

Report of a Pre-school Inspection  
Safe and Sound Pre-school, Ballynahinch

January 2025



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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk \* denotes further information included at Appendix 2.

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Safe and Sound Pre-school is part of a privately owned Safe and Sound Private Day Care facility, located on the outskirts of Ballynahinch. The pre-school is located in a new, purpose-built room, opened in September 2023, with access to a small enclosed outdoor area. In addition, the pre-school has two large enclosed outdoor areas, which are used on rotation throughout the week for outdoor play. The pre-school room is used in the afternoon to facilitate an after-schools club.

The 20 pre-school children attending the part-time session come from the town of Ballynahinch and the wider area.

The pre-school team includes a leader, deputy leader, and one assistant. The management team is led by the proprietor of Safe and Sound Day Care. An early years specialist (EYS) from the Early Years Organisation works with the staff to support the pre-school to develop and improve.

## **B. VIEWS OF PARENTS AND STAFF**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) issued online confidential questionnaires to parents and staff in advance of the inspection.

Thirty percent (6) of the parents responded to the questionnaire and their responses were wholly positive. Additionally, a small number of the parents included additional written comments which were entirely positive. In particular, the parents commented on their child's love of the pre-school, the wonderful, knowledgeable staff, the helpful communication and the progress that their child is making.

A small number of parents also met with inspectors during the inspection. In addition to the comments provided through the questionnaire, they spoke positively about the stimulating pre-school curriculum provided by the staff, highlighting their ability to engage and challenge their child with their learning. The staff respond sensitively to any identified special educational needs.

All of the staff responded to the questionnaire and almost all of them provided written comments; their responses were wholly positive. They commented on the very strong family and community links, their pride in their work and enjoyment of being part of a team and the professional learning opportunities available to them.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside Safe and Sound Pre-school to consider how well the pre-school:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;

- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

## 2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The pre-school's vision is realised through the provision of a safe, nurturing and child-centred learning environment where the children are happy and excited about their learning.
- The excellent teamwork, high levels of self-reflection and robust, well-embedded self-evaluation processes ensure a consistently high standard of practice across the pre-school.
- The staff plan skilfully a holistic pre-school programme that is responsive, thoughtful and tailored to the individual needs of each child.
- The music curriculum is a key strength, enhancing the children's creativity, building their confidence, supporting their emotional health and wellbeing, and developing their early language skills.
- The children are making good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum.
- The collaborative team maintains excellent relationships with families and builds strong connections with the wider community, which supports very well the overall development of the children.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

## 3. MAIN REPORT

### A. SETTING THE VISION

The pre-school's vision is realised through the provision of a safe, nurturing and child-centred learning environment where the children are happy and excited about their learning. The **ETHOS** of the pre-school underpins the vision where the **E**ducation of the children, the highly effective **T**eamwork, the **H**olistic development of each child, the **O**pportunities created through connecting with the local community, and the continuous improvement of the **S**etting are of paramount importance.

The staff use robust self-evaluation processes to identify areas for development based on the children's needs, which include a focus on exploration using loose parts play\* and the meaningful integration of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). These are informed by high levels of self-reflection, ongoing parental consultation, and engagement with the EYS. Weekly team meetings, which are structured around clear agendas, focus on the progression and learning needs of the children and the identification of strategies and resources to support them. The leadership team provides strong support, constructive challenge and asks reflective questions that drives continuous improvement. This collaborative and thoughtful approach enables consistently high standards of practice in the pre-school.

## **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

A recent review of the curriculum by the staff has ensured that all children have access to a programme that is exciting, balanced, cohesive and offers excellent learning experiences across all areas. The opportunities for developing the children's musicality, both indoors and outdoors, are particularly noteworthy. Through rhyme, song, and sound exploration using instruments, the children enjoy making music and expressing themselves. This develops well their creativity, self-confidence and self-esteem, while also laying strong foundations for early language development.

A recent focus on enhancing the children's awareness of ICT and its use in meaningful contexts is evident in the well-chosen resources provided. For example, the children use laptops to make appointments in the doctor's surgery role-play area, take photographs of their work, and use a digital reader to access stories.

Planning at all levels is comprehensive and clear. The staff plan collaboratively and collegially which enables them to have a clear understanding of the intended learning outcomes for each child, and their role in supporting each child to progress their learning. They monitor carefully each child's progress and use insightful and detailed observations to inform the planning, providing progression and challenge and identifying areas where development is needed. The staff interactions with the children are of a consistently high quality. They use their expertise to introduce new language, model positive behaviour, and support each child's needs.

The children's health and wellbeing are a priority, evidenced by the healthy snack routine and the 'Happy Smiles'\* pre-school oral health programme. The children have access to a calm corner where they can manage their emotions, have some quiet time and play with well-chosen sensory toys. Puppets are also used very effectively to develop the children's understanding of emotional health, wellbeing, respect and diversity. The staff discuss openly their feelings and experiences with the children, encouraging them to do the same, which impacts positively on the children's wellbeing and readiness to engage in learning activities.

The staff review and adapt their policies to reflect the latest research and practice; for example, following recent training, the Behaviour Management Policy has been updated to incorporate effective strategies to support the children.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The staff team have high expectations for every child and, through their meticulous planning and monitoring, prioritise progress across all areas of the curriculum. They have excellent relationships with the children and demonstrate a genuine care and a strong commitment to help each child achieve their full potential. The staff know the children and their families very well and use their detailed knowledge of each child's unique starting point to provide effective support and appropriate challenge for every child.

For the children who require additional support, the staff work closely with the parents and external agencies to develop detailed and clear personal learning plans. These plans are monitored regularly and incorporate specific targets focused on each child's unique needs. Strategies shared by, for example, speech and language and occupational therapists, are implemented consistently by the staff resulting in significant progress for the children. The strong partnership between the home and pre-school enables a consistent approach.

The pre-school staff team prioritise an inclusive and equitable experience for every child and access professional learning opportunities that meet the needs of both their current and future cohorts of children. Training in Makaton\* and autism strategies has had a significant impact on the children's social interaction and communication skills, with strategies such as a visual timetable adapted specifically to support individual children's needs.

### **D. DEFINING, CELEBRATING AND EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The children are making good progress across all areas of the pre-school curriculum. All of the children are confident and content in the well-established routines and transitions, which are managed effectively by the staff. Their excitement is evident as they engage in long periods of sustained and concentrated play, often working collaboratively with their peers. They recognise and celebrate each other's achievements, showing kindness and support. For example, one child praised a friend's use of colour in a painting, while another assisted a peer in zipping up a coat.

The children reflect on and talk about what they have learned with adults and each other. For example, when building a fire station in the construction area, the children linked effectively their play to their knowledge of people who help us. The children show a keen interest in mark-making and experiment with a variety of materials, including writing tablets, chalk and paint. Puppets are used effectively to encourage the children to retell familiar stories, such as 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. The children are developing well their early mathematical language and are able to count, sort, match, weigh and measure as a natural part of their play.

The children enjoy singing and music making with tuned and untuned instruments where they explore beat, rhythm and tempo. Opportunities for the children to listen to a wide range of genre, from contemporary to calming music, encourages the children to express themselves and move in different ways. The children have well-developed physical skills and are making good progress with their aiming abilities, throwing beanbags and balls at skittles.

The children's work is displayed and celebrated throughout the playroom and shared spaces within the day care facility, showcasing their achievements. The children also select and independently photograph work of which they are proud. The staff share each child's work with parents via a digital application (app), promoting further their sense of accomplishment.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The staff adopt consistently a reflective, strategic and research-informed approach across all aspects of their work. The children are always at the heart of every decision and action taken, and the impact of all work is always measured and reflected upon carefully by the staff in terms of the benefit for the children. There is a very close team dynamic, where the staff support each other and recognise each other's strengths and skills and optimise the use of these effectively to enhance the learning experiences for all of the children.

From the outset of the pre-school year, parents are presented with a wide range of opportunities to get involved in the life of the nursery, and these opportunities are consistently well-received. Notably, efforts to involve fathers in their children's pre-school experience, through activities such as stay-and-play sessions and participation in the Getting Ready to Learn (GRTL)\* programme, have been very successful. Following engagement with parents, their views are sought to explore ways to improve, further testament to the reflective and self-evaluative culture within the pre-school. Regular newsletters and an online app enable parents to be well-informed about their child's experiences and progress.

The children benefit from rich learning opportunities provided by a diverse range of professionals who are selected carefully to complement and enhance the pre-school curriculum. Visits from specialists, such as a local beekeeper, radiologist, dentist and road safety experts, have impacted positively on the children's learning. These experiences are reflected in the children's play, where they talk about and demonstrate their newfound knowledge, such as directing traffic safely during outdoor role-play.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the school demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Safe and Sound Pre-school is a safe, secure and stimulating space where the children experience excitement and joy in their learning. The pre-school's approach is rooted in reflective practice, teamwork and building relationships with families and the community, which is enabling every child to be supported to reach their full potential and develop a love of learning.

The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the highly effective self-evaluation processes which enable the staff team to develop a curriculum that is well-matched to the needs of every child; and
- the music provision which promotes and develops effectively the children's language, self-confidence, expression and emotional regulation.

The ETI will continue to work with Safe and Sound Pre-school, including to share examples of highly effective practice set out above from which others may learn.



## 5. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## APPENDIX 2: NOTES

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#### **Loose parts play**

Loose parts play is a collection of objects and materials which children can explore, build and manipulate during play and may include items such as twigs, leaves, flowers, pegs, string and wool.

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#### **Happy Smiles Pre-school Oral Health Programme**

Happy Smiles is an evidence based, regional [oral health improvement programme](#) which aims to improve the oral health of children in pre-school education and to reduce decay levels in children.

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#### **Makaton**

Makaton is a language programme that combines signs, symbols and speech to support children and/or adults with learning or communication difficulties.

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#### **Getting ready to learn (GRTL)**

The Department of Education Getting Ready to Learn project is focused on improving outcomes for children in pre-school by engaging and empowering parents to help them create and sustain positive home learning environments.

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