Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education
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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide curricular guidance for those working with children in a range of pre-school settings. It should be used by staff to review and develop the programmes of learning and to promote good practice.

The guidance outlines the range of learning opportunities that pre-school children should have through play and other relevant experiences. The term "pre-school" is used to describe settings children attend prior to entering primary school. These can include daycare centres, church/community playgroups, nursery schools and nursery units affiliated to primary schools. The term "curriculum" is used to describe the planned experiences which are appropriate for these children. The guidance should help staff to develop and broaden children’s learning experiences and make them confident, eager and enthusiastic learners ready to start compulsory education where their learning experiences should build appropriately on the methods used at the pre-school stage.

Information on the anticipated progress in children's learning by the end of the pre-school year is outlined for each area of the curriculum. Although children develop at different rates and their achievements may vary, all children should have the opportunity to follow a curriculum that enables them to make appropriate progress in learning and to achieve their full potential. Some children will do better than expected while others will require continued support to make progress; on occasions, this support may involve the use of aids or adapted equipment.

The guidance should not be seen as an end in itself but should be used to support the efforts made by staff in their review, development and improvement of existing provision. It may, for example, be used in conjunction with “Together Towards Improvement: A Process for Self-evaluation - Pre-school Education,” (The Education and Training Inspectorate 2004) and “Improvement through Self-evaluation,” Pre-school Education DVD, (The Education and Training Inspectorate 2003).
There is no place, at this stage, for the introduction of formal schooling in the sense of an established body of knowledge to be acquired, or a set of skills to be mastered.

*Nursery Education Guidelines “The Curriculum” NICC 1989*

By the time children start pre-school, they have already had a variety of experiences and have developed in a number of ways. To build upon the learning that has taken place in the home and its immediate environment, pre-school staff should provide children with a rich variety of challenging play activities and other experiences in a stimulating environment. The focus should be to allow children to learn at their own pace, gain a positive image of themselves as learners, be able to cope with uncertainty and to learn through trial and error.
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

“...our image of the child is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.” Loris Malaguzzi

Most young children come to pre-school as active, experienced and enthusiastic learners.

• They are interested in themselves and their environment and like to explore, investigate and be creative. They have a natural curiosity and sense of wonder and amazement.

• They like to establish good relationships with adults and peers and enjoy communicating with them. They are developing confidence, self-esteem and self-control. They often choose to work in groups and some may show signs of leadership. At other times, they may choose to play alone.

• They are developing concentration and a range of skills and competencies such as observing, making decisions, problem solving and communicating and can, with the support and guidance of adults, further enhance their own learning.

• They enjoy stories, rhymes and music.

• They enjoy physical play and are becoming physically independent.

NEEDS OF THE PRE-SCHOOL CHILD

Young children require:

• a safe and stimulating supervised environment where they can feel happy and secure;

• opportunities to investigate, satisfy their curiosity, explore the environment inside and outside the playroom, extend their sense of wonder, experience success and develop a positive attitude towards learning;

• appropriate periods of time for learning through sustained involvement in play;

• interaction with sensitive and understanding adults who promote their sense of well-being and extend their learning and development; and

• adults who will treat them as individuals, support them and sensitively participate in their play.

Given these needs, it follows that young children require a curriculum that:

• provides equality of opportunity; promotes their physical, social, emotional, creative and intellectual development; and ensures that they feel included, secure and valued;

• is planned, purposeful, flexible and allows them to follow their own interests and develop at their own pace;

• is enjoyable and motivates, challenges and stimulates them by building on their natural curiosity and desire to experiment;

• promotes active learning and helps them begin to develop the skills and dispositions that they will need to be life-long learners;

• is broad and balanced, building on their previous learning and allowing them to make choices and decisions; and

• provides them with opportunities, through play and other experiences, to develop the learning associated with:

  - The Arts
  - Language Development
  - Early Mathematical Experiences
  - Personal, Social and Emotional Development
  - Physical Development and Movement
  - The World Around Us
“Play that is well-planned and pleasurable helps children to think, to increase their understanding and to improve their language competence. It allows children to be creative, to explore and investigate materials, to experiment and to draw and test their conclusions...such experience is important in catching and sustaining children’s interests and motivating their learning as individuals and in co-operation with others.”

Starting with Quality, The Rumbold Report, HMSO 1990

In order to plan, prepare and organise good quality pre-school education, staff need to observe children at play, review and evaluate the curriculum regularly and maintain appropriate records. The information gained from these processes will enable staff to take account of the needs of individual children, offer suitable challenges and provide for progression in play activities.

Prior to children starting pre-school, staff should gather information about the children from parents/carers and other professionals who know the children well. Staff should take this information into account when drawing up plans to promote the children’s learning.
PLANNING

Plans are very important for promoting children's learning in the early years. They can ensure that staff working with children have a clear idea of what they want the children to learn and how they might promote this learning through activities which are interesting, varied and progressive. They can also build a picture of how individual children are progressing, and so, allow staff to provide for their future learning.

Plans are not ends in themselves; rather it is the process of planning that is important. It allows staff to think and talk about what and how children should learn and how best they can create a successful learning environment. It is important that all staff are involved in the planning process.

Staff in many settings choose to develop long-term, medium-term and short-term plans. However, there may be other approaches to planning that are equally useful in providing the basis for a broad, balanced and progressive programme. Whatever form of planning is used, it should be helpful to staff in their day-to-day work with the children and reflect their aims and preferred way of working. It should also ensure that everyone involved in a setting (including parents) is kept informed. Planning documents should not be regarded as fixed or unchanging; staff should not be afraid to alter or add to them as they observe the children's responses and the outcomes of play.

The following section should not be regarded as prescriptive. It offers general guidance on the contents of different forms of planning and should be used flexibly. Some staff may, for example, wish to use their medium-term plans to identify the learning that they intend to promote, while staff in other settings may decide to include this detail in their short-term plans.

LONG-TERM PLANS

Long-term plans set out, in broad terms, the learning for a whole group of children, usually over a year. Plans are likely to:

- take account of the age range of the children and their previous experiences;
- ensure that children experience a broad and balanced curriculum, with all areas of learning being given appropriate emphasis;
- give a brief outline of the knowledge, skills, concepts and progression expected within each area of learning;
- include seasonal, festive and other planned events that occur during the year; and
- inform medium-term planning.

MEDIUM-TERM PLANS

Medium-term plans are usually designed to bridge the gap between the broad outline of the long-term plan and the day-to-day detail of the short-term plan. Medium-term plans may refer to 6-weekly or monthly periods of time and are likely to:

- relate to the long-term plan;
- take account of the children's interests, stages of development and previous learning, and identify progression in experiences and/or in learning;
• take a cross-curricular approach to learning, for example using topics or themes;
• outline the planned activities and the resources required;
• identify the learning that the staff intend to promote in each area;
• be evaluated and so inform future planning; and
• ensure that children who remain in a setting for longer than a year have their learning challenged and their experiences broadened.

SHORT-TERM PLANS

Short-term plans should take account of the children's individual needs and be responsive to their ideas and spontaneous play. It should be detailed enough to inform the staff's work on a daily basis and ensure the smooth running of the setting, with best use being made of time, space and resources. An evaluation of the plan for each period of time, and of the children’s responses to the activities and experiences, should inform the drawing up of the next set of plans.

Plans are likely to:

• take account of recent observations and assessments of the children;
• transfer the medium-term plan into manageable steps by including sequences of experiences and activities and the introduction of specific resources, identifying the potential to promote new learning or reinforce previous learning;
• clarify the role of the adults in promoting learning through play and other activities;
• provide for the needs of individual children;
• be flexible to allow for unplanned activities and to respond to the children's ideas and intentions;
• identify opportunities within the programme for the observation and assessment of children;
• ensure challenge within play activities, altering these in the light of the children's responses so that all children have opportunities to make progress; and
• be evaluated on a daily/weekly basis to inform future planning.

OBSERVING CHILDREN AND MAKING ASSESSMENTS

Good assessment of children's learning is based on day-to-day observations of, and interactions with, children in a range of situations. These observations allow staff to learn about the children's interests, experiences, strengths and areas for development. The information gathered is essential when deciding how children's learning can be taken forward, both individually and collectively. The children's efforts and achievements should be recognised, shared with them and recorded.

However, children perform differently on different days and in different circumstances, so it is important that staff do not make judgements about a child's skills and competencies based on a single observation. Well-planned, regular and skilful observation of children's play and language should ensure that, over time, an accurate picture emerges of the progress each child is making in each area of learning.
This information should be recorded systematically, include details on each child’s strengths, areas where he/she may need additional support or opportunities to learn, and what action is to be taken. Finally, the assessment process should include sharing this information with parents and the children, so parents have a clear understanding of their child’s progress and so the children are recognised for their efforts and achievements.

**PLANNING FOR ASSESSMENT**

During the course of a busy day, it would be impossible to try to observe all that is going on. While adults will make observations as they arise naturally, it is important to draw a distinction between adults “being observant” and “planned observation”, which has a clear focus. Planned observation should be included as part of the short-term planning and should identify specific opportunities where adults can talk with individual children, make observations during particular activities and ask questions.

For example, observations of children may focus on:

- what they choose to play with over a day or a week;
- how they play;
- who they play with or talk to;
- their ability to concentrate and persevere with a task;
- how they communicate with other children and with adults;
- how they respond to questions, including open-ended questions;
- the amount of adult support needed;
- a specific skill such as climbing or balancing;
- their interest in books and stories; and
- how they relate to parents and other adults.

As children settle into a pre-school setting, it may be appropriate to focus mainly on their personal, social and emotional development; their language development; and their physical development, including any health issues. The focus of any observation should not be too specific, as this may preclude a child from demonstrating what they know, understand and can do. For this reason, recording observations using a tick list may not be appropriate.

**KEEPING RECORDS**

Writing down notes from observations takes time, so only record useful information. Record significant observations as soon as they are made, as, in a busy day, it is all too easy to forget or overlook this information. Staff need to develop a method for ensuring that the information is recorded in a concise, systematic and manageable form. They may, for example, make and date observations in a notebook/diary or on sticky notes.

Observations may be recorded in a child’s profile when staff have evidence that s/he:

- has learned something new;
- has grown in confidence or shows a particular interest;
- is experiencing a specific difficulty;
- demonstrates learning that confirms or contradicts the staff’s expectations;
• shows an understanding beyond what is expected; and
• demonstrates that there is a gap in understanding.

These observations build a picture of a child’s progress over time and should be used to inform planning. In addition to written profiles of progress, examples of children’s art work, experimental writing, or photographs of the outcomes of their play can provide information on their learning and development.

If a child is aware that information about him/her is being recorded, share this information with the child. This might be done by telling the child about his/her success and saying that you want to record the information so that you do not forget how well s/he is progressing.

Parents and children should be encouraged to contribute to assessments. Parents often make comments about their child’s learning, and adults working in the setting can set these beside their own assessments of the child. Children may talk about what they think they are good at or their particular interests. They can be involved in selecting pictures or photographs of what they have made for their records.

REPORTING

Reporting to parents should promote a dialogue between the home and pre-school setting. There should be both informal and planned/formal opportunities for reporting. Staff should ensure that the process recognises a child’s strengths and interests and celebrates the progress made; it should present a clear and accurate picture to parents of their child’s development and learning.

Informal reporting may take place on a day-to-day basis as staff talk to parents during arrival or departure from the setting, or when parents have opportunities to see examples of their child’s work. The arrangements for the admission of children, and for their arrival and departure times each day, should allow parents to talk unhurriedly to staff about their children.

Formal reporting should include individual meetings with parents. Information shared should reflect the information on the child’s record and should emphasise the child’s achievements while also identifying any areas where further support may be needed. Staff should give feedback to parents using language that is clear and jargon free. They should listen to parents’ comments or views, and discuss the next steps in a child’s learning and suggest ways parents can support this learning. Settings should also provide written reports for parents at the end of the year.

Before a child moves into primary school, relevant information about his/her progress in learning should be shared with the appropriate primary school so that Year 1 teachers can begin to plan appropriately for the child.

REFLECTING AND EVALUATING

Reflecting on and evaluating practice is at the heart of making improvements to learning and teaching. After short-term plans have been implemented, all adults working in the setting should reflect on and discuss aspects such as:
• the children’s confidence and their interest in the activities provided;

• what has been successful and whether the expected learning has taken place;

• how activities might be changed, adapted or extended to improve learning or to meet more effectively the needs of individual children;

• how staff supported the children during play;

• how the ideas of individual children might be built upon and extended;

• how activities might be made more stimulating and attractive to the children;

• how the space and time might be organised more effectively; and

• additional resources that might enhance learning.

Discussions should address moving forward and taking decisions which will bring about improvement in children’s learning.

Towards the end of a year, staff should reflect on the activities/topics that the children have experienced throughout the year and the progress they have made. Some settings may find it useful to get feedback from parents about the setting using a short questionnaire. This information should be used when planning for the following year.

THE ROLE OF THE STAFF

Staff working in a pre-school setting should enjoy working alongside young children. They should be interested in and concerned about the overall development of each child within the setting. The staff need to have a clear understanding of how young children learn and develop and should try to understand each child’s background and needs. They should consider the children's needs and best interests and put these before any other aspect of their work in the setting. Adults working with young children need to be flexible and ensure that the children’s well-being and self-esteem are nurtured.

Adults have a vital role in supporting children’s learning. They should give children the time they need to settle into the setting and be responsive to the varying and changing needs of all children throughout the year. Staff should pay particular attention to those children who are less confident than others in the setting, helping them to become familiar with daily routines and foster a sense of belonging. The leader/principal should lead by example, acting as a role model for other staff working in the setting.

It is important that staff work together to plan and organise children’s learning in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect. Although the roles of the staff in a setting will vary during the time with the children, they should work as a team, supporting
and extending the children’s learning. They should agree approaches to learning and teaching, and be consistent and realistic in their expectations of the children, developing warm and supportive relationships with them. They need to be flexible during large and small group activities to allow for the individual needs of the children. Children need to feel confident to try out new ideas or take on new challenges in a climate where they are not afraid to make a mistake or get something wrong. Staff should allow children to work through their frustrations, supporting them in finding solutions to their problems.

Staff need to be aware of health and safety issues as children explore the environment, explaining how to use equipment safely and where it is safe to engage in physical play. They should be familiar with, implement and follow good practice guidelines received from Education and Library Boards, Health Trusts and other relevant agencies. They should also implement child protection procedures as required by Government Departments.

Sensitive support and timely involvement by the staff in children's play is necessary if learning is to be stimulated and play experiences deepened. Skilful adult participation can extend children’s play and thinking, for example by introducing new vocabulary and modelling language appropriately, by using open-ended questions to challenge their thinking, by observing them and building on their ideas, and by giving them praise and encouragement for their efforts. Adults should listen to the children and give them time to respond. It is important that they observe the children before choosing the appropriate time to become involved in their play.

Adults may become involved in children's play:
- by interacting naturally with them;
- by playing alongside the children and becoming a participant in the activities;
- by commenting on their play;
- by invitation from them;
- if the children seek advice and assistance;
- if the play becomes unproductive or inappropriately repetitive;
- if there is a lack of interest in some activities;
- if a child is not becoming actively engaged in play;
- by providing an extra piece of equipment;
- if there is a need to support children during a disagreement; and
- if children are in danger.

THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Staff should provide a rich and stimulating environment which will promote effective learning. This means presenting children with opportunities to explore, experiment, plan and make decisions for themselves, thereby enabling them to progress in their learning and development. Staff should work together to create learning environments, both indoors and outdoors, that are motivating and inviting to the children and which allow them to choose from a range of activities provided for them in safe and secure defined areas. Staff should ensure that children's work is displayed where they have access to it and should encourage children to display their own work, for example, by providing space,
Promoting Good Practice

at an appropriate height, where they can place their pictures and models. Outdoor learning is an integral part of the overall educational programme and should contribute to children’s learning across the curriculum. It is about more than duplicating indoor activities outside. Staff should plan carefully to exploit the unique opportunities their outdoor areas can provide. Outdoor learning should be frequent, safe, varied and stimulating, and provide children with a balanced programme that ensures progression in their learning. For example, give children opportunities to be physical, be quiet, explore the natural environment, look at books, listen to stories and write, build with construction materials, take part in pretend play in secluded places and engage in activities that will strengthen their whole bodies. Children’s learning should be challenged as they develop their own ideas and use open-ended resources.

It is important that staff plan to make the best possible use of space, equipment and time so that children will be able to make full use of the resources available.

SPACE

Give consideration to the space required for safe play. It is sometimes possible to create extra space by rearranging the furniture, removing unnecessary equipment, using small portable equipment or rotating imaginative play activities. Rearranging the playroom can often initiate further interest in the play activities.

Plan outdoor space or space in large halls so that it can be used for different activities at different times. Also, define space so that energetic play does not interfere with simultaneous quieter activities. In very large areas, space may need to be divided into more appropriate intimate spaces, for example using cones. Encourage children to suggest how the space might be used, where particular activities might be sited and have opportunities to help to carry and place appropriate equipment in these areas.

MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

Children need access to a wide range of well-presented materials. These will provide new and challenging experiences, ready in advance of the children’s arrival, be available to them throughout the day and be added to. It is important that materials are safe, clean, fresh, attractive and accessible to children.

TIME

A well-organised day ensures that time is used effectively, with children being purposefully involved in activities throughout the day. It is important that the child’s day is organised in such a way that appropriate time is given to:

- indoor and outdoor play. Children need time to make choices and to settle into and develop their play;
- activities such as story time, music time, and routines like those associated with informal snack time; and
- arrival and departure times, to give time to the child and allow for informal parent/staff contact.

ENSURING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY

It is important that young children are helped to understand that we see the world in many different ways depending on our cultural, social and religious viewpoints. Staff in a setting should acknowledge
and respect the culture, beliefs and lifestyles of the families of all the children. When planning, include activities and resources that encourage respect for diversity, including diversity within our own society. Examples include talking about cultural and religious festivals, preparing foods from different countries, reading stories or listening to music from different cultures, and displaying photographs of cultural traditions.

Children should have opportunities to explore situations, express feelings in a way that is not gender specific and challenge stereotypes. Do not confine children to any one type of role-play, and encourage both sexes to take on leadership roles and talk with adults about traditional and non-traditional roles. Boys and girls should be encouraged to play with the full range of toys and equipment available to them in the setting. Routines should be organised in a way that is not gender specific.

Children with additional needs and those for whom English is not their first language have a right to equal access to all areas of learning so that their capabilities are fully developed. It is important that all staff recognise the capabilities of these children and, where appropriate, seek advice and support to enable them to meet the children’s needs and promote their learning.

**PROVIDING FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**

The term “special educational needs” refers to a child who has a learning difficulty which calls for special educational provision to be made for him/her. Some of the difficulties that young children experience are temporary and will be resolved as they develop, while others will have difficulties that are long term and will require additional support to ensure that they make progress. Staff should also take account of those children who need to have their learning challenged and extended beyond what is normally provided for children in pre-school, but who do not fall into the category of having special educational needs.

The admission of children with long-term special needs to a group can be an enriching experience for the child, other children, staff and parents. Such integration, however, requires careful and detailed planning before and following admission. Staff and parent(s) concerned should seek the help of appropriate professionals so that staff can provide for the child’s particular needs.

It is important to identify early any difficulties a child is experiencing. From the earliest stage, consult with parents and inform them about any difficulties their child may be experiencing. Identification of difficulties should be carried out through careful observation of the child, recording of his/her responses to activities, and through close liaison with other professionals. It may be necessary to draw up individual plans to meet the child’s needs or to identify appropriate support during play and other planned activities. Staff should ensure that a child who is experiencing difficulty has his/her progress reviewed frequently.

It is important that all staff in a setting are aware of each child’s particular needs, even where a child has additional staff support. Where a member of staff has responsibility for supporting an individual child, s/he should ensure that the child develops as much independence as possible, is supported when making choices and is encouraged to become part of a group. At times, a member of staff may withdraw from the group, work with the whole group or allow other staff to work with the child. In order to meet a child’s special needs, flexibility in the settling-in
arrangements and/or in the length of the session attended may be required.

Staff working in a pre-school setting should also adhere to the Code of Practice for children with special educational needs.

CHILDREN IN IRISH-MEDIUM SETTINGS

In addition to the range of learning opportunities outlined in this guidance, staff in Irish-medium settings may wish to incorporate appropriate informal language activities designed to promote a level of competence in Irish that will help prepare children for entry into an Irish-medium primary school. To do this, have staff model language appropriately, and fully exploit the learning potential of freely chosen play, routine situations and unplanned activities. Use Irish in meaningful contexts and use simple phrases, sentences, rhymes and songs to describe and comment on the children’s activities. The children should hear, and begin to use, language that is linked naturally to their life, interests and needs.

In planning for the successful development of the Irish language, staff should consider:

- the children’s stage of development and, in particular, their overall language development;
- the children’s linguistic background and how existing levels of language can be built on systematically; and
- how the children’s progress can be assessed.

Children’s language skills emerge gradually. Staff should focus initially on the development of children’s understanding of the Irish language and familiarisation with key words and phrases, especially those related to their play and daily routines. Over time, and through providing a rich language environment, staff should foster the children’s use of simple words and phrases in Irish as a natural part of their play. It’s important, though, that they should monitor the children’s overall language development (not solely their development of Irish), so that they can gain a good understanding of the children’s progress and, where necessary, can identify individual special educational needs.

PROVIDING FOR YOUNGER CHILDREN

Younger children in a setting need a safe and appropriate physical environment where they have space to move and to explore using all of their senses. It is important that staff recognise the stages of development of the younger children and have realistic expectations of them. They need to ensure that appropriate resources and activities are provided to meet the children’s needs.
Promoting Good Practice

Staff need to consider how they might provide an appropriate adult/child ratio for the younger children so that they can settle in to the setting and make progress. Staff should be flexible about the activities that these children take part in and the time they spend in the setting, allowing them a longer time to settle, if necessary.

Information on how younger children’s learning might be supported can be found in:

“Birth to three matters” A framework to support children in their earliest years (Sure Start).

INVolving parents as partners

Links between home and school are important at all stages of education, but particularly during the pre-school year. Parents are the child’s first educator and have an important role to play in pre-school life. So parents and staff should regard each other as partners in the children’s education. Where parents share relevant information about their children, this can be used to promote the development of individual children.

In order to ensure effective two-way communication about the welfare and education of the children, trust and confidence needs to be established. To do this, make sure parents feel welcome and comfortable and always see the staff as caring, supportive, approachable and well informed. Keep parents fully informed about the curriculum, their child’s progress and how they can support their child’s learning at home by speaking with them regularly. Take time to listen to parents’ concerns and hopes for their children. Display children’s work with captions to help explain the learning that is taking place in the setting and create a parent area to provide parents with information, such as details about forthcoming events, health and parenting issues and policies outlining practice in the setting.

Before a child attends a pre-school, it is important that contact is made with the parents and child. Parents should be given information about the curriculum and daily routines. This can be done by meeting parents on an individual basis, at open days or at parents meetings. There may need to be a degree of flexibility, both in the initial admission of children and in their arrival and departure times, so that they can settle happily and allow parents the opportunity to talk unhurriedly to the staff.

Parents and other family members can support the learning opportunities provided in the curriculum. They, for example, can talk to children about their work or interests or be involved in the story/library corner. However, it is essential that they receive clear guidance on both the nature of their involvement in the setting and about relevant child protection issues before parents begin working with the children. It’s also important that parents feel that their contributions have been valued.

The experiences children have in pre-school can often be continued in the home, for example, by choosing and taking a book home to share together. Similarly, the experiences the children have in the home may form the basis of further learning in the pre-school setting.

transition to the primary school

Good liaison between pre-schools and primary schools is essential to help ensure continuity and progression in children’s learning experiences. To help provide children with a smooth transition from pre-school to primary education, invite teachers to visit the setting in order to appreciate the learning environment and curriculum the children have experienced. Also, arrange for the children to visit the primary school. They could, for example, see a concert, go on a “teddy bears’ picnic” or listen to a story. And display photographs of the teachers to whom the children will be transferring, so that each child can become familiar with his/her teacher.

Towards the end of the children’s pre-school education, parents and staff should discuss the move to primary school. Pre-school staff should liaise with staff in the schools to which the children
will transfer. Information which is to be passed on (concerning the child’s progress) should be shared with parents.

CONTACT WITH THE COMMUNITY AND OTHER AGENCIES

It is important that good relationships and communication are developed between education, health, and social services so that children and their families have broadly based and co-ordinated support which meets their needs and ensures that every child feels included.

Before admission and throughout the time a child is in the pre-school setting, staff should seek to work with other professionals in an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect and openness. With parents’ cooperation, this should ensure that valuable information is exchanged which will assist in the planning of a child’s learning. Professionals from other agencies may be invited to contribute to meetings and events organised for parents.
“It is only when the curriculum evolves from the needs of the children that it can be viewed as being effective in promoting learning.”

Nursery Education Guidelines “The Curriculum” NICC 1989

While the curriculum for pre-school education is set out under six discrete headings (The Arts; Language Development; Early Mathematical Experiences; Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Physical Development and Movement; and The World Around Us), children should experience it in a holistic way through play and other relevant experiences. This may include using the thematic approach for planning, for example for stories, poems and songs.

Children should have opportunities to use a range of ICT resources (for example cameras, listening centres and computers), which will motivate them, enhance and extend their learning, and give them opportunities to engage in self-directed learning.
THE ARTS

Being creative is about making new things, taking risks and experimenting, coming up with new ideas, solving problems and coping with uncertainty. Creative play not only helps foster these skills, but it can also assist with emotional development, promote aesthetic awareness and is an avenue for self-expression.

Children need encouragement and stimulation by adults to help them express their ideas, extend their creativity and develop originality of thought. They also need opportunities to explore and share those thoughts, ideas and feelings through a variety of art and design, music, movement, dance, dramatic and role-play activities where they are encouraged and supported by adults.

Value and encourage the children’s natural curiosity and vivid imaginations. Help them to take risks, to have confidence to try things out, and to accept that their ideas may not necessarily work. Encourage them to explore their own ideas rather than reproduce someone else’s. Help them to observe, listen and talk about their experiences using appropriate language and teach them to appreciate their own work and other ways of working. As they discover what they can do, children will experience the joy of achievement and develop self-confidence and self-esteem.

In developing children’s creativity in the arts, remember to emphasise the process, the children’s enjoyment and the learning that is taking place rather than the finished product and celebrate the uniqueness of each child’s work.

Art and Design Activities

Art and design is a natural means of communication and learning for young children. It helps them to think through ideas, to develop visual, spatial and tactile awareness, and develop investigative and manipulative skills. Through the freedom of play, children will explore natural and man-made materials and have opportunities to experiment with colour, shape, pattern and texture. Provide them with opportunities to create in a space where they can return at different times to complete or alter their work and where they have access to a wide range of good quality materials, media and tools, which should be added to or changed over time. Allow them to choose their own activities and implement their own ideas. And ensure they see their work displayed and valued by other children and adults, including parents.

Children should have opportunities to work both indoors and outdoors, and at times create “temporary pictures” using materials such as stones, sticks, feathers, glass beads, buttons and card. These “temporary pictures” can be changed, moved around and the materials can be re-used.

As children take part in play, they should have opportunities to:

PAINT AND DRAW

• paint/draw at vertical and horizontal levels, using paper of different colours, shapes, textures and sizes;

• paint/draw pictures from direct observation of objects, for example flowers, fruit, snails;

• paint on other surfaces such as fabric, card, perspex, windows;
• experiment with various media and tools such as paint, crayons, pencils, chalk, charcoal, pastels, brushes, fingers, sponges and combs;

• explore colours and textures, for example by mixing paints, using paint with sand, glitter or glue added; and

• create pictures, for example by printing using everyday objects, blow painting, bubble painting, using wax resist, using marbling ink, and experimenting with shaving foam.

**USE PAPER, CARD, WOOD, FABRICS AND SCRAP MATERIALS**

• explore materials of different textures, which will offer them sensory experiences;

• make pictures and models using a variety of materials such as a range of paper, card, boxes, fabrics, string, wool, feathers, glitter, sequins, and buttons;

• investigate different ways of joining materials, including using different sorts of glue, tape, and staples and a range of temporary methods such as elastic bands and paper clips; and

• use tools such as scissors and punches.

**USE MALLEABLE MATERIALS**

• work with, and explore the properties of, large amounts of clay, dough and commercially produced materials, squeezing, poking, flattening, pinching and modelling;

• make patterns in the materials using a variety of tools and natural materials such as, shells, leaves, cones, scissors, potato mashers, knives and forks; and

• use materials such as glitter, colour and scent to enhance their work.

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**Music Activities**

Music provides children with opportunities to explore feelings and express themselves in ways that support or go beyond verbal communication. Music provides a context for developing creativity, self-confidence and self-esteem and can give children endless enjoyment. It helps them learn how to listen, to distinguish between sounds and to respond to beat and rhythm.

As children take part in play and other activities, both indoors and outdoors, they should have opportunities to:

• listen to and join in singing rhymes and simple songs;

• listen to a variety of music, responding to the beat using appropriate actions such as clapping, marching, swaying, nodding head;

• listen to music and respond freely by moving expressively;

• become aware of different kinds of sounds such as those made by different instruments, loud/quiet, high/low sounds;

• become aware of sounds in the environment such as bird songs and traffic;
• explore ways of making sounds using everyday objects like simple percussion and other musical instruments; and

• make and use their own simple musical instruments.

Drama Activities

Drama allows children to express their feelings and imagination in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Through role-play, dance and mime they enter different worlds as they recreate and invent situations at home, in school, in the community and in their imaginations. Taking part in these activities, both indoors and outdoors, helps children to develop self-esteem and confidence and contributes to their oral language development and their social and emotional development. Staff should become involved sensitively where they observe that role-play needs support. They can do this by joining in the play, suggesting a new context or adding a resource.

As children take part in play, they should have opportunities to:

• join a group involved in role-play;

• engage in self-initiated role-play, assuming and sustaining roles;

• use dressing-up clothes and props to enhance their play;

• see adults in roles such as the patient in the hospital or the customer in the shop, hairdressers or café; and

• explore the use of puppets and soft toys when creating scenarios, stories or expressing their own ideas.

Progress in Learning

The following is a general description of the characteristics and skills that the majority of children who have experienced appropriate pre-school education will display.

Children explore a variety of materials, appreciating colour, shape, texture and sound. They express their ideas and communicate their feelings, use their imagination and make simple representations using a range of materials. These representations become more detailed as their ability to concentrate and to observe increases. Children develop manipulative skills as they handle appropriate tools and instruments. They begin to value their own and other children's work. They express ideas and feelings during role-play and begin to assume different roles. They learn songs, listen and respond to music, and make their own music by singing, clapping, and playing simple percussion instruments.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Language development is crucial to living and learning and is concerned with more than the growth of vocabulary. Language is used to communicate with others, to share and express feelings, to give and obtain information, and to understand ideas and develop thoughts.

Children bring to the pre-school setting their own experiences of using language. Value these existing language skills and use them as a starting point. Help children to communicate confidently with adults and other children and express their own needs, ideas and feelings.
Children’s listening and communicative skills are fostered as they talk with staff and as they play with other children. By listening to children and using carefully chosen comments and open-ended questions, staff can assist children in their thinking and help to build their confidence in the use of language. They can help children to develop language for communication by initiating and sustaining conversations in a sensitive and respectful manner. They can introduce new vocabulary and so encourage children to extend their phrases and sentences. Staff should create an environment where children can chat with friends in a relaxed atmosphere.

Listening to and joining in with rhymes are important elements of children’s language experiences. Staff should be alert to opportunities during play to draw children’s attention to rhyme; they should make use of a range of activities and games to introduce rhymes and rhyming words.

Developing a love of stories and books is also important for language development. They should be helped to understand that books can provide information and help to answer new questions. This can be encouraged by having children listen to a range of interesting and exciting stories, poetry and rhymes; by retelling familiar stories; by browsing in the book area and by looking at books as a natural part of play. With sensitive adult participation in the activities, children become aware that the printed word has meaning and that the meaning does not change.

Writing is a way in which thoughts and ideas can be exchanged. Young children can express their thoughts and ideas through drawing, mark making and by writing* cards and messages. Create opportunities for them to observe adults writing and to experiment with their own writing and drawing. And provide access to a variety of media such as paper, white boards, pencils, pens, crayons, chalk and paint brushes.

Children are more likely to want to experiment with writing as part of purposeful play as, for example, they make shopping lists in the house play area or cards for patients in the hospital play area. They may become interested in individual letters and words through playing with a typewriter/computer keyboard or talking about their name as an adult writes it on their painting. At this stage, children should not be introduced to any elements of formal teaching of reading or writing.

In the course of their pre-school education, children will become aware of and use other forms of communication, for example painting, drawing, music, movement, drama and other forms of non-verbal communication.

All of the opportunities to learn and use language detailed below are appropriate for learning any language. Where a child’s home language is different than that used in the setting, it is important to monitor the child’s overall language development.

Language development is promoted when:

- adults encourage children to focus attention, listen and make appropriate responses by using, for example, puppets or other props in small and large groups;

* Writing should be interpreted as scribbling and marking, where children mimic what writers do. It is not intended to imply that children are, or should be, forming letters. Although over time some children may begin to do this.
• children have access to a wide range of materials during play and are encouraged to explore them and talk about them;

• adults model language appropriately by listening to children, by taking time to engage them in one-to-one conversation, and by helping them to understand the need to take turns during conversations;

• children are encouraged to talk to one another and to adults for a variety of purposes, including talking about their needs, experiences, ideas, feelings and achievements, to ask questions, to retell parts of a story, and to make simple predictions;

• adults recognise and build on children’s understanding and use of new words and phrases in their speech;

• children have freedom to develop language through imaginative activities including dressing-up and role-play;

• children have opportunities to talk about photographs or pictures including those that represent a specific emotion or reflect a topic, those that help children recall an activity or recent event in the setting, and those that introduce new vocabulary or ideas;

• children observe adults engaged in reading and writing activities in the course of the day;

• children have access (in various play areas) to a well stocked collection of story and information books suited to their needs, interests, race and culture;

• children have frequent opportunities, in one-to-one situations and in small and large groups, to listen to and join in with stories, rhymes and songs and to listen and respond to music;

• adults provide opportunities for children to have fun with words by, for example, using nonsense rhymes, playing “I spy” games using sounds, and guessing whose name has been clapped;

• children share books with each other and are encouraged to be aware of print in the environment;

• children have opportunities to have their spoken words recorded in writing, for example phrases or short sentences on their paintings or comments about a photograph;

• they begin to show an interest in print and are encouraged to become familiar with their own written names by finding their name card at snack time or helping to label their pictures and paintings;

• adults may respond to childrens’ questions by pointing out some features of text, for example the shape of individual letters or the way text is read from left to right, as a natural part of story reading;

• staff write children’s names or dictated phrases on their pictures;

• children have opportunities to take books home to share with parents/carers;

• children have access to appropriate ICT resources, for example those which allow them to listen to and enjoy stories or which build vocabulary; and
• children have opportunities to experiment with a variety of drawing, painting and writing materials and to write as part of imaginative and role-play activities.

Progress in Learning

The following is a general description of the characteristics and skills that the majority of children who have experienced appropriate pre-school education will display.

Children show evidence of a growing vocabulary and the development of listening and conversational skills. They express thoughts, ideas and feelings with increasing confidence and fluency. They talk about their experiences, ask questions and follow directions and instructions. They sustain attentive listening and respond to stories, nursery rhymes, poems, jingles and songs. They begin to show an awareness of rhyme. They engage in role-play, using appropriate language to express their feelings.

Children enjoy books and know how to handle them carefully and appropriately. They are aware that the printed word has meaning and that it should be read from left to right. They recognise their own first names.

Children create pictures to convey thoughts or ideas. They experiment using symbols and patterns and engage in early attempts at writing using a variety of drawing, painting and writing materials.

EARLY MATHEMATICAL EXPERIENCES

Mathematical concepts are important for everyday life and they develop slowly in the young child. Children need opportunities to re-visit activities and to experience mathematical ideas in many different contexts. Staff in the pre-school setting should seek to extend, informally, the mathematical experiences the children have already had in their home environment. These could include matching socks, putting away shopping or setting the table. They should be made aware of opportunities during play and daily routines to promote the development of mathematical language and concepts.

All areas of play, both indoors and outdoors, provide opportunities to foster mathematical concepts. Availing of these opportunities to lay foundations for development of positive attitudes towards mathematics. As children engage in play activities, they use their own everyday language to talk about mathematical concepts. With the skilful help of staff in the setting, they will begin to understand, and later use, mathematical language as they develop an awareness of number, order, shape, space, size, quantity, time, pattern, and relationships. Children should be encouraged to talk about what they are doing as they play using language such as the same as, heavy, longest, another, more, and less.

During play and everyday activities in the setting, children should have opportunities to sort, match, compare, classify, count, and make patterns and sequences. Children's understanding and enjoyment of early mathematics can be enhanced through songs, stories and games.

Through play, children need to have:

• time to experiment with a wide range of materials;

• opportunities to hear mathematical language being used as a natural part of conversations with adults;
opportunities to explore and investigate the properties of the materials;

time to consolidate their understanding of concepts; and

couragement to use mathematical language as they talk about their experiences and findings with adults and peers.

As children take part in play and other activities, they should develop their understanding of:

- **number**, for example as they enjoy stories and rhymes with an element of number in them; engage in conversation with staff during real and play situations such as laying the table for four in the house corner, helping to set out snack time and talking about whether or not there are enough pieces of equipment for each person; organise themselves to take turns using appropriate language such as first, last, and next; become aware of where numbers are used in everyday life such as numbers on houses, cars, buses, microwave ovens, telephones; and play simple games which involve an element of counting;

- **shape**, for example as they observe and talk about shapes in the natural environment such as the different shapes of leaves, flowers, worms, shells, stones and butterflies; build with a variety of shapes, sizes and types of blocks; talk about the shapes of everyday objects such as plates, books, sandwiches, fruit, windows; and use a range of shapes to create models and pictures;

- **space**, for example as they build with large blocks on the floor; push a pram through a confined space or ride a bike, ensuring the safety of others; explore personal space during activities such as action rhymes or climbing through a tunnel; understand and use prepositions such as under, beside, on, and in, when playing and tidying up; and find space for a particular activity such as dancing, doing a floor puzzle or laying out train tracks;

- **size and quantity**, for example as they find clothes that fit dolls, teddies or themselves; sort everyday materials during play while comparing quantities using language such as more, less, and the same; compare sizes of objects as they play such as paper, buckets, hands; handle and talk about toys and equipment with different properties using language such as big, long, heavy, full, and empty; compare quantities of materials such as large and small containers of sand, jugs of water, and balls of dough; and compare sizes of toys and equipment as they choose large and small wheeled toys or balls;

- **pattern**, for example as they leave footprints in the sand or snow; make patterns with a range of materials such as shells, stones, feathers, buttons, sequins, and paint; observe and talk about patterns in nature such as rainbows, puddles, spiders’ webs, petals of flowers, butterflies, ladybirds, and tigers; select beads/spools/pasta to thread; and become aware of patterns in sounds such as those made by musical instruments or those in rhymes and songs;

- **sequencing/time**, for example as they become familiar with the setting’s everyday routines such as recognising simple cues that indicate that it is time to tidy up or go outside; sequence everyday routines and activities such as putting on a coat before going outside or dressing dolls from inner clothes to outer clothes; talk about seasonal
events or festivals; become aware of the passing of time as they wait to take turns during play or plant seeds and watch them grow; listen to “Once upon a time” stories; begin to retell simple stories in sequence; recall recent events such as a visit or a birthday, perhaps using photographs; become familiar with terms associated with time such as today, yesterday, a long time ago, tomorrow, and time to as they talk to adults and other children; and

- relationships, for example as they sort toys and equipment when tidying up, returning them to their appropriate places; match objects such as lids to saucepans or dustpan to brush; play with objects that are the same shape but different sizes; and explore links in stories such as those in “The Three Little Pigs” or “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”.

Progress in Learning

The following is a general description of the characteristics and skills that the majority of children who have experienced appropriate pre-school education will display.

Children begin to understand early concepts of size and quantity. They use mathematical language, such as heavy, light, full, empty, long, short, more, another, big and little in relevant contexts. Through talking about daily routines and seasonal events, and waiting to take turns, they show an awareness of time. They begin to understand and use positional words, such as in front of, behind, above and below. They talk about shapes in their environment.

Children solve problems as they play. They question, predict and experiment. In the course of their play they sort, match, order, sequence and count. They learn number rhymes and songs and listen to stories that have elements of mathematics in them.

PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This area of learning is of the utmost importance for young children in all aspects of their lives. It is about children’s emotional well-being, them understanding who they are, respecting others and their environment, forming and sustaining relationships, beginning to understand emotions and about developing positive dispositions to learn. Good personal, social and emotional development gives children the best opportunity for success in other areas of learning.

Upon entering pre-school education, children bring with them a variety of personal and social skills, values and attitudes. They acquire these relationships and experiences within the home and the immediate environment. It is important that these are recognised. Children should be given the time that they need to settle into their new surroundings. It is important that, at this stage, staff establish good relationships with both the children and their parents.

Help children gain confidence in what they do. This can be achieved through simple gestures like allowing them to make choices and help each other; encouraging them to organise their own play, including tidying up; giving them independence at snack time; and having them put on their own coats. Fostering confidence and self-esteem in children will help them to feel valued as individuals and develop
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independence. Pre-school staff can also help children progress by nurturing their motivation, perseverance, curiosity and creativity; encouraging them to problem solve; and by giving them time for reflection.

Children are individuals in their own right and have their own personalities. They have their own likes and dislikes. Some are timid while others are extroverted. Some are protective and at other times aggressive; some prefer to lead, others to follow. Young children also have difficulty understanding their feelings and the needs and feelings of others.

As they learn to cope with people and activities outside the family, they should be encouraged to form positive relationships with adults and other children. Encourage them to talk about how they feel at different times. Discuss how their actions can affect others and why we need rules. And help them develop respect for others and appreciate the differences between people – like race, culture, and disability.

Staff can help children understand these difficult concepts by having them take part in role-play, listen to stories and by introducing them to different emotions using puppets or pictures. Through activities like these, and as friendships between particular children develop, they will become aware of both their needs and feelings and those of others.

Finally, the staff’s actions and words should reflect a sense of caring, giving children encouragement and positive reinforcement as they play, interact with others and try to behave appropriately.

Fostering Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Staff in a setting need to work together to create an ethos where:

• children feel secure and have a sense of well-being;

• adults take time to listen to children;

• staff are enthusiastic about the children’s learning;

• children are given encouragement and positive reinforcement;

• children receive consistent positive encouragement to behave appropriately and to respect their own and others’ play;

• staff respect the children’s views and ideas;

• children are encouraged to express their emotions appropriately and be independent; and

• children feel supported and cared for.

Throughout the day, children should have opportunities to develop personal and social skills, values and attitudes. These should include the following themes:

ROUTINES

During daily routines, children should be encouraged to develop independence and take responsibility as they, for example, look after their own belongings, help to prepare food for snack time, pour their own drink, choose what and when to eat, help others during snack time, or tidy the playroom.
PLAY ACTIVITIES

In these activities children should be encouraged and supported as they:

- make choices; organise their own play and become independent of adults in everyday activities like mopping up spills, putting on aprons, and displaying work;
- learn to co-operate, take turns and share;
- persevere with activities, including those that may present some difficulty. These might include buttoning dolls’ clothes, creating a model or picture, or completing a jig-saw;
- work with materials such as clay, dough, paint, sand and water and experience their therapeutic value;
- experience the exhilaration of exuberant play; and
- explore their emotions, for example in role-play where they can learn to come to terms with fears or experience the joy of a party.

STORIES, RHYMES, MUSIC, PICTURES AND DRAMA

In these activities, children should be given opportunities to express emotion and develop self-confidence and an awareness of others as they:

- listen to stories about people and places;
- extend their imagination as they create stories, act out roles of characters, use puppets;
- listen to music suggesting a variety of moods like happy, sad, scary and respond by clapping, moving, dancing and creeping; and
- identify the emotions of happiness, fear, sadness and anger when discussing pictures, talking about characters in stories or helping one another.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Most children are interested in and curious about their environment. They can further develop their awareness of the environment by:

- helping to care for plants and animals;
- observing aspects of nature, such as rainbows, sunlight, shadows, day and night and new born animals, thereby developing a sense of wonder;
- taking some responsibility for caring for their environment, for example by caring for play equipment and keeping the playroom tidy;
- talking about environmental issues such as litter, bottle and paper banks; and
- being encouraged to consider the needs of others in the environment.

HEALTH, HYGIENE AND SAFETY

The pre-school setting is an ideal place to establish positive attitudes towards health, hygiene (including dental hygiene) and safety. For example, snack/dinner time provides staff with opportunities to talk naturally and informally with children about healthy foods and healthy eating habits. During cooking and food preparation activities, staff can talk about foods that are good for them, the importance of hygiene and safety issues. Daily routines can allow children to
Children show some independence in dressing and in personal hygiene. They are eager to explore new learning. They show an increasing awareness of the importance of healthy food, hygienic habits, exercise and rest. They persevere with tasks and seek help when needed. They take pleasure in their achievements. They are learning to treat living things and the environment with respect, care and concern.

**PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND MOVEMENT**

Children enjoy physical play both indoors and outdoors. They revel in freedom of movement and in play that is inventive, adventurous and stimulating. Physical play that involves, for example, running, jumping, climbing, skipping, hopping, balancing, kicking, striking, throwing and catching helps children to develop balance, control, co-ordination and an awareness of size, space and direction. During physical play, children can observe things from different perspectives by, for example, looking at things from the top of a slide or from under a bench.

Movement skills need to be nurtured, not only because they are important for the child’s long-term health and well-being, but because they support the child’s physical and cognitive development. These skills should be developed informally during planned daily physical play. Physical development helps children to gain confidence and self-esteem as they discover what they can do, and it enables them to feel the benefits of being healthy and active.
Children should have opportunities to respond creatively to a range of stimuli including music, songs, action rhymes and stories. Through taking part in physical play, they should begin to develop an understanding of safe practice. They should develop social skills such as turn-taking, sharing, cooperating and negotiating and values such as, trust, fairness and respect for others.

Outdoor play can provide space and freedom that would be difficult to find indoors. It has an important role in the emotional development of children, providing them the freedom to run, shout and play exuberantly within appropriate boundaries. Here they can experience a wide range of emotions, for example the thrill of rolling down a hill, the challenge of climbing high, and the joy of running and jumping. They can begin to experience the satisfaction of solving physical problems and problems that arise when playing with others.

Effective physical play takes place when:

- children have access to:
  - suitable and safe spaces where they can experiment with different ways of moving; and
  - a wide variety of appropriate small and large equipment which meets with safety regulations and standards. This equipment should provide children with opportunities to extend their skills in running, hopping, jumping, climbing, balancing, kicking, striking, throwing and catching;

- space is planned so that it can be used in different ways and for different purposes throughout the year;

- play is planned carefully so that interest is sustained, challenge is offered and activities are balanced to provide for individual needs and abilities. This should ensure that children develop their skills progressively over a period of time;

- play equipment can be altered or rearranged in order to provide challenge and progression. For example, a slide or rope ladder can be added to a climbing frame;

- there is sensitive adult participation and adequate supervision to ensure children's safety;

- equipment is positioned so it can be used imaginatively, for example where children can use a climbing frame as a castle; and

- children are taught safety rules and encouraged to keep them.

All outdoor space, whether large or small, should be defined for particular planned activities in order to maximise its use and ensure that children can play safely. Children can be involved in the planning of these areas and should be encouraged to carry safely and place appropriate equipment in them.

When physical play is offered indoors, consideration should be given to:

- the materials and apparatus that can be accommodated safely in the environment;

- the location of the equipment in order to minimise disruption to quieter play; and

- the appropriate use of large spaces, such as school halls, to provide a variety of experiences in clearly defined areas that are safe for the planned activities.
In order to develop increasing control of the fine movements of their fingers and hands, children should have opportunities, throughout the day, to use a range of tools, equipment and materials. These may include, for example, scissors, pencils, paint brushes, pens, construction materials, jigsaws and books. Through play, children can improve their fine motor skills by pouring, building, threading, screwing and unscrewing, weaving, building, using the computer mouse and working with malleable materials, for example, by poking, squeezing, patting, rolling, pinching and twisting them. Children should also be included in simple tasks like buttering bread, putting on their own coat and pouring milk.

**Progress in Learning**

The following is a general description of the characteristics and skills that the majority of children who have experienced appropriate pre-school education will display.

Children enjoy physical play and the sense of freedom it brings. They have developed an awareness of space and of others and are beginning to use space imaginatively. They move confidently with control and co-ordination. They use a wide range of large and small equipment with increasing confidence and skill. They understand simple rules and can use tools and equipment appropriately and safely.

**THE WORLD AROUND US**

From their earliest days, children try to make sense of their world. They are naturally curious about their environment and the people around them and frequently ask questions. They enjoy using their senses to explore the immediate indoor and outdoor environments. Through their natural curiosity and by providing them with a wide variety of activities and experiences in play, children begin to develop a range of skills and concepts including observation, experimentation and free exploration of their surroundings.

Interaction and discussion with adults further develops these skills and concepts and helps to promote the use of appropriate language. By commenting, asking open-ended questions encouraging children to experiment and evaluate, adults can extend children’s understanding of themselves and their families, their pre-school setting (both indoors and outdoors) and the wider environment. Children can also learn about the world around them from books, pictures, posters, photographs and by using appropriate ICT.

To help children develop skills and concepts related to the world around them, they should have opportunities, individually and in groups, to engage in a wide range of interesting activities.

These may include opportunities to:

- observe water, discussing and experimenting with how different objects behave in water, what happens when colour is added to water, the uses of water and importance of not wasting it, water in the environment such as puddles and rain drops on windows;

- observe sand, exploring the properties of wet, damp, dry sand and using sand to build and make models;

- use their senses to explore a range of natural and man-made materials and sounds including
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autumn leaves and fruit, foods made in the setting, stones, shaving foam, metal objects, magnets, and environmental sounds such as birds singing or traffic;

• explore materials in creative play by manipulating malleable materials such as dough and clay; becoming aware of how these materials behave when poked, rolled, squashed and pulled; and observing what happens when colours are mixed;

• observe changes in materials and living things, for example when making dough or growing plants;

• observe and respect living things, discussing the importance of handling them with care and sensitivity, for example by helping to attend to indoor and outdoor plants or by helping to look after a wormery or bug box;

• create/explore stimulating areas of interest including those which include photographs, magnets, magnifiers, mirrors, light boxes, plants at different stages of development, shells, and representations of sea shore, jungle or ice landscapes;

• create models, for example when they assemble, rearrange and build with a variety of sizes and shapes of blocks and other materials or talking about why some models stand and others collapse;

• learn about the properties of different materials and their appropriate uses by putting things together in a variety of ways. Examples include making models with materials (both natural and man-made), sticking, cutting, folding and, on occasions, taking things apart;

• learn about themselves and their body parts by talking with adults; engaging in role-play; and listening to appropriate stories, rhymes and songs.

• talk about topics which arise naturally from their own experiences, for example holidays, festivals, birthdays, or the arrival of a new baby and recording these events, if appropriate, using photographs or by drawing or making models;

• talk about the weather and the seasons at appropriate times during the year;

• take some responsibility for caring for their own environment, become aware of some environmental issues like litter and the use of paper and bottle banks;

• talk about themselves, including where they live, the members of their extended family and events in their lives (both past and present);

• talk about some issues relating to safety in the pre-school setting and in the wider environment (including the weather), for example by discussing safe play in the indoor and outdoor environment; by playing with simple floor maps and small vehicles and discussing road safety; and by talking about “stranger danger”, how to keep safe in the sun and the importance of wearing appropriate clothing;

• learn about their pre-school setting (including the name of the setting and the people who work in it); where to find people/materials/equipment in the setting; and the names, function and position of different rooms/areas; and
• learn about the work of some of the people in the local community through role-play or making visits and having visitors to the setting like the fire officer, shop assistant, or a doctor.

While the concept of time is difficult for children to understand, activities such as daily and weekly routines, listening to “Once upon a time” stories, and talking about various festivals and other special occasions should help them to begin to develop an awareness of time.

Children show interest in and are learning to care for their environment. They care for and respect living things and handle them sensitively. They talk about themselves, their homes, their pre-school setting and the wider environment. They know about some of the people who work within the setting and the local community. They are becoming aware of some environmental issues.

Children talk about their families and events in their lives both past and present. By talking about items in the interest area, seasonal and festive events, listening to stories and taking part in daily routines, they begin to show an awareness of time.

Progress in Learning

The following is a general description of the characteristics and skills that the majority of children who have experienced appropriate pre-school education will display.

Children observe, explore, investigate and select materials and equipment in a range of situations. They ask questions about why things happen and how things work. As they work with a variety of materials, they use skills such as cutting, sticking, folding, pouring and building. They begin to recognise parts of the body and identify a variety of familiar sounds. They talk about their observations and make simple predictions about things like what would happen if water was added to sand.