

# Síolta – The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education

On 30 May 2006, the Centre for Early Childhood and Education (CECDE) launched *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland. The launch has been the culmination of a three-year process, which involved consultation with more than 50 diverse organisations, representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policy makers, researchers and other interested parties, which were united by a vision and purpose to establish the best possible learning environment for young children in Ireland.

*Síolta* is published at a time when national and international attention is focused as never before on the issue of quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) services, and their role in enhancing the lives of our youngest children. For the first time in Ireland, *Síolta* provides a common set of quality standards across a diverse range of settings for children aged birth to six years. The scale and content of the *Síolta* programme are unprecedented, and its publication marks a historic milestone in the development of care and education services for young children in Ireland.

Traditionally, the care and education of young children were viewed as separate concepts, with 'care' occurring primarily in the child's home and up to three years of age and 'education' beginning with the infant classes of the primary school. State supported ECCE services were rare and were largely targeted at children who were disadvantaged or at risk. However, it is now widely acknowledged and accepted that care and education are "inextricably linked" and inseparable elements in the life of the child (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform 1999:45).

International research has



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shown that the quality of early childhood experiences determines the outcomes for children and the effectiveness of the intervention. Since 1990, increasing levels of public and official attention has been paid to quality ECCE in the Irish context. This has led to the recognition of the value of ECCE to all children, particularly those with special needs and those affected by disadvantage.

With the exception of the infant classes of primary schools, the majority of early childhood care and education services are community based, voluntary or private in nature. They are funded by fees or by support from a range of government departments. The non-statutory element of ECCE services has remained under-resourced and under-developed and the current infrastructure is still in an embryonic stage. Membership organisations have been established to support those providing services, and most are now involved in greater cooperation through their participation in the National Voluntary Child-care Collaborative. Many of them have developed and implemented quality assurance and quality improvement programmes. These have been largely funded

under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (2000-2006), and while they might vary in style, they are largely consistent in their core values.

The Department of Education and Science established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in 2002 as a first step to implement the 1999 White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*. Our brief concerned children from birth to six years of age, and our first objective was to develop a quality framework for early childhood education; this was an ambitious task, however, several significant factors helped in getting us to where we are today.

Based on up-to-date Irish and international policy, practice and research, we started from a perspective which puts the rights and needs of the child first, reflecting the common cause of all those involved in ECCE in Ireland. This perspective transcended the many differences between the philosophies of our partner organisations, and we relied on their strengths during an intensive process of continuous consultation. This process extended to many individual parents and professionals who gave their time and

expertise enthusiastically and freely. From the beginning of the process, we established a common ground among these diverse interests and facilitated opportunities for discussion and exchange.

*Síolta* is uniquely Irish and explicitly positioned in contemporary Ireland, recognising not only her cultural and linguistic heritage, but also economic and demographic change. In order to underline and highlight the unique character of the Framework we called it *Síolta*, the Irish word for seeds. It expresses the potential of childhood and of this Framework to grow and succeed. It relates to the metaphor of the 'Kindergarten' as a place of development and learning, and the role of the educator as a skilful gardener. *Síolta's* commitment is to a quality environment which will benefit all the children in Ireland, and ultimately, society as a whole.

For copies of *Síolta* and more information please contact the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) at 01 8842225 or visit [www.siolta.ie](http://www.siolta.ie)

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