

Pre-school examples of approaches to learning and teaching during the COVID-19 recovery phase

September 2020 – December 2020



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Introduction

These following examples of practice in pre-schools are based on information gained from a combination of district Inspector (DI) visits, virtual visits via phone calls and online staff meetings made to nursery schools, nursery units and voluntary and private pre-school settings across all regions in the period from 1 September to 29 November 2020. It also includes information gained through ETI consultation with three focus groups of leaders representing all types of pre-schools.

During this re-start and recovery period staff have worked diligently, in the best interests of the children, to manage a new and constantly changing situation. They have sought to ensure that the children and staff are as safe as possible, while providing a rich and stimulating pre-school programme. There are many strengths, issues and challenges identified by staff, as well as reflection on the lessons learned about what has worked well in the period of school closures to inform their future practice. The following are examples of how some settings have sought to overcome the challenges.

Examples of approaches to learning and teaching during the COVID-19 recovery phase

Use of digital communication

- Sharing written information and videos to support the induction of new children including a virtual tour of the pre-school, introduction to staff and documentation such as the prospectus, policies and permission slips;
- providing parental guidance to support learning activities at home either for all children each week, for those who are currently self-isolating or shielding and during the extended half term break;
- suggesting ideas for sensory or physical activities parents can easily do at home each week to compensate for reduced opportunities in the pre-school;
- preparing a bank of videos and materials in preparation for possible closure or individual self-isolation, to share the responsibility for online support to the whole staff team and in the case of IME settings to support parents with Irish;
- videoing a concert, nativity play, storytelling, singing, “show and tell” sessions, displays of children’s work within the pre-school setting to maintain connections with the whole school community of staff, children and families;
- introducing the same method and online learning platform as the local primary school to secure continuity of experience for children and parents as they transition and transfer from pre-school into year 1;

- monitoring the level of engagement from families and combining the recording and celebration of the children’s achievements at home with their progress in pre-school;
- conducting “settling-in” parental interviews online; and
- liaising with other professionals and agencies online.

How staff are adapting to support outdoor learning

- Increasing the amount of time children are outdoors during the pre-school session.
- Planning the space, resources and adult engagement that supports a range of learning across the pre-school curriculum including: language skills, collaborative play, emotional well-being, physical skills development, creative arts, planting and growing, sensory activities, music and singing and stories and snack times.
- Designating/zoning learning areas using signage for different class bubbles and rotating these to provide a range of experiences over a week/month.
- Using all available (suitably risk assessed) space including “fenced in” car parks, forested areas, canopied areas.
- Linking with the adjoining primary school to take part in a daily mile within their “class bubble”.
- Providing suitable outdoor clothing or encouraging parents to have their children dressed appropriately for all types of weather.
- Providing a sink or sanitizing stations outdoors.

Adjustments to the organisation of the pre-school day

- Introducing staggered arrival and finish times to the start and end of the session.
- Creating multiple entry points, with relevant signage into the classroom or outdoor space to avoid congestion on arrival and departure.
- Starting the pre-school day in the outdoor space and extending the length of time for outdoor learning.

- A reduced day of between 15 to 30 minutes in a small number of part-time sessions to allow enough time to rotate and clean resources for a dual day.
- Zoning and rotating the use of outdoor play spaces where they have more than one bubble.

How resources are being re-organised

- Dough or art materials are presented in accessible, labelled pots or bags or larger amounts made and disposed of daily.
- Natural alternatives are provided instead of sand and dough, such as lentils, pasta, shaving foam, stones, jelly that can be rotated or disposed of on a daily basis but continue to provide a range of sensory experiences.
- Large outdoor sand trays to support collaborative play for individual bubbles of children are sterilised and rotated each week.
- Individual trays of dry sand or small amounts of sand, with a range of tools provided.
- Wipe-able books or toys are used or boxes of books and toys are sorted every 72 hours for different groups of children.

How leaders are overcoming some of the challenges

- Setting up online platforms for staff as a quick and easy way of communicating outside of the pre-school environment.
- Alternate days for the nursery principal and secretary to access the school office.
- Staff who crossed bubbles changed clothes and maintained social distancing as much as possible.
- Additional staff employed or placement students used to support bubbles and prevent cross infection.
- Labelling chairs for each specific staff member to reduce possible infection and the use of outdoor areas or playrooms for socially distanced meetings.
- For a small number of voluntary playgroups the management group were in a position to allocate release time to assist with the increasing workload and paperwork.
- A minority of leadership and management reviewed and decreased the children's hours so that staff could implement appropriate cleaning procedures to ensure the health and safety of the pre-school setting.

Many parents have embraced the use of digital communication

- Parents are familiar with using and prefer social media.
- Parents can access this information at time that is convenient to their family circumstances.
- Parents can replay online videos to reinforce the messages and watch them with their children more than once.
- Parents report that the children enjoy and engage with digital communication of activities when their leader/staff are visible online.
- Online platforms in Irish Medium settings provide support for parents and help develop their confidence to choose primary Irish medium settings for their children.
- Parents feel more involved in their child's learning when photos and videos are shared on-line, especially when they are unable to attend 'stay and play' sessions in the pre-school setting.
- A small number of settings engage the children using online platforms enabling them to share their experiences with each other as well as participating in activities and learning experiences facilitated by staff during holiday period.

How leadership and management are supporting staff well-being

- Acknowledging the additional pressure and anxiety of staff during these challenging times.
- Having robust risk assessments, policies and procedures and associated training to reassure staff that they are working in a safe environment.
- Allocating five minute fresh air breaks for staff wearing masks.
- Reduced day to allow more time for cleaning especially for dual day sessions.
- Introducing a labelling system and additional resources to allow for rotation of resources between bubbles.
- Purchasing specialist equipment to help with cleaning of all equipment.
- Organising rotas for cleaning so that it is a shared responsibility.
- Providing pamper packs/treats for staff on a Friday.

Strategies staff have used to support the children's emotional health and well-being

- Using puppets, dolls and books to encourage children to talk about their emotions and feelings.
- Extending the periods of energetic play and exercise outdoors.
- Using mindfulness activities, including the use of calming music, sensory lighting and space to relax.
- Introducing a “Hugs station” for children and parents before entry and safe places for them to sit with parents if needed.
- Asking parent to supply comfort toys, which stay in the setting, for children to access if they feel anxious or upset.
- Using ‘All about Me’ booklets to help children talk about their families and share experiences.
- Irish Medium settings using ‘Fáilte Booklets’ to support the children’s transition.

Care and welfare support for parents

- Maintaining socially distanced, informal chats at the pre-school gate, weekly phone calls or online private meetings with vulnerable families.
- Providing information linked to health, well-being and mental health support, and signposting parents to relevant charities and agencies for support.
- Responding to consultation and requests from parents by sending home learning packs during holiday periods for parents and children to continue with the blended approach.
- Providing home learning packs for parents and children to enjoy together.

How staff plan to develop the use of digital technology

- Communicate more updates and information about pre-school and their child’s achievements to parents online.
- Maintain more links with working parent and families with children who are ill online.
- Support transition, induction and learning at home through videos online.

- Use the same online approaches and online learning platforms as the local primary school to provide continuity.
- Promote the Irish language at home with parents through online story, songs and rhymes videos.
- Use the translation service associated with a number of online platforms to support newcomer families.
- Promote a wider range of ongoing online support for family learning at home through posting plans, practical ideas and videos of songs, stories and activities.
- Hold online meetings for parents having had better responses for some types of meetings such as Annual General Meetings.
- Use webinars and online training, where available, for staff development, helping to maximise use of time and resources.

Planning for future outdoor learning

- More creative use of the existing grounds to optimise all space available for outdoor learning.
- Planning a wider range of learning activities outdoors into their programme across all areas of the pre-school curriculum including active songs/rhymes, music and stories.
- Extending the time used for outdoor play to promote energetic play and the physical and mental well-being of the children.
- Action planning with a focus on the further development and resourcing of outdoor areas using current or applying for funding streams.
- Promoting the use of suitable clothing for extended outdoor experiences in all weathers.

Planning for future induction and settling in

- Inducting children in smaller groups.
- Setting out clearer boundaries for parents during the settling in period.
- Staggered start and end times to the day to avoid congestion and allow for informal conversations with parents.
- Starting the year with individual classes rather than open plan.
- Meeting individual families on their own prior to starting.
- Having fewer resources in the first few weeks of settling in.

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