



Toolkit for Parental Engagement in Early Learning and Care Services

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An Ghníomhaireacht um
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Foreword

Being a parent is one of the most important jobs in the world, and while it is a job full of joy and rewards, it also comes with challenges and ups and downs.

We know that parents are the primary educators when it comes to supporting the holistic development of their children, but we also know that children are more likely to reach their full potential when their main caregivers and practitioners work together. For a host of reasons, including government provision and policy, children are increasingly spending time in early learning and care services prior to commencing school, and so this sector, and how it engages with and enables parents, is of increasing importance.

We also know that when we work from a prevention and early intervention perspective we can improve outcomes for children and families which will last a lifetime. By working in partnership with parents and supporting them to do the best possible job that they can, whilst also being mindful of supporting parents with their own needs, we can promote resilience in families.

CDI's Toolkit for Parental Engagement in Early Learning and Care Services provides a practical resource for early learning and care practitioners, managers and organisations seeking to improve parental engagement with a view to improving outcomes for children and families.


I believe that this Toolkit will offer a practical and useful guide to support early learning and care services in strengthening their relationships with parents. The Toolkit offers an abundance of strategies, tips and activities aimed at supporting early learning and care practitioners, who can in turn support parents as they navigate their way through one of life's most important journeys. The Toolkit also encourages early learning and care practitioners to reflect on their work with children and families, a process that will no doubt impact positively on their relationship with, and responsibilities for children, other stakeholders and indeed, each other.

I very much welcome this Toolkit as a resource in guiding best practice in the area of parental engagement in early learning and care services and I am confident that it will be an invaluable resource for practitioners.

Katherine Zappone
Minister for Children & Youth Affairs



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CDI would like to sincerely thank all of the Parent Carer Facilitators (PCFs) in Tallaght West for their valuable contribution to the development of this Toolkit. These are both past and present: Grace Corrigan, George Best, Tracy Barker, Tracy Whyte, Bernie Coleman, Natalie McGarry, Caroline Moore, Kasia Purcell, Ciara Treacy, Laura Aspell, Glynis Dunne, Emma Ferris, Emily Dunleavy, Aisling Breathnach and Natalie Dunne and  Miriam Hudson. We would also like to extend our thanks to Catherine McIntyre, a former PCF and Development Officer in South Dublin Childcare Committee, who also assisted with the planning and compilation of this resource. The CDI staff who contributed their time and expertise to this document are Mary Dolan, Elaine Fagan, Michelle Butler, Tara Scott and Gráinne Smith. Together, every individual who offered insights, shared experience or reflected on content has helped in creating a document designed to promote positive parental engagement in early learning and care services.

This Toolkit would not have been possible without the support of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Atlantic Philanthropies. Their focus on prevention and early intervention has not only underpinned the CDI ethos, but informed much of current thinking in relation to services for children and their families. The financial support provided was complemented by their vision and commitment to better understanding how and why we can have a positive impact on the lives of children and their families.

Glossary of Acronyms Used

ABC	Area Based Childhood Programme
AON	Assessment of Need
AP	Atlantic Philanthropies
BCN1	Behavioural Care Needs Form
CDI	Childhood Development Initiative
CoP	Community of Practice
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EY	Early Years
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
OT	Occupational Therapist
HLE	Home Learning Environment
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Teacher
PCF	Parent Carer Facilitator
PEIP	Prevention and Early Intervention Programme
PPCC	Parents Plus Community Course
SLT	Speech and Language Therapy/Therapist
SNA	Special Needs Assistant

INTRODUCTION



The purpose of this Toolkit is primarily to support front-line staff working in early learning and care services to develop and maintain strong partnerships with parents. It works as a guide to building and sustaining parental engagement and provides the tools needed for implementing six powerful strategies that can be used to introduce and maintain effective parent supports.

The information contained in this Toolkit is based on CDI's experience of establishing the Parent Carer Facilitator (PCF) role in a number of early learning and care services in the Tallaght West area as well as drawing on Irish and international research. The Toolkit is designed to be a useful and practical resource for front-line practitioners and managers working in early learning and care settings where there is commitment to developing or strengthening their partnership with parents.

We fully recognise that family units come in lots of variations. Whilst we refer in this Toolkit to "parents", this is intended to incorporate whatever care and guardianship arrangements are in place.

The term 'early years practitioner' was originally used to reflect terminology in use while the Toolkit was being developed. However; in view of further developments in the field of early childhood education, both in Ireland and more globally, the term 'practitioner' has been replaced by 'ELC practitioner'. This captures the key role of the ELC practitioner in providing enriched early childhood experiences for children focused on enabling the holistic development of the child.

This Toolkit includes information, case studies and practical steps that professionals working with parents can draw from as they develop engagement strategies with parents, children and other services in the community.

It includes the following sections:

Section 1

This section provides information about CDI, CDI Early Years Service and the history of how the PCF role has developed.

Section 2

This section describes the CDI model of Parental Engagement based on six strategies. Each of these strategies is explained, the underpinning research referenced, and its practical application illustrated through real-life case studies provided by CDI's PCFs. Activities and tip sheets that can be used as a team or individually are also suggested, in order to enable the integration of these approaches into your service.

The six strategies underpinning CDI's model of Parental Engagement are:

- 1. Taking a Strengths-Based Approach to Parenting;**
- 2. Building Relationships;**
- 3. Inclusion and Partnership;**
- 4. Improving the Home Learning Environment;**
- 5. Supporting Transitions; and**
- 6. Supporting Childhood Difficulties and Referrals.**

Section 3

This section explores the processes that can be used to integrate a parental engagement support role, or to increase parental engagement using a whole team approach within your organisation, based on CDI's experience of implementing the PCF role.

This section also provides practical templates and resources that can be used by ELC practitioners working with parents.

In addition, resources, websites and places for further information are provided at the end of the Toolkit.

How to Use this Toolkit

CDI's experience of funding the PCF role within early learning and care services has been unique in providing a dedicated role to work with parents, but we recognise that most early learning and care services will not have the resources for this. The principles and processes described in this Toolkit, however, can be integrated into any early learning and care service.

It is recommended that you initially read the entire Toolkit and then refer back to the relevant sections for detailed consideration as implementation in your service progresses. The strategies outlined in the Toolkit are not written in sequential order, but are rather intended to be used as a resource to dip in and out of. The Toolkit is designed so that ELC practitioners can choose the areas they want to focus on, depending on what feels appropriate and relevant for their individual service.

We suggest that the reader also draw on CDI's *Quality Services, Better Outcomes* (2018) Workbook as a complement to this Toolkit. The Workbook provides information, research and tips for the practical application of evidence-informed approaches, and as such is a useful companion to this Toolkit.

SECTION 1 - Background



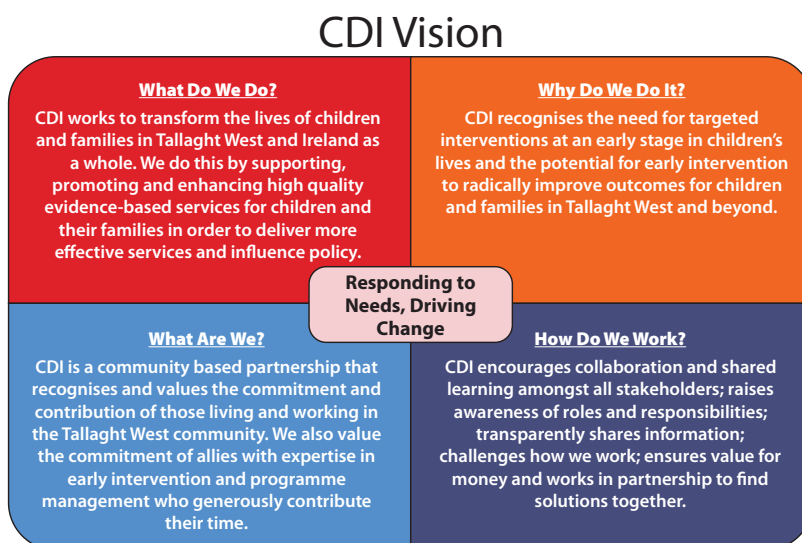
1.1 The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)

The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) is funded under the government's Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, which builds on the learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes (PEIP). The ABC Programme aims to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. It has a particular emphasis on improving health, educational and social outcomes for children and young people, and on improving the effectiveness of existing services for them.

Based in Tallaght West, CDI emerged from the professionalism, passion and persistence of a consortium of 23 concerned individuals and organisations in the community, who had a vision of a better place for children. Through innovative partnerships, they brought together the science of evidence-based practice and rigorous evaluation, with the spirit of an approach focused on the identified needs of children and families.

CDI designs, delivers and evaluates prevention and early intervention approaches across a spectrum of local needs including language, literacy, health, early learning and care, conflict management and community safety. All CDI programmes are evidence-informed and manualised, and are delivered through existing structures and services.

Figure 1.1: CDI's vision



1.2 CDI's Early Years Service

A needs analysis report entitled How are our Kids (CDI, 2004) characterised the community of Tallaght West as having an over-representation of families living in poverty, many in lone parent family households and often suffering from stress that is related to multiple disadvantage. As a result of this report, CDI developed a ten-year strategy that sought to act on three specific aims:

- to develop new services to support children and families;
- to encourage better integration of education, social care and health provision;
- to promote community change initiatives to improve the physical and social fabric of the neighbourhoods in which children live, play and learn.

As part of this strategy, the CDI Early Years Service was rolled out to nine early years services in the Tallaght community. The CDI Early Years Service was a two-year early years education programme targeted at children and their families in Tallaght West.

One of the core components of CDI's Early Years Service focused on the facilitation of parents'/carers' self-identified parenting needs and educational interests through work with a dedicated PCF and through participation in a parent training course. Specifically, the parent component consisted of the following:

- provision of quality childcare;
- activities for parents based on their specific needs as a means of ameliorating the effects of social stressors on parents. This was to be aided by home visits to liaise and develop relationships with parents and to provide information for parents on topics such as education, services or extra supports;
- provision of a parent education programme (Parents Plus) to support parents in the positive parenting of their children, with a focus on enhancing children's learning and development.

1.3 Evaluation of CDI's Early Years Service

In 2013, despite the encouraging evaluation of the CDI Early Years Service, funding required that elements of the programme cease to continue. The PCF role was continued and remains an integral support for families in Tallaght West.

For parents/carers the programme focuses on the facilitation of parents'/carers' self identified parenting needs and educational interests through work with a dedicated parent carer facilitator (PCF) and through participation in a parenting course. (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 6).

1.4 The Parent Carer Facilitator (PCF) Role

The PCF provides support to parents both in the service and at home to meet the educational and developmental needs of the family.

The PCF role includes the following:

- collaborating with parents to identify their needs;
- collaborating with other staff in the early learning and care setting to affect the best outcomes for the parent and child including liaising with early years key workers regarding observations made in supporting child development;
- implementing parental engagement strategies (home visits, coffee mornings, being a visible presence at drop-off and collection times, one-to-one meetings, supporting families to establish a parent and toddler group, etc.);
- promoting the achievement of developmental milestones by encouraging parents/carers to access training, further education and employment as part of an ongoing developmental process;
- supporting parents/carers and children to form links and access other services in the community;
- supporting parents/carers in making referrals for both the parent and child/children to other required services, and support in accessing appointments;

- liaising with health professionals and specialist agencies in relation to children with additional needs;
- being vigilant in monitoring and responding to child protection and welfare concerns or developmental delay in line with *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children*, and other relevant legislation;
- preparing, as appropriate, reports on individual children or families and participating in case conferences or other meetings concerning the welfare of children (in partnership with parents), including Meitheal;¹
- assisting the flow of information in all directions – up, down and across the service – by sharing information held and also seeking information needed (with parental consent);
- delivering parent education courses with a view to reducing parental stress, improving relationships between parents and their children and supporting a positive home learning environment.

As previously stated, few early learning and care services will have the resources to employ someone whose primary role is specifically working directly with parents. Where this is not possible, it is suggested that the Toolkit is used as a practical guide to aid in the process of improving parental engagement in early learning and care services. It can be used by ELC managers, individual ELC practitioners or as a resource to aid reflective discussion and planning at team meetings. It is not anticipated that early learning and care services will implement the entire content, but rather that the Toolkit will offer practical resources that can be referred to as needed.

¹ **Meitheal** is a national practice model that enables the needs and strengths of children and their families to be properly identified and understood. This way of working will ensure that the proper supports and services are made available to children and families when they are required.

SECTION 2 - CDI Model of Parental Engagement



2.1 Introducing the Model

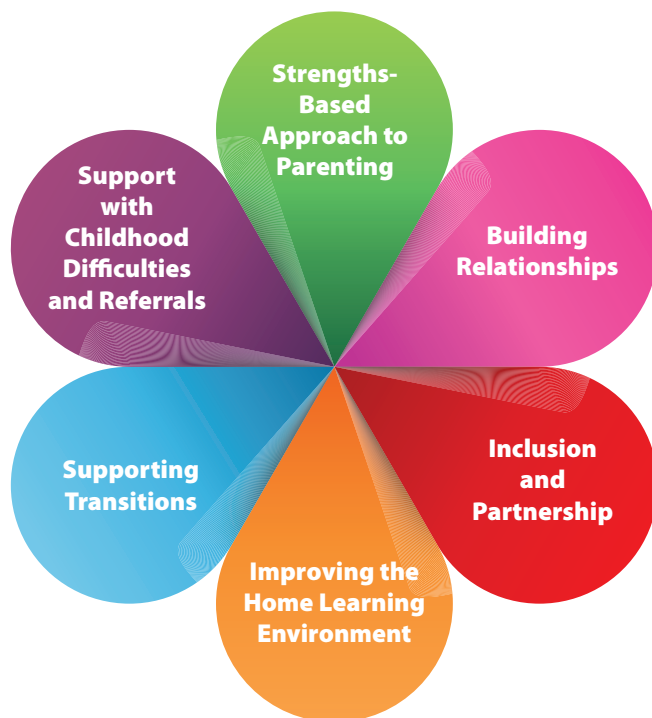
There is a great deal of evidence indicating that parental engagement is vital to children’s learning and development (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003).

This Toolkit works as a guide to building and sustaining parental engagement in the context of early learning and care services and provides the tools needed for implementing six powerful strategies that can be used to introduce and maintain effective parental supports.

The six strategies are:

1. **A Strengths-Based Approach to Parenting;**
2. **Building Relationships;**
3. **Inclusion and Partnership;**
4. **Improving the Home Learning Environment;**
5. **Supporting Transitions;**
6. **Supporting Childhood Difficulties and Referrals.**

Figure 2.1: CDI’s model for parental engagement



2.2 A Strengths-Based Approach to Parenting

Strength-based approach is an approach to people that views situations realistically and looks for opportunities to complement and support existing strengths and capacities as opposed to focusing on, and staying with, the problem or concern. State of Victoria, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2012, p. 6)

Front-line staff across a range of disciplines and settings work in a supportive capacity with parents and children and model a culture of working from a strengths-based perspective. Having a strengths-based approach when working with children requires that ELC practitioners strive to view every child as an

individual and seek to discover the uniqueness and potential that each child has to offer.

By demonstrating a commitment to and an investment in getting to know a child, taking time to identify their unique strengths and abilities, ELC practitioners can support children to develop a healthy sense of self.

The same approach can be taken when working in partnership with parents. ELC practitioners can encourage parents to take a strengths-based approach to parenting by providing feedback to parents based on their interactions and observations of the child. For example, information is shared about what the child does well, their likes, interests and talents.

It is important to recognise and respect that parents are the experts when it comes to their child. They are the child's primary educators, and all professionals working with families can model a strengths-based approach by aiming to empower parents in their role.

You can do this by:

- ✓ developing a trusting working relationship;
- ✓ believing that parents know their children better than you do;
- ✓ regularly discussing the importance and value of the parental role in your interactions with parents;
- ✓ remaining non-judgemental even when you don't agree with a parents' choices;
- ✓ fostering a culture of respect where diversity is celebrated.

When working in a supportive role with parents, you may often be working with parents presenting with complex needs and difficulties. While there is a tendency to want to 'rescue' the parent, solve their difficulties and ultimately make their situation better, it is important to work from an approach of focusing on parents' strengths and existing inner resources and supporting them in their exploration to find and deliver their own solutions.

By working from a strengths-based perspective, you will be supporting the parent to increase their confidence in their role as parents, build resilience and develop an ability to cope with stress.

There are lots of other potential benefits to this approach. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2015), systematically eliciting parent and family strengths and needs can:

- improve communication;
- help build rapport with parents by demonstrating respect and creating a partnership that is focused on identifying and meeting the child's and family's needs;
- build parental confidence by acknowledging new concerns and honouring their importance;
- prioritise needs and issues for discussion and follow-up and facilitate early detection of potential problems;
- identify needed referrals or community resources that will enhance a family's ability to maximise their child's development;
- offer opportunities for parents to share the triumphs and challenges of child rearing.

**Group Activity:**

- Put a sheet up in the staffroom/kitchen and ask the team to write on it all the things they feel when they are praised or affirmed.
- At the next opportunity, discuss how they can all give some of these 'warm' feelings to parents, especially the stressed ones!!

Tip Sheet 1: Top tips for working with parents using a strengths-based approach

Activity for ELC practitioners: Choose one tip to really focus your attention on at a time – can you integrate it into your work with parents?



This tip sheet can be circulated to all staff in the early learning and care setting and completed individually with a view to discussing progress at a team meeting, at individual supervision, or even over a coffee break!

- ✓ Think about one parent you met today and identify something they are really good at.
- ✓ The next time a child appears tearful on arrival, ask the parent what helps to soothe the child at home.
- ✓ Observe the parents who get down to their child's level and make eye contact with the child – share your observations and affirm them.
- ✓ The next time you are going to talk to a parent, consider how you can focus on positive qualities and progress before placing attention on a parent's limitations or weaknesses.
- ✓ Think of one parent who often seems distracted by their mobile phone and think about how you can promote engagement using a strengths-based approach.
- ✓ Identify a parent who makes a conscious effort to ensure that their child attends regularly, even during times of stress or natural breaks in the family routine.
- ✓ Think about a parent who manages conflict or challenging behaviour with ease.
- ✓ Think about a parent you frequently give advice to and consider how you can support him/her in their exploration to find their own solutions to difficulties that may arise.
- ✓ Think about the last time you made a phone call to another service on a parent's behalf. Ask yourself if that parent was capable of doing this independently and, if not, consider how you could support the parent to build their capacity and confidence in this area.
- ✓ Consider asking parents to participate by seeking their input in tasks that are of benefit to all accessing the service, for example, a gardening project or a clean-up day.
- ✓ Get to know the parents and observe where their strengths lie. Nurture known talents among parents. For example, is there a parent with a particular skill who could contribute/share their skills to benefit the service?



Insight ...

'It was so much easier to motivate my team when I was clear of the road we were taking and the steps we needed to get there.' (ELC manager)



Tip Sheet 2: Top tips for ELC managers to support the team in working with parents using a strengths-based approach

This tip sheet can be used as a tool for individual reflection or as a tool to aid discussion with your own line manager or board of management.

- ✓ Consider how you will create a space for staff to share their experiences of working with parents using a strengths-based approach. Start by asking people to define it and talk about their experience of it and what helps and hinders them in taking this approach.
- ✓ Ask the team to give you specific examples of the benefits they have seen when working from a strengths-based perspective.
- ✓ Keep the team focused on reflecting on their interactions with parents and monitor progress by doing fortnightly check-ins and giving reminders about the importance of working with a strengths-based approach.
- ✓ Consider how much emphasis you place on leading your team by example – do you foster a culture of seeing parents as the experts by ensuring that all parents feel welcomed and valued? Do you affirm staff and take a strengths-based approach with them?
- ✓ Consider your environment – do you have or can you create a designated space for parents to talk to other parents and share their expertise – for example, a parents' room with tea and coffee facilities?
- ✓ Consider what you need to work on as a team and create an action list in order to embed a strengths-based approach. Can you identify strong members of the team who can take the lead and act as role models for their peers?
- ✓ Consider how you are going to get progress reports on tasks identified on the action list.



Case Study – Strengthening the Parent Role

I worked with a mother who wanted information and support with toilet training her child. I held a 'ditch the nappy' coffee morning and also arranged to spend one-to-one time with mum. I gave her our toilet training tip sheet and reward chart, stickers and a sheet explaining the benefits of using reward charts. We talked about the best way to prepare both her child and herself. We also discussed how she could explain the transition to using the big toilet over the potty and we explored her feelings about bringing her child out without a nappy until she felt comfortable and confident in her abilities to manage the training process. Mum started the training process but became disheartened, as she felt it was not going well. I discussed toilet training with mum again, and again provided all hints and tips, but she did not start training again. At this point I felt mum needed support and encouragement in her own parenting skills and we talked again. I approached things differently and pointed out all of her strengths, all the positive things she does as a parent and the positive developments and learning her child has achieved as a result of her input to date. We again went through the tips, and mum felt confident to start the process again. This time, in addition to checking in with mum, myself and my colleagues encouraged and praised mum every step of the way. This child then trained very quickly and mum felt a great sense of achievement.



Worksheet 1: A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO PARENTING

Try the following:

- ✓ Choose one parent a week and find ways to name three strengths you can see.
- ✓ Ignore things you can ignore and instead focus on telling a parent what they do well.
- ✓ Use a coffee morning to invite parents to share one nice thing they did with their child over the weekend.
- ✓ As an icebreaker at the beginning of the parent and toddler group, ask parents to recall a time they laughed with their child this week.
- ✓ As an icebreaker at the beginning of a parent education programme, ask each parent to name one thing that they do well as a parent.
- ✓ Encourage parents to share their tips for toilet training with a parent who is going through the process.
- ✓ At a coffee morning, take the opportunity to ask parents to identify one thing they have learned since becoming a parent.

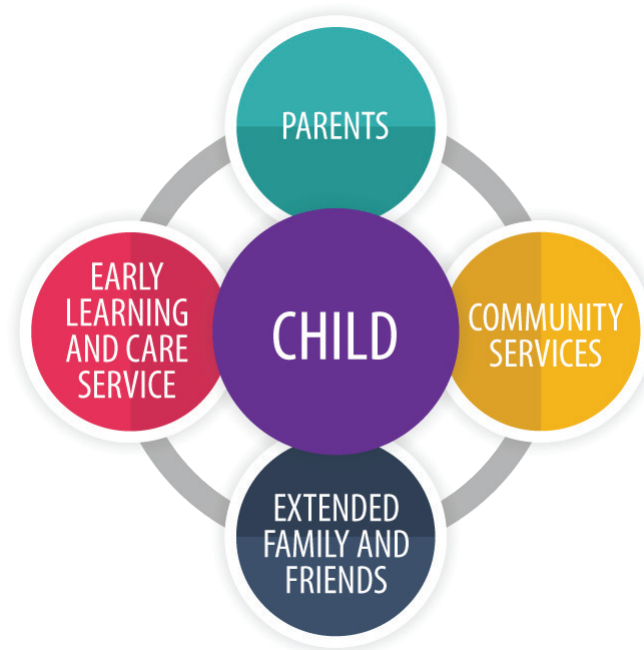
2.3 Building Relationships

2.3.1 Beginning to establish relationships

Parents are the most important people in children’s lives. The care and education that children receive from their parents and family, especially during their early months and years, greatly influence their overall development. Extended family and community also have important roles to play. (NCCA – Aistear, 2009, p. 11)

Building positive relationships allows you to work effectively with the parent in order to achieve the best outcomes for the parent as the primary carer and also the best outcomes for the child. The extended family is often an additional support to the family and it is recommended that ELC practitioners are cognisant of working to build good relationships with extended family members.

Figure 2.2: Building relationships



It is recommended that the process of building strong relationships and engaging in partnership with parents begins even before the child starts attending the early learning and care service.

Offering a range of different opportunities to engage and participate is therefore important and gives parents a choice of how they contribute to their children’s Early Years experience depending on family and work commitments, skills and personal preferences. (Ward, 2013, p. 48)

2.3.2 Early Contact

Here are some ideas for early engagement with parents:

2.3.2.1 Hold an Open Day/Evening

Holding an open day to introduce new parents to the service provides an opportunity for early

engagement with parents. This information session will usually be held in June prior to the September intake of children. In services where there isn't a designated staff member overseeing parental involvement, this presentation will usually be facilitated by the ELC manager, but it is recommended that as many of the staff as possible are involved. This will probably be the first time parents meet you and it is important you prepare and deliver a presentation that provides a clear and comprehensive view of the supports available and the ethos of the service. The aim is that parents go away from the open day with a clear understanding that there are supports available and that all ELC practitioners want to help and support parents to utilise them.

The presentation could include:

- ✓ an introduction to the staff working in the early learning and care setting. This could be done as a fun icebreaker – show a photograph of each staff member along with their first name, and maybe something unusual or quirky about them, for example, their favourite song, ice cream or holiday destination;
- ✓ where relevant, an explanation of the functions of the different staff members and give an overview of their roles;
- ✓ the age profile and adult-to-child ratio in each of the rooms;
- ✓ details of the times and dates of registration and what paperwork parents will be required to bring in order to register their child;
- ✓ breakdown of fees and funding schemes that children may be eligible for, e.g. Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme (ECCE);
- ✓ service policies in relation to attendance/absences, child protection, behaviour management, confidentiality, social media, etc.;
- ✓ information relating to pre-school inspections, e.g. frequency, purpose, date of last inspection;
- ✓ information on staff availability to meet with parents on a one-to-one basis where this can be facilitated and how to make contact to arrange this;
- ✓ some information about the in-house supports available and what the service can offer, e.g. parenting courses, home visits, support with establishing a parent and toddler group, information about other services that can offer support, support with referrals to external services for both the parent and the child;
- ✓ what the parent can expect from a one-to-one meeting in relation to confidentiality and privacy. It is also crucially important to outline, from the outset, where there are exceptions to maintaining confidentiality, i.e. if there are concerns relating to a welfare or child protection concern;
- ✓ details on the availability and purpose of home visits, if relevant, in order to incorporate the child's home learning environment into the early learning and care setting.

Another recommendation to support the initial presentation and capture early interest and engagement would be to invite a parent who has played an active role in the service to come and share their story, and to talk about their experience of the service and the benefits for their child.

This session is an opportunity to:

- begin to build rapport with parents;

- advise parents that you and your team are there to support them in their role as primary carer and also to support extended family members/guardians who are involved in the care of the child;
- assist parents with the home to early learning and care service transition. (See Section 2.6 – Supporting Transitions – for further information.)

The next time you meet parents is likely to be at the registration stage. Registration is a key contact opportunity in the early stages of building an alliance with parents, and it is recommended that those with responsibility for supporting parents' needs are always present if possible.

At this point of contact it is important to:

- wear a name badge and introduce yourself – encourage parents and children to call you by your name;
- make a conscious effort to make the family feel welcome;
- smile – a simple gesture that helps put parents and children at ease;
- complete a 'Registration Form' with the parent on a one-to-one basis;
- give the parent contact details and invite them to call if they have any questions or concerns after the registration meeting;
- have an introductory coffee morning planned. Give everyone a flyer and explain it's to help them to get to know the service, the ELC practitioners and each other.

2.3.2.2 Offer support on the first day

As the ELC manager, you are likely to be the person who will take the lead on building initial relationships with parents. It is therefore advisable that you are present at registration to introduce yourself to parents. It is important to be aware that not all parents will have been at the open day and those who weren't will need information about all of the services offered – it is advisable to bring leaflets to distribute and to be on hand to answer any questions. From this point on, you can begin to build a relationship with parents and extended family members. It is recommended that you begin to foster a culture of partnership and respect by being available, maintaining a welcoming open-door policy, focusing on individual parents' positive attributes and strengths, and reflecting on these observations in a way that is meaningful.



Activities:

- Lead your team in a role play, 'Stepping into the shoes of a new parent'. Consider how it feels walking through the door for the first time. What do you see and notice? What questions do you have?
- Work with your team to develop an introductory leaflet for parents based on your reflections ...

2.3.2.3 Ongoing contact with parents

It is always beneficial if the team can collectively make a conscious effort, where possible, to be available daily at drop-off and/or collection times in order to gradually get to know parents and gather information that will aid in the relationship-building process – for example, establishing parents' names, family composition (siblings and extended family), parents' daily routine (if they are stay-at-home parents or in employment, etc.) Daily communication with parents and being a visible presence build trust and allow you an opportunity to observe in order to understand the support required.

There is real value in all staff committing to taking any opportunity to promote the development of a culture where parental participation is actively encouraged.

The following strategies can be used to help build relationships with parents:

2.3.2.4 Set up one-to-one meetings with parents at the beginning of the year

For some parents, a one-to-one meeting in the initial settling-in period will be useful. The purpose of this meeting is to:

- build relationships and trust;
- support parents in asking any questions they did not feel comfortable asking at the open day;
- reach out to any parents who didn't attend the open day;
- identify any support needs;
- provide information about the service and other supports in the community.

Ideally, every parent would be offered the opportunity for a one-to-one meeting at this early stage, but resources may not allow for that. If this is the case, you could consider the following when identifying which parents may require a one-to-one meeting:

- speak to the team of ELC practitioners and ask them to share their observations of how each family is settling in;
- notice the parent who doesn't appear comfortable at drop-off or collection time;
- notice the parent who appears particularly anxious leaving their child or who is in need of additional reassurance;
- try to be aware of parents who are particularly vulnerable and may require additional support;
- try to be aware of parents who ask the same questions repeatedly.

If you are holding one-to one-meetings with parents, it is preferable to have a designated space such as a parents' room or private office where you won't be disturbed. When deciding when to meet, it is advisable to consult with parents and agree a time that will work for all concerned, rather than giving them an appointment to meet without prior consultation, which would not only demonstrate a lack of respect but also increase the chances of the meeting being cancelled, as the parent may have other conflicting commitments.



Tip ...

Sample agenda for one-to-one parent meeting

- Welcome & introductions;
- Feedback on how the child is settling into the service;
- Information on the service;
- Parental supports available;
- Parental supports required;
- Questions from parent;
- Optional tour of service.

2.3.2.5 Invite parents to share

Start the year off by getting into the practice of welcoming and eliciting information from parents. It is recommended that you get a sense of which events, talks or workshops parents would be interested in participating in before organising anything. This will increase the likelihood of good attendance and ensure that you have an engaged and interested audience. Establishing a sense of every parent's interests, passions, skills and knowledge is also important.

Activities to identify parents' needs could include:

- ✓ planning a coffee morning to start this process;
- ✓ devising a checklist of suggested activities and choosing a morning to complete it with parents at drop-off time;
- ✓ distributing a survey at the beginning of the year designed to gauge what skills parents have.

Remember ... The only way to know is to
ASK ... ASK ... ASK!!!!

'The important thing is to not stop questioning'
Albert Einstein

2.3.2.6 Let parents know how they can help

Many parents want to be involved in their child's development and would like to volunteer their skills and time, but often won't put themselves forward unless they are made to feel valued and welcomed. You will often need to directly ask or invite parents to contribute. Your encouragement will be very important, and building relationships will be the key to improving parental participation. Be direct and clear when asking for assistance and outline your expectations. It is also good practice to invite parents to participate in decision making where appropriate.²

² Local County Childcare Committees and www.thewheel.ie are a suggested point of contact for support and guidance with this process.

Activity: Think about how your service can involve parents in decision making.

Could you consider:

- forming a committee of parents to coordinate events, outings, etc.?
- inviting parents to sit on existing committees?
- nominating a parent to help manage the content of the noticeboard?
- having a parent sit on your interview panel when recruiting staff?
- inviting parental input when devising new or revising existing policies?
- involving parents in the management of the service, for example, considering whether a parent representative could sit on the board or attend management meetings?



2.3.2.7 Communicate often and in a variety of ways

It is important to communicate effectively and often with parents so that they feel included from the outset. Providing detailed information about what is going on in the service is very effective. Parents like to hear about what the children are learning and what they have accomplished. Keep the parents engaged and interested by sharing with them what events the staff are excited about and what the children are looking forward to, and share details of what the children are learning. It is helpful to suggest conversations that the parent may wish to initiate with their children at home.

An example of such a question is 'ask your child to tell you all about the fairy garden we made this week'. Be creative in your methods of communication, bearing in mind that different parents will have different preferences as to how they like to receive the information.

You may also consider requesting feedback from parents at the mid-way point or at the end of the year to gauge how satisfied parents feel in relation to the communication they receive and the supports they are offered.

Examples of effective forms of communication include:

- ✓ text messages;
- ✓ phone calls;
- ✓ emails;
- ✓ community noticeboard;
- ✓ social media, e.g. Facebook page for parents;
- ✓ website;
- ✓ notes for children to take home;
- ✓ Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire (See Section 3 – Toolkit Resources – for example).

While using various forms of communication with parents is useful, it is also important to realise that forms of communication can be problematic and that issues around confidentiality, data protection and consent can arise. For example, social media needs to be closely monitored to ensure that parents are

not publicly engaging in conversations that may put a child's confidentiality at risk.

Steps to manage this include:

- having a communications policy and ensuring that all parents are made aware of it. Issues such as data protection, confidentiality and consent should be clearly outlined in the policy. It is highly recommended that all parents read the policy and sign that they have done so;
- ensuring that correspondence is limited solely to issues relating to the early years service;
- setting up social media privacy in a way that any comments made by parents are reviewed and approved before being made public.

If using social media, it is strongly advised that parents sign a consent form that should be kept on file. This should include consent to be contacted via social media and consent to upload children's photographs if displaying online.

Activity: Gather all staff at a team meeting and review your current communication methods and future plans.

Consider the following ...

- Do we have a communications policy and, if not, why not?
- What's currently working well?
- What has been problematic?
- Which communication methods elicit the greatest response from parents when a response is required?
- How can we build on existing systems?



2.3.2.8 Set up a parent and toddler group

As any new parent will confirm, becoming a parent can be a daunting experience; nothing can quite prepare you for it, and just having somewhere to go to talk to other parents or even just other adults can be of great help. (Kelleher, 2014, p. 5)

Setting up a parent and toddler group allows children to become familiar with the service, staff and other children in advance of attending the early learning and care service. It also gives parents an opportunity to build a sense of trust in the service and to start developing a relationship with the staff, thus creating a sense of familiarity that will make the settling in period easier when the child starts attending the pre-school. Encouraging parental participation at this early stage will also increase the chances of getting parents invested and engaged in the service when the child is attending the service. Regular attendance at a parent and toddler group will enable the development of peer support amongst parents, which can be invaluable in combating isolation, stress and mental health issues.

Tip Sheet 3: Top tips for setting up a parent and toddler group

- ✓ Decide who is responsible for organising the group and establish the role.
- ✓ Identify a space that has regular availability and can accommodate the numbers you expect.
- ✓ Consider whether you will require facilities for storage of toys and other materials.
- ✓ Consider whether you need to purchase any equipment – for example, toys, bottle heaters, seats, etc.
- ✓ Check you have the necessary insurance required to run the group from the chosen location.
- ✓ Put together a flyer or poster advertising the group to parents – highlight the benefits of the group for the child and parent and include details of day, time, location, contact number for organiser, cost and what parents are expected to bring.
- ✓ Ensure parents are clear on the expectations of them in relation to supervision of their child and participation – this can be done on the first day by having a group discussion or devising a group contract.
- ✓ Distribute task cards to the parents at the beginning of the session to promote partnership and autonomy over the group. (See Section 3 – Toolkit Resources.)
- ✓ Do a health and safety check before each session commences. (See Section 3 – Toolkit Resources.)
- ✓ Ensure you have enough materials to cater for the size of the group.
- ✓ Decide whether or not you will have an age limit and if you will allow siblings to attend if the group coincides with school holidays.
- ✓ Decide on your budget – will you have funds to provide refreshments on an ongoing basis? Can parents contribute to cover these costs?

2.3.2.9 Coffee mornings

Setting up regular coffee mornings allows parents to become familiar with the service and gives them an opportunity to build trust in the service and form positive relationships with the staff. Coffee mornings can also reduce isolation, as parents are given a space to socialise informally with their peers, develop relationships with them, share experiences and hear about all of the exciting things happening in the service. ELC practitioners can also utilise the coffee morning as an opportunity to invite guest speakers in to talk to the parents and to promote upcoming events such as parenting courses. Informal discussions in a relaxed atmosphere can also give parents an opportunity to learn ways to promote and encourage learning in the home environment.

Activity: Team Brainstorm

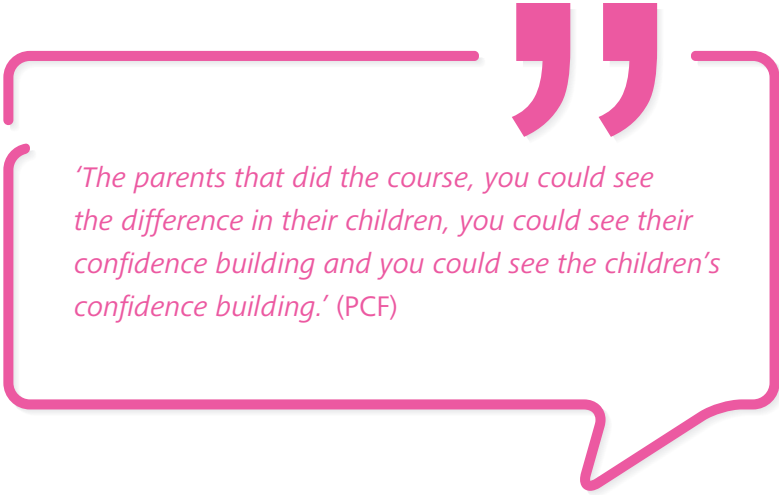


- Identify possible speakers and agree who will follow up with invitation.
- Consider who is going to facilitate the coffee morning – will this be a rota?
- Draw up a list of games, activities and craft ideas for the group.
- Consider if there are any issues arising in the service that could be discussed at a coffee morning, e.g. soothers, tantrums, toilet training, etc.
- Are there any grants available to support the development of the coffee mornings, e.g. Katherine Howard Foundation grant?
- Explore how parents can eventually be supported to run the group independently.

Tip Sheet 4: Top tips for establishing coffee mornings

- ✓ Choose a time and a day that is most likely to suit the majority of parents.
- ✓ Make sure that the physical space is welcoming, inviting and informal.
- ✓ Encourage the parents to get involved in the set-up for the coffee mornings – for example, a parents' rota outlining tasks such as selecting and displaying the toys, arranging the furniture, preparing the snacks, etc.
- ✓ Make sure that the snacks and refreshments offered are appealing and inviting.
- ✓ Use the noticeboard, newsletters, word of mouth, text messaging and service website as platforms for advertising.
- ✓ Alternate the format to allow for guest speakers from time to time.
- ✓ Invite feedback from parents, e.g. what do you look forward to about the coffee mornings?
What could be done to improve the experience?

2.3.2.10 Offer parent education courses



'The parents that did the course, you could see the difference in their children, you could see their confidence building and you could see the children's confidence building.' (PCF)

The more sessions of a parenting course that parents attended, the higher the Home Learning Environment (HLE), which indicates a positive effect of the CDI parenting course on home learning environment. (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 2)

Parent education is a key component in improving the home learning environment. In CDI's experience, a fundamental element of a parental support role is to deliver parent education to parents accessing the early learning and care services. The facilitator needs to have the capacity, confidence and experience to deliver a parenting programme. CDI recommends the implementation of evidence-based parent education programmes with recognised results leading to an improvement in parenting skills and ability. There are many such programmes, generally with far more similarities than differences. It is important to consider many and identify the right programme for your service and for parents.

A certified course gives the necessary assurance that the content is of high quality and based on research and that it can be tailored to meet the needs of the parent group to maximise the learning.

However, it is the delivery of the course that is crucial, so identifying staff (either in-house or external) who have good empathy and engagement skills and experience of delivering group work is essential.

Activity:

Consider doing the following at a team meeting:

- brainstorming local services or individuals who could support the delivery of parenting programmes, e.g. Public Health Nurses, Area Based Childhood Programmes, Tusla, community organisations, etc.;
- identifying what the particular needs of the parents are;
- brainstorming innovative ways to engage fathers in parent education programmes;
- practising group facilitation at team meetings by rotating the chairing of discussions and giving each other constructive feedback.

**Consider ...**

- ✓ Are any staff trained in the delivery of parent education programmes?
- ✓ Is there a budget available for staff training?

Tip Sheet 5: Top tips for delivering parent education programmes

- ✓ Schedule the programme on a day and a time that makes attendance manageable for parents. For example, consider if parents will be available during school holidays or on monthly children's allowance payment day.
- ✓ Pair up with another experienced ELC practitioner if delivering to a large group of parents or a group of parents presenting with a high level of need. Co-facilitating can also be beneficial if you are inexperienced at delivering parent education programmes and want to build confidence.
- ✓ Provide tea, coffee and inviting healthy treats for parents, and try to make the room informal and welcoming.
- ✓ Remember that previous course attendees can often be the best recruiters – include testimonials from parents who have previously completed the course when advertising with a flyer or in the newsletter.
- ✓ Ask parents who have previously completed the course to talk to new parents about their experience of participating and the learning they gained.
- ✓ Do a quick informal check-in at the end of each session and ask for feedback. For example, did the parents enjoy the session? What was helpful? What would they like more or less of? This gives an opportunity to tweak the delivery if it is not meeting the parents' needs, thus increasing the chances of parents seeing the course through to completion.
- ✓ Get to know the group dynamics. For example, consider who doesn't engage and needs prompting/encouragement or who dominates the group and needs gentle encouragement to allow others to contribute.
- ✓ End each session on a positive note. For example, ask parents 'what one message will you take from today?' and then give a preview/taster of what parents can look forward to the following week.
- ✓ Encourage as many fathers as possible to attend – having a gender balance can enrich the quality of the discussion. (See Section 2.4 for more information on this.)
- ✓ Don't worry that you need to have all the answers to every question asked – remember that your role is to deliver the programme and to facilitate discussion; you don't have to be the expert in everything.
- ✓ Remember that parents are the experts when it comes to their children; give them an opportunity to celebrate the successes.



Case Study – Benefit of attending a Parent and Toddler Group

I have noticed the benefits of parents and infants attending a weekly parent and toddler (PT) group before the child starts in the service on the pre-school programme. This weekly group involved parents meeting other parents in the community for mutual support, discussing a parental 'hot topic'. Parents discuss topics in detail with advice and support being offered by the PCF. Previous topics have included ditching the soother, establishing a bedtime routine, helping your child's language skills, developmental milestones in children under five and the Marte Meo method, among others. The group also involves children playing with other children – that offers the chance to learn communication and social skills.

The group operates as an almost unofficial feeder for enrolment in the pre-school. Both parents and the pre-school team have noted the benefits of children coming from the parent and toddler group in relation to transitioning from home to pre-school, as the child knows a familiar face in pre-school. This is also true with parents as well, as parents are aware of the role of the PCF and the supports they offer. We've also found that parents who transfer from the PT group to pre-school avail and seek supports offered by us.

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'Me and my son loved the parent and toddler group. We went every Wednesday and loved getting out of the house. By the time he went to the pre-school he had loads of little buddies which meant he settled in really easily. It was also easier for me to walk away because I knew the girls and trusted he was in good hands.'

(Fiona, parent)



Worksheet 2: BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

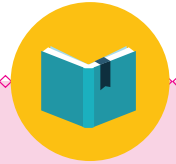
It is important to periodically review how we engage with parents.

The following questions can be used to identify strengths and areas for future development:

- ✓ Can I name my strengths when building relationships with parents?
- ✓ What three things can I do to make the parents feel at ease on the first day?
- ✓ Did I invite questions and provide opportunities for discussion at the initial parent information session?
- ✓ What did I feel worked well and what didn't work so well about the presentation?
- ✓ What would I change when doing my first introductory presentation to parents in the future?
- ✓ Did I invite participation and leave parents with the message that their contribution is valued?
- ✓ Do I have an understanding of the supports and services the parents need? If not, how can I find this out?
- ✓ Do the programmes, workshops and activities I plan to offer reflect the needs of the parents I am working with? How do I know this?
- ✓ How will I handle resistance from parents who find it difficult or would prefer not to engage in the early stages?
- ✓ What three things can I do to improve how I develop relationships with parents?

Tip Sheet 6: Top tips for developing meaningful engagement with parents

- ✓ Smile when you see parents.
- ✓ Take the time to learn parents' names and the names of significant people in the family's life.
- ✓ Always be honest and transparent in your interactions with parents so they can begin to develop a sense of trust in you.
- ✓ Communicate often and use a variety of communication methods – e.g. face to face, phone, text and newsletter. (Ideas for what to include in a parent newsletter can be found in Toolkit Resources in Section 3.)
- ✓ Show interest in the child – ask what he/she enjoys and share your observations of the child's likes and interests with parents.
- ✓ Let parents know how they can help their child or engage in the service.
- ✓ Acknowledge and thank parents for their participation.
- ✓ Acknowledge that relationship building is a gradual process and be prepared to be patient.



Case Study – Building and maintaining parent contact

One parent has been coming into the service for over a year but did not engage in any of the coffee mornings or education programmes. She made no connection at all with other parents. I asked her in for a 'get to know you' meeting but her husband attended in her place. He also attended our family days and Christmas and summertime events and would bring the child. If Mum did come she would ask to bring her sister along.

I received a flyer from the local librarian promoting a workshop dealing with depression which I posted to the noticeboard.

Mum approached me a couple of days later and asked me for some more information about the workshop. I brought her to a private space and she confided that she had been suffering with depression for years and asked me questions about booking, whether she would have to speak and if her sister could go with her. I called and booked two places on the course for her.

I made tea and we chatted for over an hour-and-a-half. She told me that most days she goes back to bed when she leaves her son to school. We talked about counselling and she said she had been before and it didn't help. We discussed taking small steps that might help, e.g. like going for short walks and gradually extending that a little, maybe even going into the shop by herself. When she came to pick her son up she whispered to me that she had gone for a short walk after we chatted. She started coming in every week for a chat, mostly just about the children and life.

She attended the workshop and gave positive feedback. She said that this was the first time she realised she wasn't the only person that suffered depression. She found it hard to believe that people could openly speak about their experience of depression. She shared with me how she was so ashamed of her condition and always felt it was her fault. She suffered dreadful guilt about not being able to do things socially with her children.

Since the workshop and with the support of her doctor and family, she has reduced her medication.

We have regular chats and cups of tea when she is having a difficult week or not coping too well. She has even had a birthday party for her little boy and invited some of the children from his room to the party. I have noted that there are a few parents she has connected with and there are some exchanges at drop-off and pick-up.

This Mum has come a long way and I believe it also has made a difference to how her son is building relationships with his peers in pre-school, which will support him in his transition into mainstream school.

2.4: Inclusion and Partnerships

Partnership involves parents, families and practitioners working together to benefit children. Each recognises, respects and values what the other does and says. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides. (NCCA – Aistear, 2009, p. 7)

ELC practitioners can work in partnership with parents by promoting a welcoming, inviting and positive environment where parents feel part of the service and the importance of the parents' role is consistently recognised.

According to Fitzpatrick (2012), research shows that the best outcomes for children are achieved when parents and educators work in partnership.

It is important that all interactions with parents are carried out in a respectful and non-judgemental manner. We know that parents are the experts when it comes to their children and it is helpful to model this ethos consistently and at every opportunity, particularly in the initial stages of building trust and positive relationships with parents.

This can be done by:

- reinforcing to parents on a regular basis that they know their own child better than anyone;
- reminding parents that they are the most important people in their child's world;
- respecting parents' decisions on issues relating to their child, even if at times it's not something you would recommend.

It is important to respect and celebrate diversity. Every individual parent will benefit from feeling valued, respected and nurtured.

There is inevitably diversity among families accessing early learning and care services, including one- and two-parent families; different ethnic backgrounds; different religious persuasion; children residing with grandparents or in the care of the state; parents who are in employment and some who never have been; educational attainment; and social circumstances. Some families may present as being more vulnerable than others – for example, parents and children from the travelling community, parents and children experiencing homelessness, individuals with disabilities, and low-income families.

It is essential that every effort be made to make the service inclusive and accessible to all children and families. All staff can do this by recognising and promoting the importance of the relationship between your service and parents.

It is important that you can provide supports for parents that ensure equality of access. Some of the strategies and practical steps you can use to do this include:

- having a parent representative on the Board of Management. This facilitates parents informing the decision-making process for the service. Where this is in place, utilise it by supporting parents in giving their feedback to the Board representative;
- encouraging both mothers and fathers to get involved. This may require that you use different ways of communicating, or change the wording of messages so that they include both fathers and mothers;

- asking the parent to provide you with the spelling and pronunciation for words used at home where English is a second language – for example, toilet, food, etc.;
- holding a day to celebrate diversity and the various cultures of the families attending the service. Some examples may include asking a parent from the travelling community to teach some words in Shelta/Cant, asking a Nigerian parent to bring in some traditional clothing, etc.;
- organising regular storytelling sessions where parents tell stories from their own childhood, so that all children can learn about and value the different cultures in the community.

It is important to recognise and respect that some parents may not wish to be involved. There are many reasons why this may be the case and it's also all right for people to make this choice. Be aware of potential barriers that may make including parents and working in partnership more difficult, and do what you can to minimise these.

Reasons may include:

- other commitments that take priority, e.g. full-time employment or caring for another family member;
- not feeling their contribution is valued;
- a lack of knowledge of the service;
- negative experiences of engaging with services;
- social and cultural issues such as language barriers, gender, literacy.

2.4.1. Including Fathers

'When my older kids were smaller I never got involved in what was going on. With my little fella now, sure I'm in his school all the time. I get the texts and invites about anything that's happening ... He was beside himself when I came on the trip to the farm ... I have to say, I had a brilliant day too.' (Frank, Parent)

Research consistently shows that children can benefit from the active involvement of fathers in their care and upbringing. A good relationship between fathers and their children, particularly in their early and pre-teenage years, is associated with a range of social, educational and psychological benefits. (Barnardos, 2005, p. 6)

As previously stated, it is important to ensure that both mothers and fathers are given the same opportunities to participate in the early learning and care service. It is CDI's experience that generally, aside from the day-to-day drop-off and collection, there are typically a higher number of mothers who are actively engaged in what's happening in the early learning and care services – for example, parent and toddler groups and parent education programmes. This is reflective of the early learning and care sector in Ireland, where there tends to be a gender imbalance, with the workforce being predominately female and with mothers taking more of an active role.

Some common barriers to fathers not engaging in early learning and care services include:

- work commitments;
- lack of confidence and skills;
- attitudes of society that early learning and care services are a place for women;
- staff attitudes and lack of confidence in how to engage fathers effectively;
- fathers may not reside with their child and may have limited contact with the service;
- fathers may feel out of place and uncomfortable due to a lack of engagement by their peers.

When reflecting on how to begin to be inclusive of fathers or how to improve on what's in place in your service already, it is important to:

- recognise the very important role that fathers play in their children's lives;
- be aware that some working fathers may not be available to participate in planned events during the day and consider offering alternatives;
- include fathers, especially where parents are separated, by inviting fathers to meetings, events and activities;
- include fathers in newsletters, e.g. have a section aimed specifically at dads, invite dads to suggest content, put out a call for dads to volunteer for tasks, etc.;
- promote and value the importance of fatherhood by displaying images of male role models around the service, for example, pictures of a father and child cooking or eating together could be displayed in the home corner.

It is also important and recommended to give due consideration to managing the process of inclusion of fathers in situations where they don't share custody and are not the child's primary carer. Supporting both parties where families are co-parenting or where there may be tension needs to be approached with sensitivity at all times. Issues relating to confidentiality and consent need to be considered and continually managed with whoever has legal responsibility for the care of the child. It may be an idea to check at registration whether you have permission to include the co-parent in correspondence, invitations for events throughout the year, etc.



Activity:

Consider the following ...

- ✓ Do I place value on promoting a gender balance by leading by example? What is my attitude to recruiting male ELC practitioners or male auxiliary staff?
- ✓ How can I explore my team's attitudes to working with fathers?
- ✓ How can I ensure that promoting the involvement of fathers is embedded in all aspects of the service and not something we do as an add-on?
- ✓ How will I support my team to measure if we are working effectively to engage fathers?
- ✓ Do my team require training to build their confidence and capacity in engaging with fathers?



Activity:

As an ELC practitioner, can you ...

- ✓ list five benefits of engaging with fathers?
- ✓ count how many fathers you spoke to this week?
- ✓ choose one father a day to give positive feedback to?
- ✓ look at the environment and pick out three things you see that portray the message that fathers are welcome?
- ✓ consider whether there are enough resources available in the service to reflect the importance of the fathers' role, e.g. books, posters, pictures?
- ✓ choose two things you could say this week to stress to fathers the importance of their role in relation to achieving better outcomes for their children?

Tip Sheet 7: Top tips for including fathers

- ✓ Ensure you take the time to tell fathers how much their contribution is valued.
- ✓ Consider running a fathers' only parent education course and running it at a time that works for them.
- ✓ Ask dads to bring in photographs of themselves and their children and display them in the early learning and care service.
- ✓ Ask fathers how they would like to be involved by simply talking to them informally, organising a coffee morning or designing a questionnaire specifically for fathers, gauging how they would like to be involved.
- ✓ When you need to phone a parent about an issue relating to a child, consider phoning dad instead of mum.
- ✓ Instead of addressing correspondence to parents as Parents/Carers, address correspondence as Mums, Dads and Carers.
- ✓ Consider how you will routinely communicate with fathers who do not reside with their child.
- ✓ Invite a father to the open evening to share his experience of engaging with the service to new parents.
- ✓ Invite a father with a particular skill to share it, e.g. a father who plays the guitar could be invited to do a music session with the children.
- ✓ Put fathers in touch with other fathers – they may be more likely to attend activities if they have a relationship with their peers.
- ✓ Have posters and books that highlight the importance of the father role.

2.4.2 Including Extended Family

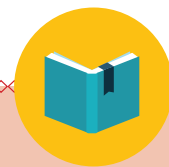
The extended family plays a very important role and can have a high level of impact on a child's learning and development. Children depend not just on their parents but also on their extended family to provide for their needs and to support them to learn and grow.

When thinking about how to begin to be inclusive of extended family members or how to improve on what's in place already, you could consider:

- thinking about the importance of the role of extended family in children's lives – for example, grandparents, adult siblings, aunts and uncles;
- holding activities for the extended family and always being clear that activities are open to all, not just parents;
- including grandparents, adult siblings, aunts and uncles in newsletters, e.g. invite them to share 'a day in the life of a grandparent or uncle' or a skill they can share, e.g. recipe of the week;
- organising one-off events such as grandparents' day, siblings' day, etc.

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“I always felt there was a place for me in my grandson's school. The staff respected what I had to say and invited me to the coffee get-together when his mammy couldn't go... It really meant a lot” Rita, Grandparent



Case Study – Working with Dad

I worked with a dad who was the sole carer for his two young boys after their mother left the family home due to issues relating to addiction. Initially I had limited contact with dad other than at drop-off and collection times. He usually presented as being shy and appeared uncomfortable in his interactions with the staff. One morning when I was in the hallway I observed him being very impatient towards his son who was reluctant to come in; it was very unusual to see him being short tempered and I'd never seen him frustrated like this before. I asked dad if he would like some assistance and together we coaxed the child in, reminding him of all the fun activities that were planned for the day. When walking back down the hallway, I asked dad if he would like to join me for a cup of tea. Initially he declined, but when I put it to him that he would be doing me a favour, as I had the kettle on and another parent had cancelled last minute, he agreed. We initially chatted about the weather and all the usual pleasantries and then I shared with him my observations that he seemed unusually stressed this morning. Dad disclosed that since mum had left the family home, his youngest son's behaviour was becoming increasingly challenging and he found it difficult to get him to sleep at night. I chatted to dad generally about the impact change can have on children and gave him examples of typical behaviours he might see in his son which were appropriate to his age and stage of development. I then offered to meet with dad to help him with getting a bedtime routine in place. Initially dad was reluctant but then said it couldn't do any harm to try. I met with dad for the following two weeks and gave him some tips and techniques to try at home. I also made a point of being visible at drop-off time in case dad had any questions. A few weeks later I met dad in the hallway. He thanked me for my support and disclosed that he didn't want anyone thinking he wasn't coping but he was glad of the help at a time he needed it most. I now make a point to send dad a text message when there are any upcoming coffee mornings or guest speakers coming into the service. Slowly but surely, I'm building a relationship with dad and I hope in the future he will have built up enough confidence to participate in one of our parent education courses.



Worksheet 3: INCLUSION AND PARTNERSHIP

It is important to continually promote the importance of the relationship between your service and parents. Consistently reflect on how you are doing this, how effective you are and how it can be improved.

Reflective questions to consider:

- ✓ Is everyone who comes through the door greeted with a welcome on arrival and wished well on departure?
- ✓ Does every parent feel welcome and valued as an expert on their child?
- ✓ Is the open-door policy working? Are parents and professionals coming and going? Is the service a hub of activity in the community?
- ✓ Do I play my part to encourage active participation of children, parents/carers, other professionals in order to ensure high quality service provision where everyone's needs are met?
- ✓ Is my role valued in the service? Do I feel like an active member of our community?
- ✓ Have I taken steps to ensure diversity is celebrated?
- ✓ What else can I do to improve inclusion and partnership?

2.5 Improving the Home Learning Environment (HLE)

A [home-learning environment] (HLE) is one where parents actively engage with their children in play and learning activities. (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 14)

CDI recognises that if parents can be supported to improve the home learning environment, it can significantly strengthen children's cognitive development.

The HLE was a stronger predictor of child cognitive outcomes in Early Years children than either social class or parental education, which led the EPPE³ to conclude that parents can supersede the negative effects of a low education or social class just by doing activities in the home with their child which promote cognitive development. (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 14)

You can support parents in their provision of a quality HLE by promoting activities with the parent and child. The objective is to bring consistency to the HLE so that the child experiences a seamless learning experience between the early learning and care service and home. Ways to achieve this include:

- promoting the importance of family involvement in your interactions with parents – this keeps the focus on the family as the strongest influence in the development of the child;
- providing time to meet with parents on a one-to-one basis to discuss a home learning plan that is suitable for their particular home environment;
- conducting home visits (see below);
- organising library visits – this can sometimes be the first visit for the family;
- encouraging the parent to read to the child at bedtime and to make up their own stories;
- involving parents in play activities and discussing the benefits of play and how children develop through play;
- promoting outdoor activities as a cost-free activity that the family can share together. For example, organise regular nature walks that promote the value of being in nature. Ask parents to bring appropriate outdoor clothes (wellingtons, etc.) and encourage parents to join you on these walks or trips to the park. Remind ELC practitioners to use the opportunity to model positive engagement with the children;
- Reward Charts – Use Reward Charts that encourage and reward positive behaviour. They are a useful tool to develop consistency in the approach to behaviour between the home and the early learning and care service. Parents may require support to get into the pattern of using them at home. You can support this process by regularly checking in with parents, sharing your observations when you see the child behaving well, offering a home visit, regularly reviewing progress and updating the reward chart with parents as necessary;
- sending artwork created by the child home to create a link between the home and the early learning and care service;
- providing a take-home learning pack at holiday periods (Christmas, Easter and mid-term breaks) – this will help the parent to follow up on learning in the home. Ideas could include:
 - recipe for play dough or games for water play along with a leaflet outlining the developmental benefits of messy play;
 - craft activities reflective of the time of year;
 - activities for a rainy day;

³ EPPE – The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (explanatory note added by CDI and not part of Hayes et al.).

- activities to promote the development of gross motor skills, such as making an obstacle course, skipping to the local shop, etc.;
- activities to promote the development of fine motor skills incorporating real-life experiences in the home, such as using clothes pegs, sorting pasta shapes into two bowls, etc.;
- activities to promote language development, such as topic ideas to initiate conversations, copies of songs being taught in the early learning and care service, etc.



Case Study

'One child could not master jigsaws or fitting shapes into a box. These activities were age appropriate and there seemed to be a developmental delay in his co-ordination skills. The key worker met with mam, asked what she had noticed at home, and asked if she would try doing these activities at home. Mam said that they had no jigsaws at home and that she would be happy to try this out. The key worker gave mam age appropriate puzzles and Mam did this at home with her child. Over the coming weeks, his growth and development in this area improved immensely.'



2.5.1 Home Visits

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‘My little fella loved the visits, making the time to come to the house; it made him feel very special. I think he showed off every toy he owns. I have to say ... I enjoyed it too.’ (Wendy - Parent)

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‘The parents have just been so welcoming and brilliant about us going into the home and it’s given us a broader picture of the children as well, to see them, what they’re like in their home environment.’ (PCF)

The aim of home visits is to improve the home learning environment for the child, to gain an understanding of the child’s environment and culture, to get to know the family better, and therefore to work with the parent to ensure the most relevant supports are identified. Home visits also provide an opportunity to work in partnership with parents to identify actions and next steps.

There are many benefits to home visits, such as:

- getting an insight into the environment where the child spends the most amount of time;
- observing the child at home can provide insights into certain behaviour patterns or interests;
- building relationships – home visits help to develop relationships and build trust. After a home visit, parents will often feel more confident in approaching the ELC practitioners with their comments and questions;
- a way to reach families who don’t take up invites to get involved in events happening in the early learning and care service;
- an opportunity to gain an insight into the culture and traditions of the family, which will aid in the process of tuning in to the child.

It is worth recognising that some ELC practitioners may be ambivalent or nervous about conducting home visits, as most of their experience will have involved working with families in the early learning and care setting. This is a genuine response, and concerns or reservations should not be dismissed or ignored. The introduction of home visits should be carefully planned, and consideration should be given to ensuring that ELC practitioners have a full understanding of the rationale, that there is time for discussion and planning in individual supervision meetings and team meetings, and that procedures to reassure staff and minimise the risk are developed, understood and implemented.



Activity: At a team meeting:

- brainstorm initial thoughts and feelings about conducting home visits;
- explore what would need to be put in place for ELC practitioners to feel confident and safe, e.g. home visiting policy, risk assessment;
- consider how you would present the offer of home visits to parents – what is the rationale, what is expected of parents?

CDI recognises that the safety of the staff member is of paramount importance and recommends that a home visiting policy and strict procedures are in place in any organisation where ELC practitioners are visiting parents and their children in their home environment. (See Appendix 1 for sample Home Visiting Policy.)

Home visits should be targeted at children who will benefit most from an improvement in the home learning environment. Where there are large volumes of children attending an early learning and care service, it may not be possible to offer home visits to every family. In these instances, priority should be given based on the level of need.

A visit should be 1 hour to 1 hour 20 minutes in duration, and no longer.

Explain at the introductory meeting for new parents in September that home visits are part of the parental support role and the programme offered by the early learning and care service. In order to increase the chances of securing engagement from parents, clearly outline the rationale and ensure that parents have a solid understanding of why home visits are a core part of the programme offered.

It is important to recognise that for some parents the prospect of a professional visiting their home may be a daunting one. This can throw up anxieties and questions around the nature and purpose of the visit, particularly for families where they have had a negative experience of professionals. It is therefore essential to build a relationship and a trusting working alliance with the parent before offering a home visit.

During a home visit you could:

- give an overview of play-based curriculums to the parent;
- share with the parent observations made in the service by the ELC practitioners of how the child likes to play, e.g. likes the book area, rarely plays in the sand area;
- discuss how you can both offer support and opportunities that will add value to the child's experience of play;
- discuss any issues or concerns that the parent may have relating to the child's development and/or well-being;
- discuss the other things that are coming up at the early learning and care service and bring information and flyers on parenting courses, outings, adult education opportunities, parent and toddler groups;

- discuss what is available locally that could be of benefit (e.g. the local library or mobile library). This will help you gauge the parents' interest with a view to organising a trip for the children and involving the parents;
- take notes identifying actions and next steps. A copy of your notes should be given to the parents.

Home visits can be conducted when the child is present or at a time when the child is attending the early learning and care service. There are advantages to both approaches, as follows:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
No Child Present	Affords an opportunity to talk to parents freely without distraction.	No opportunity to observe engagement between the parent/s and child in their natural environment.
	Allows an opportunity to have conversations with parents that would not be appropriate in the presence of the child.	Other siblings may be at home when you arrive, which may lead to the child you work with feeling excluded.
With Child Present	Gives you an opportunity to observe the interaction between the child and parents in their natural environment.	Some topics of discussion will be off limits, as the child will be present.
	Provides an opportunity to promote positive parent and child interaction, e.g. a play-based activity could be incorporated into your visit.	It may be more difficult to schedule the visit, as it will need to be done at a time when the child is at home.

Tip Sheet 8: Top tips for conducting a home visit

- ✓ Try to eliminate any nervousness or anxiety that the parent may be feeling by letting the parent know in advance what they can expect from the visit.
- ✓ Be punctual – make every effort to arrive at the time that was mutually agreed. Arriving too early or arriving late can be frustrating for the parents you are visiting and may be interpreted as a lack of respect.
- ✓ Have a couple of ‘door openers’ or topics to open the lines of communication, for example, current news topics, entertainment or sports news. A shy parent may initially feel a little uncomfortable and may need a few minutes of general conversation to put them at ease.
- ✓ Bring something that the child has created in the early learning and care service, such as a piece of artwork, as a ‘gift’ and a prompt to open the lines of communication.
- ✓ Be respectful and remember that you are in the parent’s space. Always ask if you can sit down, wait to be offered refreshments, etc.
- ✓ Allow the parent to decide how much of the house you get to see – don’t ask for a tour.
- ✓ Bring a post-it pad and some markers with you. The parent can stick their next appointment or start date for a course somewhere visible, e.g. on the fridge or inside a kitchen cupboard.
- ✓ If a visitor arrives unexpectedly, wait for the parent to introduce you. This allows the parent control over how much they want to disclose in relation to who they say you are and the nature/ purpose of your visit.
- ✓ Always remember that your safety comes first. Trust your intuition – if you feel in any way unsafe or uneasy, make your excuses and leave.
- ✓ Agree in advance a code word with your manager or designated person. Text the code word to prompt a phone call. You will then have a ‘reason’ to vacate the premises. This can be useful if you are feeling at risk or if the visit is running longer than scheduled and efforts to leave have not been successful.
- ✓ Always position yourself so that your exit isn’t blocked in the event of an emergency arising, e.g. ask the parent/s to lead the way and walk behind; sit in a location where you have a view of the door. This also applies when parking your vehicle – park it as near as possible but never park in the driveway.
- ✓ Keep your car keys on your person at all times during the visit.
- ✓ Make enquiries prior to the visit about the possibility of pets being present. If pets pose a risk, talk to the parent/s about putting the pet outside before you arrive and for the duration of the visit.
- ✓ Never outstay your welcome or overstep your professional boundaries. There should be a clear rationale and purpose for the home visit; once the work is completed, the visit should end.



Worksheet 4: REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER BEFORE A HOME VISIT

- ✓ Have I completed a risk assessment and are my manager and I satisfied that the home visit should go ahead?
- ✓ How am I feeling about the home visit? If I'm feeling anxious, can I name why?
- ✓ Am I clear on the structure of the home visit? For example, will I do the home visit when the child is present or just with the parents?
- ✓ Am I clear on the purpose of the home visit? Do I know what information I want to tell the parent and am I clear on what information I hope to gain from the parent?
- ✓ Have I made contact with the parent to confirm the appointment so I am not making an unnecessary journey?

Reflective questions to consider after a home visit ...

- ✓ How do I feel the home visit went?
- ✓ Did the parent/s engage in the process?
- ✓ What made the home visit easy?
- ✓ What were my challenges?
- ✓ Would I change anything for the next time?
- ✓ What follow-up do I need to do now?

2.6 Supporting Transitions

Transitions are changes that occur throughout the life cycle that can be predictable or unpredictable and can occur over a short or long period of time.

Managing transitions can be a stressful time for both children and parents and these periods of significant change can raise anxiety and uncertainty for all concerned. There can be feelings of sadness and loss associated with leaving something behind.

However, transitions can also be exciting, bringing new opportunities and experiences. They often indicate the growing independence and developmental progression of the child, so they are times to be celebrated too.

Some common fears children experience when transitioning from home to the early learning and care service or the early years service to primary school include:

- What if I miss my mammy/daddy?
- What if no one will play with me?
- What if my mammy/daddy forgets to collect me?
- What if the teacher gives out to me?
- Will they know I'm afraid of ...?

Some common fears parents experience include:

- Will the staff phone me if my child isn't settling?
- What if the staff can't pacify my child?
- Will the staff take good care my child?
- What if my child is pining for me?
- What if my child finds it hard or can't make friends?

Transitions need to be managed appropriately to reduce difficulties arising, and you play a vital role in providing support to parents in the transition process from home to the early learning and care service and from the early learning and care service to primary school.

2.6.1 Home to the Early Learning and Care Service

The transition from home to the early learning and care service can be discussed with parents at the information session for new parents. This session provides an opportunity to open a conversation on the expectations of both the service and the parent in relation to ensuring the transition is a positive experience for the child. The focus for the service should be a two-way information sharing process, in both receiving and providing information.

Areas you could incorporate into this discussion include the following:

- inviting feedback from parents on how they found starting in the service and what might have made this easier;

- allowing time for parents to complete a 'Getting to know you' form. This will provide valuable information on who will bring and collect the child; pets' names; any fears, likes/dislikes; favourite food, games and superheroes; details of any trauma; emergency contacts, etc. This information will help ensure that the staff are fully informed of the child's needs from the outset and offers parents reassurance by demonstrating a real interest in the child;
- asking if there is any particular item that can be brought from home to help the child settle in;
- asking parents if they have any particular concerns and discussing how these can be addressed;
- inviting parents to come back with questions if they can't think of any at the time;
- inviting parents to provide information on a 'Parent checklist'. (What supports do parents need?)
- inviting parents to provide information on a 'Child readiness' checklist. (What do parents need to do to help their child prepare for pre-school?)

Provide information on:

- toilet training (Tip Sheet);
- the early years service: ethos, values, key staff, contact numbers, etc.;
- activities, curriculum and daily routine;
- promoting parent education through evidence-based parent learning programmes;
- policies – for example, child protection, health and safety, healthy eating, emergencies, consent for photography, etc.

2.6.2 Early Learning and Care Service to Primary School

To help parents to prepare for transition from the early learning and care service to primary school, you can organise various supports.

There are a number of ways in which an early learning and care service can support groups of parents in managing the move to primary school. For example:

- invite parents to attend a school preparation coffee morning where school registration forms can be completed and assistance in completing them provided to parents who require it. This can be done for each school that the children will be transitioning to;
- if possible, have someone from the school attend the session to meet the parents, to answer any questions they may have and to advise parents on tips for preparing the child for school;
- invite all parents to visit the school with the child and agree with school principals on a date when this will happen;
- invite all parents to a presentation at the early learning and care service by the school principal;
- invite all parents to visit the school with the child.

It is important to consider if there are vulnerable families who may require extra attention and support during the transition process.

For example:

- children with or suspected of having additional needs;
- children whose parents have addiction issues;
- children whose parents have a disability;
- children whose parents have mental health difficulties;
- families from the travelling community who may experience discrimination;
- families with language/literacy difficulties;
- children experiencing homelessness;
- children whose attendance is poor;
- families for whom English is a second language;
- children who are likely to be the youngest in the class going to school, i.e. children whose birthdays fall in the summer months.



Case Study – Transition to primary school for the child with special educational needs

We begin our transitioning to school in February with a coffee morning for the parents of the children who are entering primary education. During this coffee morning, we discuss what the school will require and what the transition to school will mean for their child. I have found through the years that this is a great time to answer questions or concerns that parents may have. During this meeting, we hand out the application forms from the local school to the parents along with an information handout about the school. The parents can drop back in the application forms with their child's birth cert and these are then handed over to the school as a group.

Within our setting, we have at least two visits to the local school with all children transitioning there where the children and parents are afforded the opportunity to see classrooms and meet teachers and other children in the school. The teachers and pupils then come over to our setting, allowing children to again meet and recognise a familiar face. This is also the perfect opportunity for the children to meet and greet siblings, cousins or other relations within the school environment. After our visits to the school, we discuss with the children any questions they may have.

The youngest child of a family we have worked closely with is transitioning to primary school in September. The child has a physical disability and our main aim for the child was inclusion and equal access to learning. Through open communication and support between the school, parent and ourselves, we wanted to ensure the transition to school would be smooth and supports would be in place from the first day to offer the child the best possible chance of learning.

With the parents' permission, the resource teacher and I filled out a BCN1 application form* for a special needs assistant (SNA). I spoke to the parents about gathering documentation relating to the child's disability from the hospital. I supported the parent in writing a letter requesting the information and have corresponded through emails with the hospital in relation to the reports. The parent read, understood and signed the BCN1 form and I returned it to the school.

Through these small acts of support for the parent and child, we ensure that there is open communication between all involved in the child's care. We support the parent through unfamiliar waters and provide the best possible chance for learning for the individual child.

*BCN1 Application: a form completed by the school where the primary reason for SNA application relates to behavioural care needs.



Worksheet 5: SUPPORTING TRANSITIONS

Reflective questions ...

- ✓ What have I done in my engagement with parents to support them with their child's transition to school?
- ✓ Do I know which families may require the most support with this process?
- ✓ How can I best support vulnerable families who are struggling with an upcoming transition?
- ✓ What can I do to maximise the chances of a smooth transition to primary school?
- ✓ What activities can I plan that will support the transition process?
- ✓ What help do I need with this, e.g. resources, support from colleagues?

2.7 Support with Childhood Difficulties and Referrals

According to Guralnick (1997), parental involvement in early intervention is commonly recommended.

This early intervention and working with parents is especially important where children have an additional need. For many parents, the early years service is the first port of call for advice when experiencing difficulties with their child. Parents may present seeking a listening ear, reassurance, guidance and support.

In these instances, a parent could need:

- ✓ a space to voice their concerns;
- ✓ acceptance;
- ✓ validation that the situation or their child's difficulties are not their fault;
- ✓ affirmation that they are right to be concerned – or they may be hoping to be told that their worries are unwarranted and everything appears fine;
- ✓ advice and information;
- ✓ guidance on next steps to take.

It is worth acknowledging that no service can address all issues, so connecting families with specialist supports is a critical role, especially given the evidence that early identification and intervention with children presenting with additional needs can significantly improve outcomes for the child.

Parents may require support with the referral process in instances where there is an apparent developmental delay or where the parent or the child has needs beyond the remit of the early learning and care service in which they operate.

Stage 1 – Identifying an issue

Your observations or those of other staff may well be the key first stage in the process of supporting parents when an issue arises. Often an issue will be picked up instinctively, through everyday engagement and observation, but the fundamental questions to be asked are:

Examples

- Physical issues
 - Is there reduced mobility?
 - Is the child lethargic?
 - Is the child often absent due to illness or frequently complaining of feeling unwell?
 - Are the child's fine and/or gross motor skills below what is developmentally appropriate for their age?
 - Are there toilet training issues, for example, holding on, frequent soiling although trained, and/or food issues?

- Sensory
 - Is there a poor response to auditory and/or visual stimulation?
 - Does the child avoid contact with staff and/or other children?
 - Does the child avoid or show discomfort with certain textures, e.g. dirt, sand or lotions?
 - Does the child gag when eating or refuse to eat certain textured foods?
- Dental
 - Is there overuse of a soother or bottle?
 - Is there visible evidence of tooth decay?
 - Does the child have a habit of thumb sucking?
- Speech and Language
 - Does the child have trouble playing with other children?
 - Does the child have limited interaction with others?
 - Is vocabulary limited?
 - Does the child not understand basic phrases and sentences?
 - Does the child put the words in a sentence in the wrong order?
 - Does the child fail to smile and interact?
- Social and Emotional
 - Is peer interaction difficult?
 - Is the child overly dependent or remote?
 - Is the child frequently seeking adult attention or showing a preference for adult over peer contact?
 - Is behaviour difficult – for example, outbursts of aggression?
 - Is the child introverted – for example, engages in limited contact with peers or staff, or a preference for solitary play?
 - Is there a lack of emotion, poor coping skills or high levels of anxiety?

Observation of the child over a period of time may highlight other issues of concern.

Irrespective of how the issue is raised, it is important to clearly document and date all observations and concerns and any actions taken.

It is worth noting the importance of being aware of GDPR and refer to the service policy on record retention, particularly in relation to the recording of sensitive data.

Concerns may come to the attention of the service indirectly too, for example:

- the parent may identify an issue and ask you for assistance;
- a member of the extended family may identify an issue or share their observations;
- the Home School Community Liaison Coordinator may flag a concern as a preventative measure (where they are familiar with the family, e.g. sibling at school, etc.);

- another professional (e.g. Public Health Nurse) might have concerns and ask for your observations.

Prior to sharing your concerns, you should be cognisant of other factors that will need to be considered as part of your assessment of the situation and to help you in the preparation process.

- General:
 - Is there a history of similar concerns with other siblings?
 - Is the parent already aware that there is an issue? What do the parents perceive as 'normal'?
 - Does the parent have any additional needs or literacy difficulties that may make the processing of information or understanding of documents difficult?
 - Are the family experiencing other issues that require additional sensitivity, for example, parental separation, bereavement, financial difficulties?
 - Not all parents will take advice and it may be necessary to try more than one approach.
- Physical:
 - Does the child lack exposure to physical activity?
 - Does the child's physical environment lend itself to developing their gross motor skills?
 - Do the parents have access to adequate cooking facilities?
 - Is the child lethargic due to other factors, e.g. disturbed sleep due to sharing a room with a younger sibling?
- Sensory:
 - A significant sensory disability will most likely be diagnosed before the child reaches pre-school age – are you aware of any prior assessment or diagnosis?
 - Is the child exposed to messy play at home? Is the child given an opportunity to explore?
- Dental:
 - Is the family registered with a dental practice?
 - Does the family have a current medical card and, if not, could finances be an issue?
 - Is there a fear for either the parent or child in relation to engaging with dental services?
 - Has the child or parent had a previous negative experience of engaging with dental services?
- Speech and Language:
 - Is English the first language? Can the child communicate effectively in their primary language? Check with the parent. Are they speaking English at home? Is the child called by his/her English name?
- Emotional:
 - Is there anything significant going on for the family at present or has the child experienced any traumatic events that may be having an impact on the child's emotional/social development?
 - Some parents may feel frightened or daunted and as a result may present as being

ambivalent or resistant. How can you support their engagement – for example, can you offer to accompany the parent to initial appointments? Can this be facilitated?

Stage 2 – Discussing concerns or observations with parents

Once you have identified that there are concerns that require further exploration, your observations must be brought to the attention of the parents. This conversation will need to be carefully planned so that it is done sensitively. It is important to recognise that your observations may be very difficult for any parent to hear and you need to be prepared to receive a number of possible reactions, such as:

Shock	Why my child? How did I not notice before?
Anger	You don't know what you're talking about! Who do you think you are? It's your problem; he/she is fine at home! Do you think I don't know my own child?
Denial	He/she will grow out of it! He/she is only a baby! There's no problem. I would know if there was!
Ambivalence	Maybe he/she will grow out of it! I'm sure he/she is fine, but then I was like that too at that age!
Relief	I'm glad someone else is seeing what I see! I'm so relieved I have support!
Guilt	Why did I not do something sooner? This is all my fault! I must be a terrible parent!

When planning to discuss your concerns with parents, you could:

- ensure there is a private space/room for the meeting to be held;
- always start with a positive, e.g. observations of what the child is doing well;
- name the identified issue and have tangible examples to support your concerns;
- recognise that this may be difficult for any parent to hear, but state that you feel it's important to discuss your concerns;
- ask the parent for their insight and observations; offer advice that is in the best interests of the child;
- clarify if the child is linked in with their Public Health Nurse and establish if developmental check-ups are up to date, and, if so, if any concerns presented or if referrals are already in progress;
- have referral forms ready and offer support with the completion of referral;
- if the parent requires a period of time to process the information given, arrange another appointment for a couple of days' time or no longer than a week's time to follow up and complete the referral.

In the event that the parent will not accept that there is a concern, or does not engage, you will need to consider putting this in writing to them, and/or reassuring them that they can get support from the service at any time.

Stage 3 – Factors to Consider

Using facts and explaining what you (and others) have observed will help parents to hear and process what you are saying.

In most instances, you will be referring the parents to their GP as an initial point of contact. If suggesting an external referral to another service, it will be helpful to have a working knowledge of the service so you are in a position to answer any initial questions a parent may have, for example, information about the service offered, location and approximate waiting list times.

Be sensitive to the possibility that some parents may have had a negative experience in their engagement with services in the past and may require your patience, support and understanding around this. You may need to explore this with parents if you get the sense that they are avoidant or reluctant to take action.

Stage 4 – Taking Action

- Give the parents time to process the information. Be mindful that parents may need to take some time to process the information.
- Consider if the issue can be addressed by the early years service and the parents working together to support the child – it may be worth considering trying some interventions before progressing to the point of making a referral.
- Provide parents with details of resources that relate to the issue or concern, such as information leaflets or useful website addresses. For example, if the issue is lethargy – give advice on implementing a bedtime routine and nutrition and advise the parent to access further support from the PHN.
- Advise the parent on activities they can do at home with their child that may help with a particular developmental delay.
- Advise on 'next step' options if interventions do not prompt positive progress (GP referral, Assessment of Need (AON) process, psychology clinic referral).
- Depending on the issue, refer the parent to the GP, PHN or Primary Care for assessment if the child is presenting with reduced mobility, reduced visual or auditory capacity, or a speech and language difficulty.
- Assist parent with the referral forms if required.
- Refer the parent to the psychology drop-in clinic if an emotional issue is presenting.
- Support the Parent:
 - If contacting a service on behalf of a parent or child, you MUST have prior consent from the parent. It is advisable to get this in writing and record that you obtained consent.
 - Reinforce the importance of parents following through with supports for the child at home.
 - Professionals – for example, Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs), Occupational Therapists (OTs) etc. may observe the child in the service (with parental consent) and the service can support the parent to implement recommended actions.

- Parents may require support after a referral has been made or after an assessment has been completed. You can do this by regularly checking in with parents, listening to their ongoing concerns, validating their feelings, advocating for the parents and child with other services, continuing to offer suggested interventions to support the child, assisting the parent in interpreting reports and implementing recommendations, or assisting the parent in applying for funding.



Case Study – Responding to needs

This child was referred to our service as a child with difficulties whose parent advised that they had 'given up' on him. They reported that he had limited speech, was unable to read, didn't want to be read to and was hyperactive. Additionally, the parents reported that he would fight with other children and didn't seem to be afraid of things, for example, dangerous dogs.

We completed our six-month assessment and confirmed that he didn't talk, would shout, throw things, lash out at his peers, adults and property. He would also empty the content of the shelves. His behaviour was often destructive and very challenging. We observed that he would sometimes sit and concentrate on threading beads by himself and appeared to enjoy cutting paper with scissors. He was very fast on his feet – could dart away – and it was important to keep a close eye on him. We put a plan in place to shadow him to prevent injury and damage and to try to support his language development – naming things, playing with drums or making loud noises.

Allowances were made in the daily routine to allow him to spend more time outside. This needed to be planned, as we had no outdoor area and instead took him for walks in the area and around the car park. We tailored our communication with him to simplify our messages to him. We used a picture planning book which we developed. He was referred for assessment and was diagnosed with moderate hearing loss and was fitted with hearing aids. A visiting teacher for the deaf was appointed to work with him every two weeks and he was given SLT support. A project worker was appointed to shadow him in September of his second year with us. However, he no longer stood out as requiring support, as he was talking (always talking!!!!), he was able to name his feelings, and his ability to sit and concentrate was much improved. He is now in local mainstream school supported by an SNA.



Worksheet 6: SUPPORT WITH CHILDHOOD DIFFICULTIES OR REFERRALS

Reflective questions ...

- How do I feel about raising my concerns with the parent?
- Am I confident that the concerns I am raising are based on factual observations?
- What do I need to do to prepare for this discussion?
- Am I clear of my role in supporting the parent?
- How will I feel if the parent doesn't take the news well and how will I respond?
- Am I getting the supports I need from my manager? If not, how can I raise this with my manager so he/she can support me?

Tip Sheet 9: Ten top tips for supporting parents of children with additional needs

- ✓ Listen to what the parent has to say about their child and acknowledge that you understand that they are the expert when it comes to their child.
- ✓ Ask the parent what they need from the service and what you can do to support – try not to assume you know best.
- ✓ Keep communication regular – not just when a situation or difficulty arises.
- ✓ Always start with a compliment about their child or by naming a strength you have observed.
- ✓ Focus on the child's unique personality and not their accomplishments.
- ✓ Acknowledge and celebrate any success – no matter how small.
- ✓ Treat difficult conversations with sensitivity, i.e. find a quiet area, be respectful, listen and empathise.
- ✓ Always be honest with parents.
- ✓ Give parents time – parents may need time to process your recommendations or to accept their child has an additional need.
- ✓ Always follow up when you say you will. Parents of children with additional needs often have to navigate waiting lists, services, various professionals – deliver on what you have promised and give updates when you say you will, even if it's to say that there is no news.

SECTION 3 -

Supporting ELC Practitioners to Build and Sustain Parental Engagement in Early Learning and Care Services



3.1 Implementing Parental Supports in Your Setting/Organisation

CDI has devised this Toolkit as a road map for early learning and care services and front-line staff seeking to either implement a parental support role or increase parental participation, incorporating a whole team approach in their service.

In addition to this Toolkit, CDI provides training to ELC managers and front-line staff who are working in a supportive role with parents on utilising this Toolkit.

To achieve successful parental engagement and create a culture of partnership, it is essential that there is commitment and understanding of the importance of this engagement and partnership across all personnel involved with the service, from the Board of Management to ELC practitioners to auxiliary staff.

The ELC manager or person with responsibility for overseeing parental participation will need to coordinate actions and approaches to supporting parents and promoting parental engagement across the service.

CDI recognises that supporting parents can present challenges, as staff in the early learning and care setting may identify parents with complex needs who require intensive or specialist supports. CDI recommends that ELC managers actively support all front-line staff to continually develop and expand on their existing skills whilst also developing and building local networks of professionals who can provide specific expertise and guidance.

It is recommended that early learning and care services integrate a parental participation strategy that incorporates all aspects of parental participation and is led by a designated person (e.g. the ELC manager) but that is also inclusive of all staff working in the early learning and care setting. A whole organisation approach, where everyone feels responsible for supporting and engaging with parents, is likely to be most effective in maximising children's development.

It is CDI's experience of working with PCFs that they are best supported in their work when systems for the following are in place:

- 1. forming community links;**
- 2. Community of Practice Meetings;**
- 3. regular professional supervision with line manager;**
- 4. access to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities, e.g. attending relevant training courses, workshops and seminars;**
- 5. attendance at team meetings.**

3.2 Forming Community Links

A key element associated with building and sustaining parental engagement and ensuring parents feel supported is networking with other services and professionals involved in the lives of the parent and child.

Effective links to services and developing strong working alliances are vital in ensuring that early years educators can respond effectively to needs as they arise for parents and that you are aware of the current position in relation to service availability if making recommendations to parents or suggesting a referral. Examples of key community contacts are:

- SLTs;
- OTs;
- Meitheal Co-ordinators;⁴
- schools;
- other early years services;
- social work departments;
- psychology team;
- Public Health Nurses;
- Assessment of Need;⁵
- City/County Childcare Committees;
- Family Support Services, e.g. Family Resource Centre (FRC);
- GPs.

It is recommended that the ELC manager or another identified member of the team make contact with these services through a phone call to introduce your service. It may be beneficial to set up a meeting outlining your commitment to working to support parents and your wish, as part of this process, to gain an understanding of other services that parents can be referred to. It is also recommended that you make links with relevant local network groups, for example, parenting networks.

Activity:



Make a list of key local contacts in the area and put their contact details and opening hours in a visible and easily accessible place, for example, the wall in the ELC manager's office. Examples of key services may include Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs*), Assessment of Need Officers, Local County Childcare Committees, Tusla, etc.

3.3 Community of Practice Meetings (CoPs)

CoPs are intended to be a key support for service providers and may include sessions involving invited speakers on relevant topics, case study presentations or facilitated sessions on issues identified as affecting service delivery.

⁴ Meitheal Co-Ordinator – Oversees the Meitheal process.

⁵ Assessment of Need is completed by the HSE. Assessment will identify a child's health needs and will also identify what services are required to meet the child's needs.

* CYPSCs: Children and Young People's Services Committees. Interagency working to improve the lives of children, young people and families in Ireland.

The objectives of Communities of Practice sessions include:

- to support fidelity to a manual/programme;
- to provide technical assistance to programme delivery, particularly in terms of connecting practice and theory;
- to offer a space for reflection, consideration and sharing the learning;
- to identify and respond to training and support needs;
- to collectively identify solutions to issues impacting on service delivery;
- to inform the development of best practice guidelines for services;
- to improve practice and programme delivery.

CDI recommends that any front-line staff working in a parental support role have access to CoP meetings with their peers who have similar roles with parents in the community.

You could consider selecting a small number of ELC practitioners to lead on making links with other early learning and care services with a view to setting up a Community of Practice with the goal being to support each other around parental participation.

3.4 Regular Professional Supervision

Effective supervision is a very important structure to support staff in their work and it provides an opportunity to reflect on practice. Supervision offers an opportunity to:

- review tasks and develop/inform work plans;
- identify areas where support or resources are required;
- reflect on practice in a more private and focused environment.

It is recommended that supervision be provided for all members of the team, and that it be structured to maximise its effectiveness – both the supervisor and staff whose role involves working directly with parents can prepare for the meeting in advance. The Toolkit can be used in supervision as an aid for developing the ELC practitioners development and confidence around their interactions with parents. For example, tasks can be assigned using the worksheets and activities and progress reflected on at supervision. (See best practice sample supervision template in Appendix 1.)

3.5 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

CDI recommends that early learning and care services actively support any staff with responsibility for working with parents to continually develop and expand on their existing skills.

It is recommended that a schedule of training be devised by the ELC manager and the team at the start of the academic year. CPD activities can be identified by looking at the profile of the target group and assessing the current needs of the children and parents accessing the service. Examples of CPD activities may include:

- understanding addiction;
- supporting parents with mental health difficulties;

- Parents Plus or other evidence-informed parent education training; Meitheal;
- Restorative Practices.⁶

Other training needs will undoubtedly arise in response to the profile of the children and parents, policy changes (e.g. Síolta and Aistear) and individual areas of interest.

3.6 Team Meetings

It is CDI's experience that the parental support role is most effective when it is integrated into the wider team and supported through regular team meetings.

It is recommended that all personnel working in a supportive capacity with parents be included in team meetings.

The team meetings provide an opportunity to share information, observations and insights that aid in developing a greater awareness of the issues that are current or ongoing for parents and children accessing the service.

It is recognised that many early learning and care services won't have a designated person with sole responsibility for parental supports; therefore, implementation of some or all the strategies outlined in this Toolkit can be shared among the wider team.

It is recommended that the team reflect on their relationships with parents and make plans for increasing parental participation by including it as a standing item on the agenda at team meetings.

In this case the ELC manager can take the lead and use the team meeting as an opportunity to:

- continually ensure new and existing staff are clear about what is offered in terms of parental supports;
- discuss the activities and worksheets provided in the Toolkit, delegate tasks and request updates on progress;
- support staff with difficult issues arising – for example, remaining inclusive of a parent who presents with challenging behaviour;
- clearly outline the rationale for home visits and use the team meeting to explore any resistance among the team;
- lead on discussion integrating parental support into new and existing policies.

3.7 Measuring Impact

This Toolkit has been designed to be a useful and practical resource for front-line ELC practitioners and managers working in early learning and care services where there is commitment to developing and strengthening partnerships with parents.

⁶ **Restorative Practices (RP)** are an evidence-based approach that helps develop and sustain strong and happy organisations and communities by actively developing good relationships, preventing the escalation of conflict and handling conflict in a creative and healthy manner.

As you implement some or all of the strategies outlined in this Toolkit, it is recommended that you reflect on the progress made and measure the impact that strategies have had on children, families and your service.

If seeking to measure the impact, it is recommended that you set targets and measure progress. You may consider setting targets for:

- individual parents and;
- the service more widely, in relation to parent engagement.

More information on the implementation of these systems and measuring impact can be sourced in CDI's publication, *Quality Services, Better Outcomes – A Quality Framework for Achieving Outcomes*.



Worksheet 7: REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR THE ELC MANAGER

- ✓ Am I clear on the purpose of supervision and do I view it as a priority?
- ✓ Do I prepare the agenda in advance and how can I ensure that staff come to supervision prepared?
- ✓ Do I support my team in developing a CPD plan for the year ahead?
- ✓ How can I motivate my team when faced with resistance from parents?
- ✓ What are the challenges we find in forming alliances and establishing links with other professionals in the community? How can I better manage this?

Reflective questions for ELC practitioners working with parents ...

- ✓ Do I need to change anything about the way I communicate with parents?
- ✓ Do I use supervision to discuss the highs and lows of working in partnership with parents?
- ✓ Am I comfortable using supervision as a space to discuss any issues arising?
- ✓ Do I take responsibility for my own learning and development and take ownership over my CPD plan?
- ✓ Do I take into account the needs of the parents and current trends when assessing my CPD requirements?
- ✓ How do I make plans to put my learning from CPD events into practice?
- ✓ Do I feel supported in my role and, if I don't, what steps can I take to address this?

TOOLKIT RESOURCES



This section includes a variety of practical resources and templates designed to be a practical support for ELC practitioners working to build and sustain parental engagement in their service. The templates can be adapted and amended to suit your organisation.

1.	Induction Form – Getting to know your child
2.	Record of Parent Meeting
3.	Parent and Toddler Group Registration and Consent Creating a Parent and Toddler Group Flyer Sample Parent Task Sheets Developing a Parent and Toddler Group Health and Safety Checklist
4.	Ideas for parent newsletter
5.	Ideas for creating parent tip sheets
6.	Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR CHILD

Here at _____ (Service Name) we recognise that parents are the experts when it comes to their children. We believe that you know your child better than anyone else in the world and would appreciate your assistance in helping us as we start the very important job of getting to know your child.

Child's Name: _____

- Describe your child's personality in a few sentences or words ...
- What languages are spoken at home?
- What special occasions does your family celebrate?
- Who lives at home?
- What are the names and ages of your child's siblings?
- Who has a special relationship with your child?
- Does your child have a pet name/nickname and what name would you like us to use?
- Is your child toilet trained? How does your child ask to go to the toilet?
- Tell us about your child's likes/interests/any favourite games or songs.
- Tell us about your child's dislikes/any fears or things that scare them.
- Describe in a few sentences how you would describe your child's behaviour at home.
- Has your child ever had to cope with anything really difficult?
- What calms your child during times of distress?
- Do you have any worries/concerns about your child's development?

Please tick whether your child can do or is still working on the following:

	Can Do	Still Working On
Expresses wishes clearly		
Plays with other children		
Adjusts easily to changes in routine		
Follows one-step instructions		
Identifies own emotions		
Seeks help when sad/frustrated/in difficulty		
Tells someone when needing the toilet		
Uses the toilet independently		
Opens and closes lunch box unaided		
Opens and closes coat unaided		
Asks simple questions		
Can see a task through to the end		

Signature of Parent/Carer: _____

Date: _____

RECORD OF PARENT MEETING

Date of Meeting: _____

Time of Meeting: _____

Location of Meeting: _____

Child's Name: _____

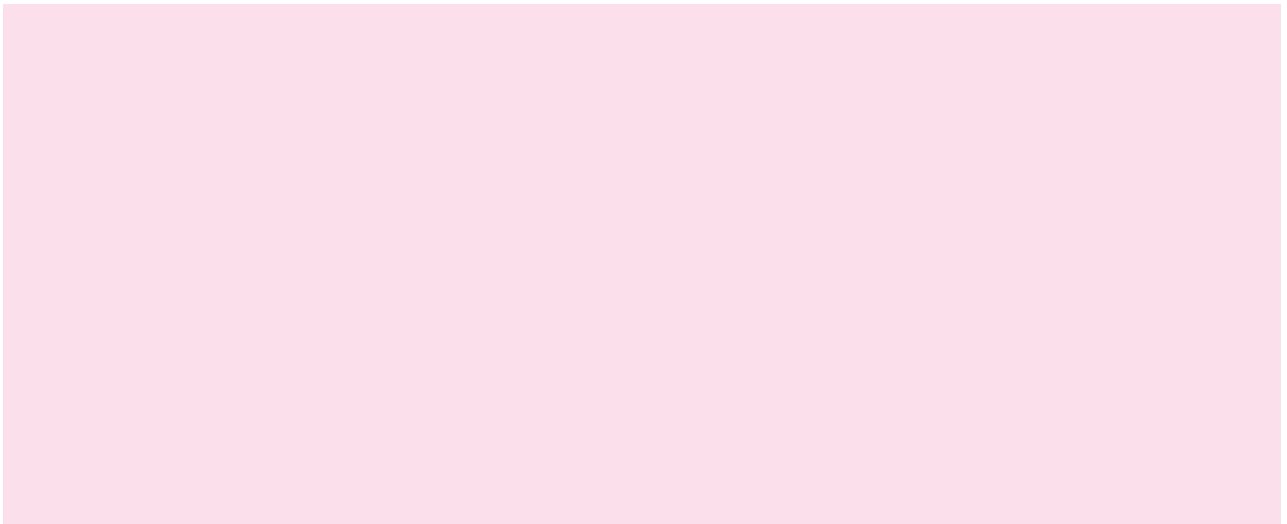
ELC Practitioner: _____

Mother's Name: _____

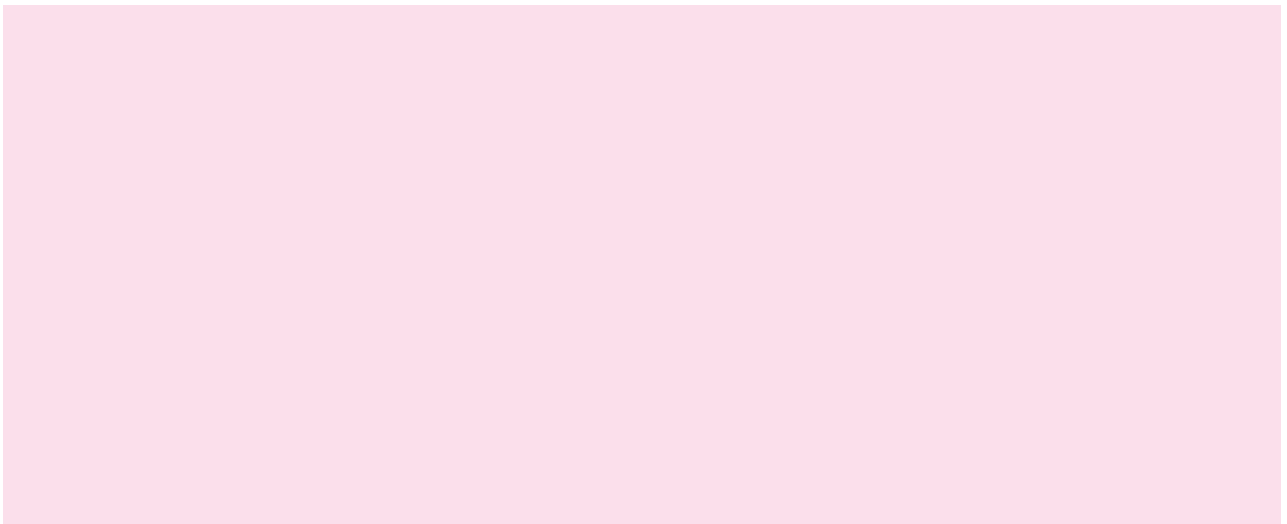
Father's Name: _____

Other Guardian/Carer: _____

Areas Discussed:



Parent's Needs Identified:



Actions Agreed:

Follow-up Required:

Task	Who	When
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Date of Next Meeting: _____

Parent/Carer Signature: _____

ELC Practitioner Signature: _____

PARENT AND TODDLER GROUP

Registration Form _____

Start Date: _____

Parent's Name: _____

Guardian's Name: _____

Child's Name: _____

Child's Date of Birth: _____

Address: _____

Telephone: _____

Email: _____

Have you and your child ever attended a parent and toddler group before?

(If Yes, please provide details)

Do you or your child have any special requirements we should know about?

Consent:

I _____ give consent for my

child _____ to attend the parent

and toddler group. I agree to take full responsibility for my child, and I will accompany and supervise him/her for the full duration of each session.

Parent's Signature: _____

Creating a Parent and Toddler Group Flyer

Remember to include:

- ✓ venue;
- ✓ dates and time;
- ✓ cost;
- ✓ purpose;
- ✓ contact name and number for further inquiries.

Other top tips:

- Make it colourful, attractive and inviting.
- Review on a regular basis, as information may require updating.

**PARENT &
TODDLER GROUP**

Venue:

Dates and Time:

Cost:

Further inquiries:

Contact name:

Contact number:

Developing a Parent and Toddler Group Health and Safety Checklist

Questions to consider:

- ✓ Does the group have insurance?
- ✓ Is the premises safe and clean?
- ✓ Are the toys safe and clean?
- ✓ Are the fire exits clearly marked and kept free from obstructions?
- ✓ Is everyone aware of the fire escape procedures?
- ✓ Is there someone trained in first aid present?
- ✓ Are there socket protectors on all sockets?
- ✓ Are there appropriate clean nappy changing facilities and a disposable unit to store soiled nappies?
- ✓ Is the premises accessible for buggies and is there storage for buggies?

SAMPLE TASK CARDS

Welcome to our group

Today you are responsible for refreshments

- ✓ Is the kettle on?
- ✓ Are the cups out?
- ✓ Is there milk and sugar on the tables?
- ✓ Have the biscuits been put out?



Welcome to our group

Today you are responsible for set-up

- ✓ Are the chairs out?
- ✓ Are the toys ready for the children?
- ✓ Is the music ready to go?



Content Ideas for Parent Newsletter

- ✓ Upcoming events this month;
- ✓ Recipe of the month;
- ✓ Details of upcoming workshops or parent education courses;
- ✓ Recipe of the month;
- ✓ Mornings of interest for parents;
- ✓ Reminders re. fees, spare clothes, events, planned holiday closures;
- ✓ Upcoming dates for your diary;
- ✓ Focus on a different type of play each month – for example, the benefits of messy play or outdoor play;
- ✓ Top tips – for example, managing bedtimes, toilet training, introducing new foods. etc.;
- ✓ Information on local events happening in the area – for example, family fun days;
- ✓ Seasonal activities to try at home;
- ✓ Recommended book of the month;
- ✓ Recommended song of the month - include the lyrics;
- ✓ Changes in staff i.e. welcome new staff or say goodbye and farewell to staff leaving the service;
- ✓ A message from a parent e.g. my experience of a recent home visit.

Ideas for Designing Parent Tip Sheets

- Ditch the dummy;
- Toilet training;
- Establishing a bedtime routine;
- Introducing new foods;
- Healthy lunch boxes made easy;
- Supporting the development of your child's linguistic skills;
- Developmental milestones in 3-, 4-, 5-year-olds;
- 20 rainy day activities;
- Managing temper tantrums;
- Alternative ways to say "no";
- Making time for play;
- Containing the mess – messy play made easy;
- Stress free travel;
- Keeping safe in the sun;
- Screen time – the benefits, but why to limit it;
- Self-care – attend to your own oxygen mask first;
- Mindfulness made easy.

Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire

How would you rate the quality of interaction between you and the early learning and care?

Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

How would you rate the quality of the parental supports offered?

Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

How would you rate the variety of parental supports offered?

Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
1	2	3	4	5

I felt understood and supported

(1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

My involvement was supported and encouraged

(1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

I felt satisfied with the level of communication I received

(1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)

Strongly Disagree				Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

How can we improve parental engagement in our service?

Sample Supervision Record Form

Name of Staff Member: _____

Date of Supervision: _____

Name of Supervisor: _____

Key areas for discussion	Progress to date	Questions/Reflections
		<p>What are the successes/issues or concerns?</p> <p>What would support you in this aspect? What blocks you?</p> <p>How can this be better managed?</p> <p>What are the priorities?</p>
Are individual needs of parents being met?		
Are the parents/carers accessing parenting skills training, self-development and further education?		
How are parents/carers linking in to other services in the community?		
Do parents/carers have space for structured and unstructured time in the service?		
How are parents/carers participating in the Parent Education Programme?		
How are families being supported to establish parent and toddler groups?		
Are parents/carers availing of home visits?		

What objectives can be set for the next supervision? Please list:

Comments from supervisor:

Comments from supervisee:

Date of Next Supervision Meeting:

Supervisor Signed: _____ Date: _____

Staff Member Signed: _____ Date: _____

Resources: Weblinks; Publications

- Childhood Development Initiative: www.twcdi.ie
- Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs): <https://www.cypsc.ie>
- Meitheal: <https://www.tusla.ie/.../how-do-children-and-families-get-extra-help-when-they-need-it>
- Tusla Parenting24seven: www.parenting24seven.ie
- Parents Plus Parenting Programme: www.parentsplus.ie
- Parentline – confidential helpline for parents and guardians: www.parentline.ie
- Department of Children and Youth Affairs: www.dcy.gov.ie
- The Access and Inclusion Model: aim.gov.ie
- The Wheel – Support and representation for the Irish community, voluntary and charitable sector: www.thewheel.ie
- Parental involvement – A handbook for childcare providers: https://www.barnardos.ie/assets/files/publications/free/parental_involvement.pdf
- Building partnerships between parents and practitioners: http://www.ncca.biz/Aistear/pdfs/Guidelines_ENG/Practitioners_ENG.pdf
- Helping Children Learn: Involving non-resident parents in their children’s education – a practical guide for all those working within a learning environment: https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2017/09/GED_Helping_Children_Learn.pdf
- Getting it right for families – a review of integrated systems and promising practice in Early Years: <http://www.eif.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/GETTING-IT-RIGHT-FULL-REPORT.pdf>
- Children in Scotland – Parent Support Needs: <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/PIPFINALDRAFT.pdf> www.pobal.ie/Publications/Documents/Stay%20and%20Play.pdf
- Solihull Approach – Understanding your child: <https://solihullapproachparenting.com/>
- Quality Services, Better Outcomes – A quality Framework for Achieving Outcomes: <https://www.twcdi.ie/resources/quality-services-better-outcomes/>

Appendix 1: HOME VISITING POLICY

In all circumstances where home visits occur, the safety of the person undertaking the visit must always be of paramount importance.

This policy has been devised in line with best practice to highlight areas of potential risk and strategies to minimise the risk when visiting families in their own home environment.

This policy should be read in conjunction with your organisation's Child Protection Policy.

The management of _____ (name of service) will establish, maintain and regularly review operational procedures for the conducting of home visits.

Procedure prior to home visit

1. The person carrying out the visit will complete the necessary preparation work before undertaking a home visit. It is recommended to meet with the child's room leader prior to the visit to get feedback on any issues they may be dealing with, for example, behaviour, development or parent interaction.
2. Consider when the most appropriate time to arrange a home visit is. Home visits should generally be scheduled for early or mid week so that there is adequate time in the week to follow up on any issues arising.
3. Complete a risk assessment prior to undertaking any home visit. (See checklist below.)
4. Have a second person attend the home visit if there is a known concern or risk.
5. Make contact with the parents to confirm the home visit prior to leaving the early learning and care service.
6. Ensure your line manager knows where you are going, what time you expect to return and that you have a charged mobile phone with you.

Procedure after a home visit

1. Reflectively evaluate the home visit after it has occurred to see if any changes need to be made for future visits.
2. Record the visit – what was discussed, identified actions and next steps. Parents should be given a copy of the home visit record sheet and a copy should be placed on the child's file.

Communication

Effective communication prior to and whilst conducting a home visit can minimise any associated risk.

The person conducting the visit should make contact with the parent on the morning of the visit to remind the parent of the appointment so that the family knows that the visit is expected. It is never recommended to call to a family home unannounced.

The person conducting the visit should be aware of their tone of voice and body language and any cultural issues. It is advised that, prior to the visit, the person should receive comprehensive background information on the family and be briefed on any known potential areas of discussion that may cause sensitivity.

It is essential that there is strong communication between the person conducting the visit and the ELC manager or designated person, both in the planning stages and on the day that the home visit is taking place.

Risk Assessment

The aim of a risk assessment is to assess the level of risk associated with the activity and to identify control measures designed to eliminate or reduce the risk to as low a level as is possible.

CDI recommends that it is mandatory that all early learning and care services carry out this comprehensive risk assessment as standard procedure before undertaking any home visits to families in the community.

Questions to Consider	Yes	No
Have I left the address of the home I am visiting and details about my expected arrival and departure times with my manager or a designated person in the office?		
Have I agreed that I will call my manager or a designated person immediately before entering the home and immediately after exiting?		
Have I agreed the procedure with my manager or the designated person if they have not received contact or cannot contact me after the expected departure time? E.g. if they call me and there is no reply after 10 minutes, they will contact the local Garda station to advise them and request a call-out.		
Do I have, on my person, a mobile phone that has credit and is fully charged?		
Have I left any unnecessary confidential information and personal valuables behind?		
Have I established whether there are any pets at the home and, if so, is there a need for them to be adequately restrained?		
Is there any indication of potential violence – including from a parent, family, friends, neighbours or the neighbourhood?		
Are there any known safety issues associated with the premises?		
Are there any other known risk factors or potential hazards?		

If you answered No to any of the above, what are the specific risks in relation to visiting the home and how can these risks be managed?

I have discussed this risk assessment with my line manager and my line manager has authorised the home visit.

I am satisfied that the home visit can proceed Yes No

Signature: _____ Date: _____

ELC Manager's Signature: _____ Date: _____

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An Ghníomhaireacht um
Leanaí agus an Teaghlach
Child and Family Agency

www.twcdi.ie

www.doodleden.ie

www.parenting24seven.ie

www.restorativepracticesireland.ie

TWITTER: @twcdi

FACEBOOK: <https://www.facebook.com/ChildhoodDevelopmentInitiative>

YouTube: Childhood Development Initiative