



An Lárionad um Fhorbairt  
agus Oideachas na **Luath-Óige**

## **The National Framework for Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland**

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Since the early 1990's investment in childcare and early education has grown rapidly and has stimulated a plethora of publications and initiatives which have had a direct impact on the range and nature of ECCE services in Ireland. To date these could be viewed as having either a care or education focus. More recently, policy documents have articulated the need for a more coordinated approach that recognises the interlinked nature of care and education in children's lives. The establishment of the CECDE is the first major concrete initiative which crosses this divide and which recognises the need to have consistency in the quality of all services for young children and families in Ireland.

## **What is the CECDE?**

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education was established in October 2001 by St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, and the Dublin Institute of Technology and is funded by the Department of Education and Science. The purpose of the CECDE is primarily to begin the process of enacting some of the key recommendations of "Ready to Learn" the 1999 White Paper on Early Education. To this end the Centre has a three-year work programme which is designed to fulfil the following core objectives:

- To develop a quality framework for early childhood education;
- To formulate targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs; and
- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper.

Within this context, the functions of the Centre are to:

- Develop early education quality standards in relation to all aspects of early childhood education including equipment and material, staff qualifications, training, learning objectives, teaching methodologies, curriculum and related areas;
- Develop a support framework to encourage compliance with quality standards by early education providers;
- Co-ordinate and enhance early education provision, including parental involvement, with a particular focus on disadvantaged and special needs groups;
- Undertake and/or commission research and development through which best practice in curriculum, teaching methodology and parental involvement may be implemented and evaluated.

At this point in time, we have completed much of the preparatory work towards the development of the National Framework for Quality (NFQ) and this has been published on our website [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie). We are now proceeding with the actual development of the NFQ which will be ready for pilot implementation by the end of 2005.

## **What is the National Framework for Quality (NFQ)?**

The NFQ will have three distinct but interdependent elements. Firstly it will provide national standards for quality in ECCE. These standards will apply to all settings where children aged birth to six years are present including full day care, childminding, infant classes in primary schools, play groups etc. The standards will cover all aspects of provision (e.g. the environment, programme and activities, equipment and materials, staffing etc.) and it is anticipated that they will act as a developmental tool for quality service provision, professional development of ECCE staff and indeed for all adults who are concerned with supporting the optimal development of young children. These standards will also harmonise with other statutory initiatives such as the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Framework for Early Learning and the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations.

The second aspect of the Framework will involve the provision of a range of supports for ECCE practitioners and services towards the enhancement and implementation of quality. This will include, for example, mechanisms for providing advice and mentoring, information and resources and communication networks to facilitate the sharing of ideas, experience and good practice.

The third element of the Framework will be concerned with assessment of quality. The purpose of the assessment is to provide information, which will allow for the dynamic development of the NFQ so that it adequately meets the needs of ECCE services and children and families. A national award system, as envisaged in the White Paper on Early Education, will be part of the assessment process.

The preparatory work that has already been completed towards the development of the NFQ has revealed that there is already a great deal of work in process towards the achievement of quality services in ECCE in Ireland. The CECDE will ensure that such initiatives will find reference within the NFQ and so, for example, the excellent work that has been accomplished by services participating in the NCNA Centre of Excellence programme will ensure that they are well placed to comply with the national standards for quality.

### **What next?**

Over the next twelve months the CECDE will continue the process of consultation with stakeholders in the ECCE sector, which has been critical to our work to date. We have established a consultative group that comprises representatives of a wide range of interests (full membership list available on our website) and we will refer all aspects of our work to this group for comment and advice.

The creation of a National Framework for Quality in ECCE in Ireland will be an important milestone in the development of the sector. It will raise awareness of the critical importance of early childhood experiences and so raise the status of those who strive to improve the quality of such experiences. It will reinforce the common goals of early childhood practitioners regardless of their sphere of work and enhance the growing professional identity of the sector. It will reassure parents and families that the best interests of their children are being served. And most importantly it will strive to ensure that every child in Ireland, regardless of their situation, can reach their full potential.

If you are interested in finding out more about the work of the CECDE, you may visit our website [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie).