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Historical Development of the ECEC sector in Ireland

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- **History of ECEC provision in Ireland**
- **ECEC services currently available in Ireland**
- **Occupations within the childcare sector**
- **Childcare organisations and non-governmental agencies**

History of ECEC provision in Ireland

Pre-school education did not really exist in Ireland (apart from some exceptions) until the 1980s and 1990s. This was largely due to the fact that until quite recently the majority of Irish women did not work outside the home. Even if they did, childcare was usually provided by family members or childminders located in the community and known to the family. Irish policy discouraged women from working outside the home. The ‘marriage bar’ meant that women working in the public service had to leave their jobs as soon as they got married and become stay-at-home mothers and wives. This ban was lifted in 1957 for primary school teachers, but it was 1973 before the ban was lifted for other women in the public service.

Until recent years in Ireland, very few mothers worked outside the home. Therefore, there was little focus on pre-school education in Ireland until the late 1980s and 1990s. Most of the progress in the area of pre-school education in Ireland has come from the private rather than the public sector.

Outside the state-funded primary school system, investment in pre-school provision was traditionally targeted to support children in need of specific intervention, including educational disadvantage and children with special needs. The ECEC needs of babies, young children and their families were met instead by a broad range of community, voluntary and private enterprises. ECEC service provision was unregulated until 1997. When the Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006 came into effect, no stipulation was made regarding the qualifications necessary to deliver such services beyond the person having their own children, a reference to show appropriate experience in caring for children and/or an appropriate qualification. Many services, especially those provided by the community and voluntary sector, relied heavily on volunteer staff. Even in the private sector, salaries were low and conditions of employment poor. Opportunities for employment in state-funded services were very limited (excluding primary teachers in infant classes) and similarly characterised by low status and low wages. Working in childcare was not generally viewed as a desirable career choice.

One important initiative came from the public sector in 1969, with the opening of a state-run pre-school in Rutland Street, Dublin. The Department of Education worked with the Van Leer Foundation – an organisation that promotes the early education of children living in economically disadvantaged areas. Together, they set up the pre-school in Rutland Street as a template for other such pre-schools around the country. These pre-schools were known as Early Start pre-schools. A total of 40 pre-schools opened nationally – all of which are still open today. The aim of these pre-schools is to combat the effects of economic and social disadvantage on educational achievement. This is achieved by giving children a good start to their education.

In 1992, Ireland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This helped to bring to public consciousness the rights of children. And in 2000, the Department of Health and Children published the National Children's Strategy. This strategy set out a ten-year plan for the improvement of children's lives in Ireland. The strategy document stated that its vision was for:

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential... (DoHC 2000: 10)

One of the goals of the National Children's Strategy is that 'children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development' (DoHC 2000: 30). The strategy aims to fulfil this by providing quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures.

There have been many other significant initiatives and decisions in Ireland in recent years in an attempt to respond to the demand for quality in ECEC.

National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998)

The National Forum on Early Childhood Education was established in 1998 by the then Minister for Education and Science, Micheál Martin. The forum brought together organisations and individuals with an interest in early childhood education, and in this way it created a ‘think tank’ from which a number of very worthwhile initiatives came, e.g. the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn* (DES 1999).

National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (1999)

The National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative (NVCC) was first established in 1999. Today, the organisation comprises seven national non-governmental agencies dedicated to the promotion of ECEC in Ireland. While the organisations involved are non-governmental, the NVCC can receive government funding. The seven organisations involved in the NVCC are:

- Barnardos
- Childminding Ireland
- Children in Hospital Ireland
- Forbairt Naíonraí Teo
- Early Childhood Ireland
- Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
- St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

These organisations aim to continue the work of the past number of decades by promoting ECEC in Ireland.

White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn (1999)

The purpose of this White Paper was to set out government policy on all issues relating to early childhood education. Quality of provision was the key theme of the White Paper. It recognised that while there was much quality provision in the ECEC sector, there was also a need to standardise provision. These findings led directly to the Child Care Pre-School Regulations (DoHC 2006), *Siolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009). All three of these initiatives are concerned with standardisation and quality of provision.

Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2002)

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was established by Dublin Institute of Technology and St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra. It was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in 2002. CECDE aimed to achieve the goals set out in *Ready to Learn* (1999). The organisation was disbanded in 2008, when it was seen by government to have achieved everything it was set up to do. Among other things, CECDE produced Ireland’s first quality framework, entitled *Siolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006).

Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006

Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006 was produced by the Department of Health and Children. This document set out pre-school regulations and put on a statutory basis ECEC service provision in Ireland. The regulations clearly list all the requirements that must be met by organisations or individuals providing ECEC services to children aged 0–6. The regulations cover such issues as first aid, management, staff–child ratios, behaviour management, fire safety measures, premises and facilities, heating, ventilation, lighting, facilities for rest and play, etc.

Fulfilment of the requirements of these regulations undoubtedly put much work and expense on ECEC providers, particularly those providing services from premises that were not purpose built. Having said this, many people believe that these regulations have done more than any other initiative for the improvement of ECEC services for children. This is because they are on a statutory footing and they are enforced by HSE inspectors.

Síolta (2006)

The Department of Education and Skills published *Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* in 2006. The Síolta framework was developed by CECDE in a process that took over three years and involved more than 50 different organisations representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policymakers and researchers. Síolta aims to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECEC settings that cater for children aged 0–6. Settings covered by Síolta include full- and part-time day care, childminding services and sessional services, e.g. Montessori classrooms and infant classes in primary schools.

The inclusion of infant classes in primary schools represents a new departure for ECEC in Ireland. Up until the publication of Síolta (and Aistear in 2009), pre-school and primary school children were treated very differently. It is now understood that children aged 0–6 require a developmental-based (as opposed to subject-based) curriculum regardless of whether the child is in pre-school or primary school. Since December 2008 (after CECDE was disbanded), the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta.

Aistear (2009)

Up until recent years, the curriculum followed by pre-school settings was largely undirected and unregulated. This has inevitably resulted in variation in the quality of the curriculum provided by settings. In 1999, the NCCA published the *Primary School Curriculum*, which did direct and regulate the curriculum followed in infant classes. However, in 2004 the OECD conducted its *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland*. This review found that education provided in infant classes in primary schools in Ireland was too directive and formal (OECD 2004: 58).

In 2009, the NCCA published *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. The ultimate aim of Aistear is the development of the whole child. This is in contrast with the previous Primary School Curriculum, which was more subject based. Infant classes in primary schools must now follow the Aistear curriculum. This is a huge departure for ECEC in Ireland. For years, Scandinavian countries have been using curricula similar to Aistear and it is now understood that introducing children to formal, direct education at too young an age is counterproductive and can suppress children's natural enthusiasm and curiosity for learning. American educator John Holt (1923–85) devoted much of his time to researching this topic.

It is important to note that (at the time of writing) Aistear is inspected in primary school settings only. It is not inspected in pre-school settings, which may have reduced its impact.

Free Pre-School Year Programme

In 2010, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs introduced the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education Programme. Before this, it was only children in disadvantaged areas who could avail of free or subsidised pre-school education. The Free Pre-School Year Programme recognises that *all* children benefit from quality pre-school education. The programme recognises that because pre-school education in Ireland usually comes from private providers, it is expensive and therefore not available to all children, e.g. children of parents not working outside the home. Under the programme, pre-school providers are paid per child enrolled. The providers must meet certain criteria before entering the scheme, e.g. staff qualifications. This has had the effect of incentivising providers to meet criteria, which in turn has increased the quality of provision.

ECEC Services Currently Available in Ireland

The types of ECEC services currently available in Ireland can be organised under these headings:

- Sessional services, which provide ECEC services for a set period of time during the day (e.g. 9am–1pm)
- Full-time services, which provide ECEC services throughout the day.
- Part-time services, which provide ECEC services for a total of more than 3.5 hours and less than 5 hours a day. It may include a sessional pre-school service for pre-school children not attending the part-time day care service.

Up to 80 per cent of services in Ireland, whether sessional or full time, are owned and operated by the private sector. All registered services (regardless of who operates or funds them) must comply with the Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006 and they must also follow the Síolta and Aistear frameworks.

Sessional Services

Playgroups

Playgroups operate in a range of settings and are usually open for approximately three hours per day. Children usually attend playgroups from the age of two-and-a-half until they go to primary school. Some playgroups are privately owned. *Community playgroups* are primarily funded by government and are run by community members. Many community playgroups are staffed by individuals on government employment schemes, e.g. Community Employment Scheme (CE). These staff members are encouraged to undertake further education and training.

Montessori Schools

Usually, Montessori pre-schools are privately owned and they operate for approximately three hours per day. Some Montessori schools run two sessions (morning and afternoon), with children attending one session per day. Montessori pre-schools are run according to the principles and educational methods of Maria Montessori. While Montessori pre-schools in Ireland do follow the Aistear framework, they also learn via the Montessori curriculum and practical materials.

Naíonraí

Naíonraí are pre-schools run through the medium of the Irish language. They are supported by an organisation called Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta and there are almost 200 of them nationwide. Naíonraí also follow the Aistear framework, of which there is an Irish-language version. Children between the ages three and five attend for approximately three hours.

Early Start

The Early Start Programme is a one-year preventative intervention scheme offered in selected pre-schools in designated disadvantaged areas. The objective of the pre-school programme, which is managed and funded by the Department of Education and Skills, is to tackle educational disadvantage by targeting children who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. The Early Start Pre-School Programme was introduced in 1994 in eight pilot schools in disadvantaged areas. It expanded the following year to 40 schools and now caters for over 1,650 children in Ireland. Most schools are located in the Dublin area, with 26 schools there. There are six schools in Cork and three in Limerick. There is one each in Galway, Waterford, Bray (Co. Wicklow), Dundalk (Co. Louth) and Drogheda (Co. Louth). Early Start implements the Aistear framework in an effort to enhance the overall development of young children and to prevent school failure by trying to counteract the effects of social disadvantage.

Pre-schools for Traveller Children

Up to recently, funding was provided for a number of pre-schools that catered specifically for Traveller children who might not otherwise have been able to avail of a pre-school year. However, since the introduction of the Free Pre-School Year Programme in 2010, all children can avail of one year's free pre-school, so there is no longer separate provision for Traveller children.

Pre-schools for Children with Special Needs

Local Health Offices and/or voluntary bodies provide services for young children with severe or profound disabilities. Services are provided in specialised centres around the country and are generally run by a clinical director and staffed by nurses with an intellectual disability qualification, ECEC trained teachers and often play therapists. While pre-school children in Ireland do not have a specific right to education, they are entitled to certain health services that are related to education.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) is responsible for providing psychological services and speech and language therapy services for pre-school children with disabilities who are assessed as needing these services. Assessments of children under 5 are carried out under the 'assessment of need' provisions of the Disability Act 2005. The Visiting Teacher Service of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) provides a service to young children with visual and/or hearing impairment, from the age of 2.

There are a small number of special pre-school class units for children with autistic spectrum disorders. These units are sometimes attached to primary schools. There are also a number of ABA schools in Ireland. These schools cater for children with autism by using a specific method of teaching called **Applied Behavioural Analysis**.

Parent and Toddler Groups

These are informal groups where babies and toddlers go with their parents to meet other babies, toddlers and parents. They are aimed at providing play and socialisation opportunities for children and they normally take place in settings such as community centres or parents' homes. Parent and toddler groups are supported by Early Childhood Ireland.

Full-time Services

Crèches, Day Care Centres and Nurseries

These terms are used to describe services offering full-time care and education for babies and children. Services are usually provided for children aged 6 months to school-going age. Childcare regulations state that the adult-baby ratio must not exceed 1:3; this ratio increases to 1:5 for babies aged over 12 months. Because of this, many settings will not accept children under the age of 12 months.

Many facilities also offer afterschool care and/or homework clubs for primary school children. This means that crèches, day care centres and nurseries now cater for children aged 6 months to 12 years. While most full-time services are privately owned and funded by parental fees, a small number are government funded, i.e. community crèches. Some large employers and also many of the larger colleges and universities provide crèche facilities at subsidised rates for their staff and students. These services usually operate a long day (8am–6pm) to facilitate working parents. Some city crèches open as early as 6am.

Family Day Care/Childminders

This is the most common form of ECEC service in Ireland. According to Childminding Ireland (2012), approximately 70 per cent of children in out-of-home settings are cared for in this way. It is estimated that there are approximately 37,900 childminders working in Ireland today (National Childcare Strategy 2006). Childminders who care for three or fewer children are exempt from the Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006. However, they are encouraged to register voluntarily with their local Childminder Advisory Officer (CMO), whose name and contact details are available through the local City/County Childcare Committee (CCC). Under the Childcare Act 1991, childminders caring for more than three pre-school children are required to register with the HSE. However, many do not do this.

All childminders (whether registered or not) are encouraged to follow the National Guidelines for Childminders, which were published by the Office of the Minister for Children in 2006 and updated in 2008. Recent government initiatives have tried to regulate this area by offering a number of different incentives to childminders who register their service. These incentives include training by CCCs; financial supports, e.g. childminding development grant (€1000) and capital grants (up to €75,000); and tax exemptions, i.e. childminders can earn up to €15,000 per year tax free. If childminders register, they are included on the CCC list of registered providers. This can be a useful way of advertising childminding services, since many new parents look to the list of registered providers when investigating childcare options.

Occupations within the Childcare Sector

■ Nursery nurses

These practitioners provide care for children in day or residential nurseries, children's homes, maternity units and similar establishments. Related job titles include crèche assistant, nursery assistant and nursery nurse.

■ Playgroup leaders

These practitioners deliver and facilitate play opportunities for children in a range of formal and informal settings, including play groups, play schemes, free play locations and after-school activities. Related job titles include play leader and playgroup assistant.

■ **Educational/Special Needs assistants**

These practitioners assist teachers with (or relieve them of) a variety of non-teaching duties. Related job titles include classroom helper, education care officer, non-teaching assistant, school helper and special needs assistant.

■ **Childcare manager/supervisor**

These practitioners ensure that the care and education of the children is being maintained at all times. They take care of any issues that arise and they are in direct contact with parents. They are responsible for the day-to-day running of the childcare facility. This role requires childcare qualifications as well as experience in the area. The role also requires excellent interpersonal and organisation skills and the ability to manage a team of employees.

■ **Montessori teacher**

These practitioners ensure efficient day-to-day running of a Montessori education setting. They follow Montessori guidelines regarding the education of young children. They present different exercises to children using the Montessori materials and they practise observation on a regular basis.

■ **Other childcare and related occupations**

There are many other childcare practitioners who perform a variety of domestic activities in the day-to-day care of children. They supervise and participate in children's play, education and other activities. Related job titles include childminder, nanny and au pair.

City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs)

There are 33 City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) that were established in 2001 to encourage and facilitate the development of childcare locally. They provide information and advice on setting up your own business in the childcare sector, training courses for people interested in working in the childcare sector and useful information for parents about local childcare facilities.

In Budget 2006, the Irish government announced the establishment of the National Childcare Investment Programme 2006–2010 (NCIP), which succeeded the previous earlier Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme. City/County Childcare Committees are open to members of the public who wish to apply for grant assistance and support information under the National Childcare Investment Programme.

List of City/County Childcare Committees	
Carlow	Limerick County
Cavan	Longford
Clare	Louth
Cork City	Mayo
Cork County	Meath
Donegal	Monaghan
Dublin City	Offaly
Dublin South	Roscommon
Dun Laoghaire	Sligo
Fingal	Tipperary North
Galway	Tipperary South
Kerry	Waterford City
Kildare	Waterford County
Kilkenny	Westmeath
Laois	Wexford
Leitrim	Wicklow
Limerick City	

Public Health Nurses

The Public Health Nurse is employed by the HSE. Their role is to serve the community with a range of healthcare services; they are also registered general nurses. They are usually based within the community and will cover certain local areas. They may visit schools. They may visit elderly people who require help to dress a wound. They also visit newborn babies and their mothers within a six-week period of them being discharged from hospital. Public Health Nurses engage in regular contact with GPs, hospitals and other healthcare providers about a patient in their care. This will ensure that the other healthcare providers have up-to-date knowledge so that they can ensure best practice.

Special Needs Assistants

Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) are employed to facilitate learners with a disability related to education. SNAs may work in a special school or in mainstream schools either on a part-time or full-time basis, as mentioned earlier. They take on a non-teaching role and are always under the supervision of the class teacher. An SNA may help a child to get on and off buses. They may help the child with reading and writing exercises. They may also help with feeding and toileting. SNAs are required to have an appropriate qualification to work as a special needs assistant, e.g. level 5 course in Special Needs Assisting.

Primary Teachers

Primary school teachers are qualified to teach the primary school curriculum to children aged 4–12. Primary school teachers have a number of important roles. They ensure the social and academic development of the children in their care. They plan and deliver lessons within the primary school curriculum and they have regular interaction with parents and guardians.

Educational Psychologists

The role of the educational psychologist is to assess the needs of children and young people who have problems relating to behaviour, learning and/or social/emotional development. This may be done by observing and/or interviewing the child. The appropriate methods of helping the child will then be established, e.g. different therapies, counselling or learning support programmes. Educational psychologists work in many different settings, within schools, the HSE, private practices and third-level institutions.

Family Support Workers

The Family Support Worker Service offers practical and emotional support to families if it is required. The aim of this service is to ensure where possible that children remain with their families. This service also offers home-based support to families for a certain number of hours per week. The support services include parenting skills, information on diet, nutrition and healthcare, budgeting and family finance, and confidence and personal development. If the family support worker has concerns regarding the family, they will report this information to a social worker.

Social Workers

The social worker in childcare services can work in four main areas: child protection, child placement, child and adolescent psychiatry, and family support. Social workers often work with families and individuals that require support with a number of problems, e.g. emotional, social, psychiatric and behavioural. They may also work with individuals and their families on a regular basis regarding issues such as child abuse and domestic violence.

Childcare Organisations and Non-governmental Agencies

Barnardos

Barnardos children's charity delivers a variety of services and works in close proximity with

children and their families depending on their specific needs. The aim of this is to promote family learning and development and, therefore, to enhance the family's overall wellbeing.

Barnardos strives to give children positive childhood experiences:

If a child's learning and development, and his or her emotional wellbeing, is successfully and measurably improved through our work, then the child's ability to benefit from life opportunities and manage life challenges will be improved, and therefore the path of his or her life will be changed for the better. (www.barnardos.ie)

Barnardos aims to improve government laws, policies and procedures across all areas that affect children's lives. They do this by ensuring that the knowledge and experience they gain through working with children and their families in areas such as education and health is heard at government level. They also engage in regular political meetings with government and opposition parties and relevant policy makers.

There are a number of ways in which people can learn about the work of Barnardos: internet, posters, billboards, media interviews and articles.

Barnardos offers services across three stages of child development:

- Children aged 0–5 ('best start')
- Children aged 6–12 ('best chance')
- Children and young people aged 13–18 ('best choice').

Barnardos may work with a child's family in order for the child to experience a happy family life with good relationships with parents and siblings. This work may include:

- Providing group sessions with parents and children to practise skills such as listening and problem-solving skills
- Providing help and advice to parents in different areas, e.g. managing challenging behaviour
- Engaging with children of different ages on relevant and often sensitive issues, e.g. a family that has been affected by alcohol misuse
- Providing a *guardian ad litem*: a person who is qualified and experienced in working with children that are involved in family law proceedings. This service gives the child involved an independent voice in court. This person can speak on the child's behalf and explain what the child's particular wishes are. The *guardian ad litem* works in conjunction with the child's family at all times.
- Providing an *origin tracing service*, which is especially for people who spent some or all of their childhood growing up in an Irish industrial school. This confidential service provides them with the necessary assistance in finding information relating to any of their relatives. Staff who deliver this service are highly trained.

- Providing a confidential *post adoption service* for adults, e.g. a helpline number or e-mail service for birth family and adoptive family members. A mediation service is available for people who were adopted and have come in contact with birth relatives and want to begin correspondence. There are training and support meetings for parents who have adopted children from various countries outside of Ireland. The service may also be useful for adoptive parents to discuss any questions they may have about their adult adoptive child seeking birth relatives. Adoptive parents are also welcome to contact the service to discuss any questions or anxieties they might have about their adult son or daughter making contact with birth relatives.

Barnardos provides a range of *parenting programmes and talks*. These are designed for parents of children of every age (0–18). These programmes can offer support to parents in managing their child’s needs and in understanding their child. Topics will be selected to address the needs of the parents and their child’s stage of development.

Teen parent programmes are another important part of the work of Barnardos. In these programmes, Barnardos works in careful collaboration with teenage parents, both male and female, together with their children to assist them with advice on financial/educational support.

Services Provided to the Community

Barnardos works with children in disadvantaged areas. They provide many services, including the following.

■ Early Years/Tús Maith services

These are programmes suitable for children aged 0–5. The main principle is to support children and to manage their transition into primary school. This programme works using the HighScope approach, where children have direct experiences based on their own interests and ideas, along with a programme called the REDI programme (**r**esearch-based, **d**evelopmentally informed).

■ Friendship group

Barnardos realises the importance of children having friends (particularly friends of the same age). Therefore, they offer a friendship group which facilitates children in learning the necessary skills to establish genuine and meaningful relationships. These friendship groups are typically suited for children aged 6–9. Each group is made up of six children and two staff who meet every week for two hours over a period of weeks.

■ Vetting service

Barnardos provides a vetting service that assists in the processing of Garda vetting applications for a number of groups/organisations that are not directly registered with the Garda Central Vetting Unit. This is at the request of (and in collaboration with) the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA).

■ **Wizards of Words**

Barnardos provides a service known as Wizards of Words (WoW). The programme is a paired literacy improvement programme. It is suitable for children in first and second class in primary school. The programme delivers one-to-one tuition with older volunteers during school time and on the school premises. The trained volunteers (who are typically aged 55 and over) meet with children who have been nominated by the teacher, three times a week during school hours. The volunteers provide reading support to the children. Barnardos appoints a project leader who trains and supports the volunteers in the implementation of the programme, monitors progress and ensures that the programme is run effectively. WoW is currently hosted in eight schools in Dublin and Limerick.

■ **Training and consultancy**

Barnardos offers training to childcare professionals, parents and all people that work in the childcare area. The training given is within the important context of Siolta, the National Quality Framework.

■ **Bereavement counselling**

Barnardos has a bereavement counselling service for children and young people who have lost someone close to them. They try to help them through the grieving process and give them the opportunity to talk. Counsellors are based in Cork and Dublin, but work with children from across the country.

Childminding Ireland

Childminding Ireland aims to promote quality childminding as a beneficial form of non-parental care for children of all ages, from infancy to school-age. Childminding Ireland explains that childminders are dedicated to offering constant care in small, home-like settings in which children are most comfortable.

Childminding Ireland, as the National Association, is committed to promoting the development of quality in family-based care for children by providing a range of services for childminders, promoting Siolta quality standards, developing training for the childminding sector and promoting the development of local childminding networks. (www.childmindingireland.ie)

Childminding Ireland has a number of objectives in relation to childcare. They aim to:

- Promote high-quality ECEC standards for children and ensure that all their developmental needs are met
- Support and advise childminders and parents in the area of ECEC
- Maintain a code of standards for family-based care for children
- Encourage the recognition of childminding as a positive care facility for young children.

Childminding Ireland strives to ensure that their knowledge is heard at government level; they have direct contact with the Minister for Children and the officials who design policies that are directly linked to childminding. Childminding Ireland is constantly lobbying to change and improve laws, policies and procedures in the relevant areas. They often attend meetings with both government and opposition public representatives. They promote public awareness for childminders in many ways, e.g. providing an up-to-date and easily accessible website, along with print articles.

Childminders are always welcome to register with Childminding Ireland. In doing so, they can enjoy many benefits. There is free advertising on the Childminding Ireland website (www.childminding.ie). The website also offers other useful resources, including sample policies and procedures, and information on upcoming training courses and local events. Childminding Ireland also operates a telephone helpline, which is open five days a week.

Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta

Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta (www.naionrai.ie) is an all-Ireland voluntary organisation that supports the promotion of education and care services in Irish for children from birth onwards. Children learning through Irish attend a Naíonra and are taught solely through Irish.

- Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta provides a number of services through Irish: afterschool care, summer camps, and parent/guardian and toddler groups.
- Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta offers advice and assistance to parents who wish to send their children to a Naíonra. They also offer support for new and existing Naíonraí. There is a grant scheme open to all Naíonraí outside the Gaeltacht regions.
- Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta is a QQI-recognised training centre and it provides intensive training courses in Childcare Levels 5 and 6.

There is a wide range of material and books available from Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta and they also provide some basic equipment suitable for a Naíonra. Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta publishes a monthly newsletter containing information and articles of interest to all involved in childcare.

Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association

The Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association (www.steinerireland.org) is Ireland's main source of information on Steiner Waldorf education. The organisation provides support for members who are based all around Ireland.

The organisation was formed in 1992. Initially, membership was restricted to those who were working in a Steiner kindergarten and, since Steiner education was unfamiliar at the time in Ireland, there was little interest from those outside the area. However, in recent years there has been an increasing recognition of many different pre-school methodologies. Steiner

Waldorf education has become more popular in Ireland and there is greater recognition of its importance in children's development.

The Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association has a number of objectives in relation to childcare. They aim to:

- Promote and support the development of Steiner Waldorf ECEC in Ireland
- Represent professionals working in Steiner Waldorf schools in Ireland
- Establish and develop a range of training programmes for childcare practitioners
- Provide professional in-service training programmes for members. The association has established a programme of training workshops on aspects of Steiner Waldorf education for childcare professionals.
- Collaborate with other organisations and agencies to promote high-quality, affordable childcare services in the community.

St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland

St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (www.montessorireland.ie) provides certification of Montessori pre-school programmes which ensure that Montessori pre-schools are of the highest possible standard. As there are no set standards which Montessori schools must adhere to, St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland have set out their own standards. Montessori schools that wish to register with the organisation must satisfy these standards. These standards require, for example, that Montessori teachers have the appropriate Montessori qualifications and that they attend St Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland's workshop/refresher course during the year. The Montessori pre-school must adhere to the Child Care (Pre-School) Regulations 2006. The Montessori classroom must be purpose built and must be complete with a wide range of Montessori materials.

There are many benefits for Montessori pre-schools that register with the society.

- Since registered schools must follow the principles of Maria Montessori, this helps to set and raise standards of Montessori education in Ireland.
- Montessori Education Mentors help Montessori teachers in all areas of the Montessori approach to education.
- The society provides information on training, refresher courses and workshops.
- Registered pre-schools are given unlimited access to the society's website, which is regularly updated with useful information.

Early Childhood Ireland

Early Childhood Ireland (www.earlychildhoodireland.ie) represents and supports individuals who are in any way involved in the development, delivery and oversight of ECEC in Ireland. Early Childhood Ireland is a member organisation. It has more than 3,200 members and is open to people in the childcare area, including managers and staff of ECEC settings,

employees in the childcare sector, students of childcare, parents and relatives of children, and researchers and policy makers who influence the quality, availability and range of ECEC services.

Early Childhood Ireland has a number of objectives in relation to childcare. They aim to:

- Provide professional support and training for ECEC practitioners
- Contribute to research and public policy development
- Promote best-quality ECEC that is accessible to all children
- Explore and evaluate different child-centered approaches to ECEC.

Children in Hospital Ireland

Children in Hospital Ireland is a voluntary organisation that ensures children in hospital receive the best possible care. They also promote the care of children's families.