills and behaviours (Breathnach, Moloney and Pope, 2021) that support sustainable development, such as social justice and cultural diversity (Mackey, 2016). In keeping with Article 12 of the UNCRC, children have a right to hold, and to express an opinion, and for these opinions to be heard and taken seriously. Furthermore Article 29 highlights the role of education in encouraging ‘a child to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help a child to learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people’. Early childhood and infant classrooms are suitable sites for young children to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences with regards to the world around them, their place in it, and their hopes for the future (Moloney and Pope forthcoming).

The Lundy Model of Child Participation was endorsed by the Irish Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (2015 – 2020). This encompasses the 4 principles of space, voice, audience and and influence. Play is a fundamental right of childhood. Article 31 (2) of the

UNCRC posits, ‘State parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully... and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for ... recreational and leisure activity’. This includes outdoor and nature play. Research continues to accumulate the benefits of such experiences for all children including children with physical disabilities, specific learning needs, ACEs and children from impoverished urban backgrounds who lack access to outdoor experiences (Caprino 2018, Touloumakos and Barrable 2020 Sando, Kleppe and Sandseter 2021.) Negative attitudes to the weather (Kernan and Devine 2010) and/ or suitably challenging play have been found to limit children’s participatory rights. Gill (2007, p.11) has critiqued ‘adult intervention to minimise risk at the expense of childhood experience’. As such, Clerkin (2016) indicates that adults in ECEC have a vital mediating role in balancing children’s right to protection with their right to participation in suitably challenging or ‘risky’ play.

Children’s competence is seen in their ability to engage as environmental stakeholders in environmental learning and outdoor activity for their well-being (Barratt Hacking, Barratt and Scott, 2007); establishing relationship with nature as well as their ecological and environmental literacy (Davis 2009); act as social agents (Mackey, 2016), critical thinkers and problem solvers (Breathnach, Moloney and Pope, 2021) who are able to affect change in collaboration with the community (Davis and Elliott 2014). Therefore, young children are perceived as social actors with agency, competent individuals, forming their own lives and identities (Eriksen, 2013). Moreover, Twigg, Prendergast and Twigg (2015) indicate that from ‘a very young age, children learn the values of friendship, the avoidance of conflict, environmental sustainability, the power of technology and the value of commerce’ (p. 82).

All of the issues discussed thus far, have considerable implications for educator’s knowledge and skills and how they work with young children. In turn, they are critical to informing and shaping updates to *Aistear*.

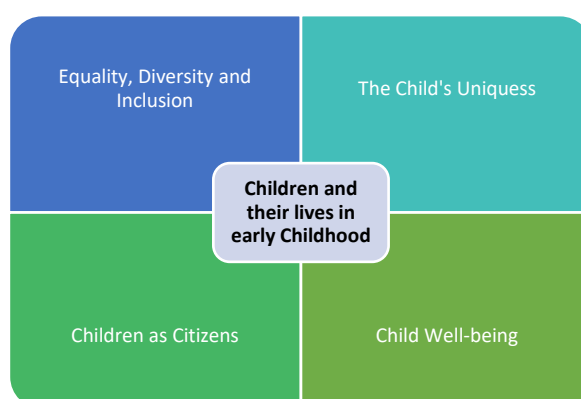
Section 2

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.

Group one: Children and their lives in early childhood



Suggestions for the first group of Principles: *Children and their lives in early childhood*

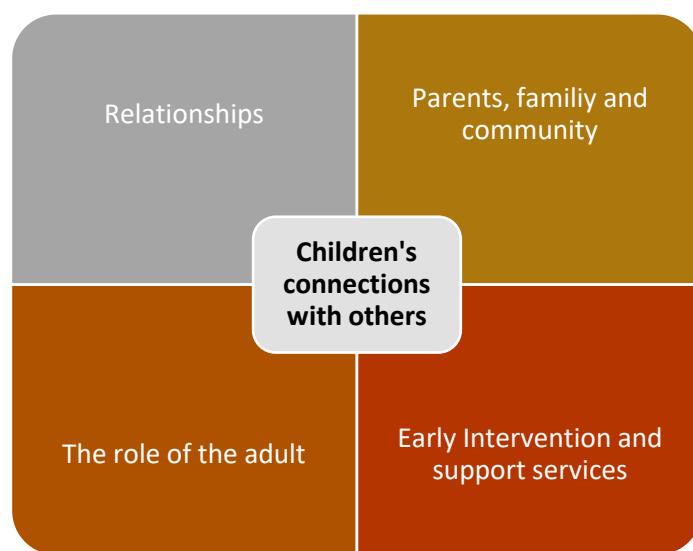
1. Incorporate a new principle '**Child Well-being**' with a focus on attunement and coregulation in order to nurture resilience
 2. Amend Equality and Diversity to '**Equality Diversity and Inclusion**' in keeping with the thrust of the Diversity Equality and Inclusion Charter (2016) and the Access and Inclusion Model (2016)
 3. Strengthen '**Children as Citizens**' to create a comprehensive link with Sustainable Development Goals, e.g., responsibility in the immediate context of the early childhood setting, progressing to learning about being socially and environmentally responsible citizens within the wider community.
- Foreground the Child as a citizen with rights in the here and now and not just as future adults. - Incorporate Laura Lundy's participatory framework of *space, voice,*

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audience and influence in keeping with the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making (DCYA, 2019)

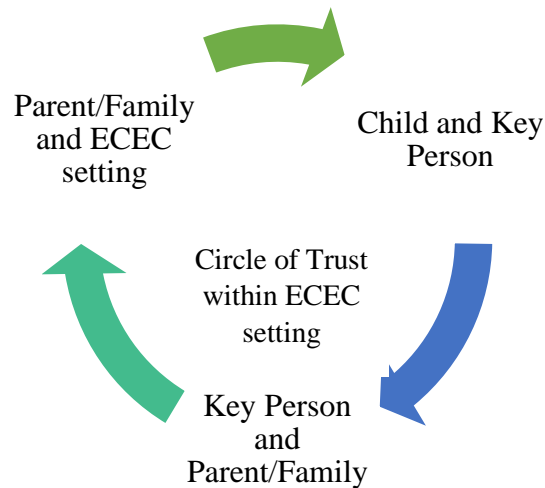
4. Include the principle of '**Empowerment**' so that every child experiences an empowering curriculum that is developed in collaboration with the children, their parents/families, teachers and community, encapsulating the concept of 'contributing'

Group two: Children's connections with others

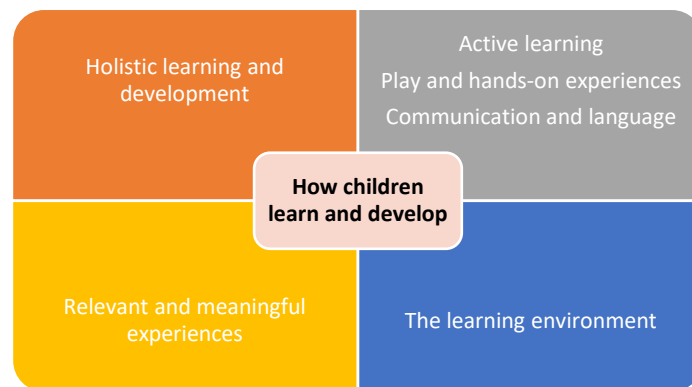


Suggestions for the second group of Principles: Children's connections with others

1. Amend language to reflect terms used in '*Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC), 2022-2028*' (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) 2021), i.e., practitioner to **Educator**
2. Include a new principle '**Early Intervention and Support services**' to reflect the supports available through the Access and Inclusion Model and the various services with which young children (birth to six) may need to engage with depending on their particular strengths, abilities and needs
3. Include the concept of **slow relational pedagogy** in the principle dealing with '**Relationships**'.
4. Include a principle on '**Key Person Approach**' to reinforce and consolidate the need for a '*circle of trust*' between Children and Key Person, Key Person and Parent/Family, Parent/Family and ECEC setting (see figure 1).



Group three: How Children Learn and Develop



Suggestions for the third group of Principles: How Children learn and develop

1. Include principle on '**Participation**' and the adult mediating role in supporting all childrens' rights to participatory experiences indoors and outdoors in ECEC
2. As above, specify that children learn and develop through **slow relational pedagogy**
3. Strengthen the 'Learning Environment' to take account of the principles of Universal Design for Learning, as well as emphasising the physical, emotional, aesthetic and temporal (PEAT) (Moloney and McCarthy, 2010) aspects of the learning environment

In light of the greater emphasis upon '**Transition to school**' and the seminal work undertaken by the NCCA in development the Mo Scéal templates, consideration should be given to introducing a fourth group of principles, focussing upon '**Transition**'

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.

Suggestions for enhancing and updating the themes of *Aistear*

- Expand the theme Communicating to include ‘**Communicating and Contributing**’ to reflect the expanded understanding of Citizenship and incorporating Lundy’s Model of Participation

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.

Suggestions for enhancing and updating *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice.

In relation to the Guidelines for Good practice, OMEP Ireland suggests the need to advocate for the following:

- Trauma sensitive and culturally sensitive approaches for all
- Use of *Key Person Approach* with children from birth to 6 years
- *A circle of trust* with and between child, key-person, parents/guardians/family and ECEC setting.
- Real authentic and meaningful experiences with the wider community
- Slow and relational pedagogy. Relational Pedagogy should be clearly defined as the intentional practice of caring, compassionate educators interacting with children to build and sustain positive, responsive and trusting relationships
- Attunement and coregulation
- Supporting and developing children's technology literacy
- Guiding and supporting children's behaviour using connecton and relationships
- Sustainable development linked to the concept of 'slow pedagogy' and citizenship as well as the Lundy Model of Participation

Data Protection

The NCCA fully respects your right to privacy. Any personal information which you volunteer to the NCCA will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts. If you require further information related to data protection please visit <https://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement> or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at dpo@ncca.ie.

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