Pre-School: Shaping the Restart

Guidance for Pre-School Leaders and Practitioners

August 2020

INTRODUCTION

The pre-school curriculum is a holistic/play-based curriculum set out in six areas of learning which is delivered using exploratory and discovery teaching and learning approaches, rich with opportunities for young children. This early learning and development builds on the learning from home and/or other settings.

As pre-school settings plan to reopen and engage in the Education Restart programme for the first term of 2020/21, it is vital that methodologies are created to ensure paramount safety for our children. This should be balanced with approaches that facilitate the continuity of play-based learning experiences appropriate to the ages and stages of the children's development, in line with the NI Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education.

The DE Education Restart Guidance (17/8/2020) states:
"Given the changing public health position it is now appropriate that such (protective) 'bubbles' are based on whole classes, facilitating the safe return of pupils to education on a full time basis'"

and

"As pre-school education settings are not expected to implement social distancing among pupils within groups, in most cases, after a short period of induction, it should be possible for settings to deliver pre-school education for <u>all pupils five days per week</u>…

It is noteworthy that should circumstances with Covid-19 change significantly e.g. should a further lockdown or unexpected incident of partial closure occur, pre-school settings along with all other educational settings need to be ready to revert to a remote/blended learning approach with immediate effect in partnership with the home learning environment, and pre-school education provision should be planned accordingly

The purpose of this document is to provide non-statutory guidance relating to the actions that pre-school settings can take to encourage **CONTINUITY OF LEARNING** for every child. The guidance should be read in the context of the overarching DE Northern Ireland Schools Re-Opening Guidance New School Day and the supplementary DE Pre-School Education Guidance of Re-opening Settings. It provides a common reference point for the whole pre-school community in the context of the 'new pre-school day' and includes a range of practical suggestions and tips which can be contextualised to meet the needs of your setting.

The underpinning principle is that all children will receive the highest quality of pre-school education possible with the provision of excellent learning and teaching opportunities both in the pre-school and in the home learning environment.

This document may be used together with the Education and Training Inspectorate publication, The Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF): Effective Practice and Self-Evaluation Questions for Pre-School.

PRE-SCHOOL RESTART – KEY PRIORITIES

The pre-school education restart planning process will revolve around three key priorities, namely,

1. **COMMUNICATION** ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⟶ with all stakeholders

2. **CREATING** ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⟶ space for a safe learning environment

3. **CURRICULUM** ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⟶ delivery

> For the purpose of this document, these key priorities are summarised under the acronym
>
> **"THE THREE CS: COMMUNICATE, CREATE SPACE, CURRICULUM."**

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COMMUNICATE

Clear lines of consistent and updated communication with all stakeholders in a timely and sensitive manner is key to the management and function of the pre-school setting. The provision of a two-way communication system between parents and the pre-school will not only demonstrate empathy for the school community but will increase parental confidence in the pre-school setting's preparation for the education restart programme.

Below are a number of communicative *suggestions* to consider in the pre-school restart process, which are not intended to be a 'tick list':

- Leadership and Management update themselves on the latest information, advice and guidance from the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Health (DoH) and, where possible, communicate the content collaboratively with the staff, adopting agreed team approaches to its implications for the pre-school prior to sharing it with the pre-school community.
- Leadership and Management adopt agreed communication methodologies with staff, parents and the whole pre-school community.
- Establish lines of communication among clusters/leaders from other pre-school settings to share and communicate effective practice.
- Liaise closely with other relevant professionals for any child with medical/SEN needs and ensure the child's individual risk assessments/individual educational learning plans are communicated with the relevant people. (EA SEN helpline - **SENHelp@eani.org.uk**)
- Keep lines of communication open with relevant supporting educational personnel, such as the district ETI inspector, the early years specialist and other pre-school support services.
- Communicate through the Education Authority's Pre-school Education Professional Learning Portal where there is a service available to access support and share good practice.

Communication methodologies with Staff:

Staff
- Collaboration with staff outside of the school setting could begin either through written communication, oral communication via telephone or via various online meeting platforms such as collaborative ultra, Microsoft teams, etc.
- Socially distanced staff meetings in the pre-school setting at the beginning of the school term will begin the collaboration for the holistic planning process for the education restart and these may be supplemented through various online methods.

Health and Well-being of Staff

Staff may have very real concerns and anxieties regarding the safe return to work. Compassionate leadership will reduce staff fears and create team reassurance that the "new norm" will be okay and workable. Further guidance about the initial return to work can be found here:
https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-supporting-staff-return-schools

The EA has recently launched a well-being section for schools on the School Development Service (SDS) online learning portal which focuses on supporting well-being throughout Education Restart. The portal contains a number of useful web links to both EA resources and external organisations and support, along with a user guide. If you haven't used the portal before, you will need to create an account using your C2k email address at https://www.easds.org.uk/sds/portal2/createaccount/ (Invite Code: 52z44M).

In addition the EA Health Well Hub is available at https://healthwell.eani.org.uk/ and all EA employees are also able to avail of Inspire Workplaces at **0808 800 0002**. Inspire Workplaces provides a confidential and independent counselling support service for all staff that is available at any time.

Suggested communication methodologies for the compassionate leader may include:

- Begin with self-care because it will have a positive ripple effect on the staff (and the whole pre-school community). Take regular breaks, meals, exercise and get sufficient sleep as well as leisure time! This combination of self-care recommendations should prepare leaders to adopt a positive mindset to lead from the front.
- Be aware of the anxieties of the staff and gather this information through individual discussions.
- Empathise and recognise their fears.
- Be affirming through the sharing of factual information with staff from Public Health Agency (PHA)/DE/EA/Early Years Organisation (EYO)/Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT), etc.
- Provide continuous relevant updated information to them by letter/e-mail/phone/video calls/online meeting platforms or through socially distanced 1-1 meetings in the pre-school setting to decrease further development of fears and anxieties.
- Make staff aware of the school support available to them e.g. who they can talk to, safe places to talk, emergency response measures to anxieties whilst in the setting, etc.
- Signpost staff to other support agencies. For statutory settings support is available through Inspire Workplaces.
- Create an ethos and atmosphere that depicts being "comfortable with the uncomfortable" through perhaps adding positive and uplifting quotes around the pre-school setting, having "Feedback Friday" sessions with staff, having weekly staff "celebration coffee times", etc.

- Engage the whole staff in reflective conversations about the development of the good practice achieved over the lockdown period and possible conduct staff development sessions where staff can **REFLECT/ CELEBRATE/ CONNECT** e.g.,

REFLECT:	We increased our use of social media to share information with parents and children and for some of us, this was a new practice.
CELEBRATE:	Let's celebrate the success of our new practice. We are now comfortable with something we felt uncomfortable about!
CONNECT:	How can we implement or incorporate this new adapted practice into our future delivery of the pre-school curriculum.

Communication Methodologies with:

Parents
- Communication of the induction and settling-in process to parents may begin with an initial welcome letter or e-mail giving a brief explanation of the general procedures expected to take place at the beginning of the new school year with a promise of a further update of the specific procedures as and when government guidelines are issued.
- Induction pre-school building tours for the children and parents may take place in pre-arranged 'meetings', perhaps virtually through the means of an online platform.
- Induction packs and enrolment information booklets including the current government information and advice can be either posted, e-mailed or distributed to parents in 1:1 meetings during August.
- On-going induction related videos can be shared with parents during the Restart period and the settling-in period.

Children
Communication with the children may be more important than ever for the year 2020/21, as the settling-In period may be more challenging than usual with children having been in their home environment for a long period and potential attachment issues may arise,

Video messages could be sent through parent apps to communicate the following to the children:
- welcome message to the children by the teacher/leader;
- staff introductions;
- indoor and outdoor tours of the setting;
- drop off/pick up routines;
- starting school preparation (stories, rhymes, rules) etc;
- encouragement of good handwashing habits (e.g. through the Rufus handwashing programme – all pre-school settings should receive a pack at the start of the new term).

The continuity of this on-going communication method with the children may become embedded in the pre-school setting as the "new norm".

NB: GDPR and E-safety guidelines should be adhered to through all communication.

CREATE SPACE FOR THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The pre-school learning environment of the "new norm" will require creative adaptation and careful planning to simultaneously provide a rich, stimulating learning environment that offers a broad and balanced pre-school curriculum whilst adhering to the current PHA guidelines. Staff will need to self-evaluate the available indoor and outdoor space of the pre-school setting and scrutinise its maximum potential for safe and qualitative teaching and learning. Consideration of cloakroom areas, entrance areas, halls, bathrooms and their potential use alongside the staff ratio can also be self-evaluated. **Consider the SPACE as a child would. What will they see? What will they want to touch?**

Updating Policies and Procedures in line with Relevant Guidance

Creating and adapting space for the new learning environment will mean that staff will have to review and update their policies and procedures in line with current guidance from the relevant organisations, including DE, EA, PHA and DoH.

It may be helpful to keep all the information and policies related to COVID-19 in one file for ease of access and reference by all stakeholders.

Some settings may choose to share the updated information relevant to COVID-19 with their new cohort of parents, in a cover sheet, as part of their policy summaries included in their children's induction packs. Current and on-going updates to policies could be conveyed to parents via short video clips, e.g. parent apps etc.

Updated policies may include: (this list is not exhaustive)

- Pre-School Curriculum Play Policies (including the learning environment)
- Risk assessment
- Roles and responsibilities of staff (including secretarial, cleaning, catering, site supervision)
- Code of conduct for staff (including students/parent volunteers)
- Health and Safety (including Social distancing measures, hand hygiene etc.)
- Intimate care
- Safeguarding and Child Protection
- Induction/Settling-in including arrival/departure arrangements
- School visitor policy
- Positive behaviour policy
- E-safety
- Evacuation Procedures

Creating and adapting space to adopt safety measures for the decreased transmission of COVID-19 will affect most of the pre-school's daily routines and timetable.

Below are a list of changes for individual settings to consider and self-evaluate:

Proposed settling-in routines and the pre-school day

Entry/Departure Routine
- Principal/Leader in liaison with staff and relevant stakeholders should establish the agreed settling-in routines and procedures for the new cohort of children. This may involve the allocation of staggered starting dates as well as times for each child.
- Management and organisation of safe arrivals and departures to and from the setting will ensure minimum movement of parents and children in and around the building, this may include the use of: one-way system markers, designated entries and exits, "socially distanced" canopy areas, etc.
- Use of a designated socially distanced area for 1:1 meetings with parents and their child may be considered for children who are for example, experiencing attachment difficulties separating from their parent or who may have additional needs.
- Provision of hand hygiene facilities at entry and departure points.
- Discourage/Prohibit the movement of resources from home to school and vice versa. Transitional/comfort objects, only if required, should be wipeable.

Snack and Lunchtime Routine
- Manage and organise snack and mealtimes to minimise the risk of infection, this may include staggered snack/meal times or use of designated, fixed seating places for children where there is a free table sitting between children and also between the adult and the child.
- Avoid shared utensils or communal plates of food (utensils may be disposable and recyclable e.g. paper plates and cups).
- Adults may serve all snacks to the children. Distribution options to serve food may include: serving individual portions of food to the children which they can independently access; serving food onto the child's plate from some food varieties in an air tight container, offering them a level of choice by verbally/signing food requests.
- Consumption of school lunches may take place at home during the settling-in period and those in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) could take home the packed lunch provided to them by the pre-school. Safe arrangements for the distribution of school dinners will need close liaison with the school cook or catering provider and consideration given to options such as placing food on the table before the children are seated, where appropriate.

Toilet Routine
- Use visuals to designate toilet(s) for each protective bubble/class
- Encourage independent toileting and the implementation of good hand hygiene.
- Follow appropriate guidance on the use of appropriate PPE where necessary, e.g. to assist a child with a toileting accident/intimate care dealing with a sick child.

Indoor/Outdoor Routine
- Maximise the potential of outdoor learning opportunities.
- Promote the use of suitable outdoor clothing to enable children to be outdoors for longer periods in a range of weathers.
- In settings where more than one class operates at the same time, it may be possible for more than one group to be outdoors at any one given time where space can be zoned or cordoned off to use other designated areas such as the garden, green areas, mud kitchens, wheeled vehicle areas, etc.

- Self-evaluation of the learning impact on the children from the indoor and outdoor play areas and resources will inform future planning and may involve staff asking questions like:
  - How long should we should we stay outside?
  - How can we offer simultaneous play both indoor and outdoor?
  - What methods can I use to implement smooth transitions from indoor and outdoor play?
  - Should I use a small/large water tray with anti-bacterial liquid to teach small groups how to wash their hands correctly?
  - Instead of using the sand tray inside, could I use the sand tray outside or under a canopied area to maximise ventilation and use of it?
  - Maybe I should use individual sand boxes with smaller sand resources?
  - Will I make dough daily and dispose of it or will I give each child their own individually labelled dough box?
  - How do I store resources for easy access for children and staff?
  - Have we cleared out all the soft fabric play equipment?
  - What other materials can we use to replace these sensory objects?
  - Could we make greater use of natural outdoor resources?
  - What ideas can we explore to encourage temporary/disposable art?
  - Have we got enough hard backed, wipeable books at the correct development level for the children?

> **"Education settings will be best placed to consider their right approach for their own individual circumstances".**
> *(pg 24 NI Reopening Schools Guidance New School Day (v2 13 August 2020))*

Story/Music/Rhyme Time
- Where possible, maximise the use of the outdoor and canopy area for activities
- Soft cushioning/fabrics should be avoided. Floor sitting options could include use of wipeable cushions, rubber mats or spots/discs.

CURRICULUM

The Pre-School Curriculum: Recovery Period

The pre-school curricular guidance is not being amended. Pre-schools need to consider how best to deliver the pre-school curricular guidance in their individual settings, taking into account the emerging needs and interests of the new cohort of children, including the many factors related to COVID-19.

As would be normal practice, the curricular areas planned for should reflect the children's interests and needs gathered from:
- parental informational booklets;
- Sure Start transition records;
- health visitor information;
- age and stage of the children; and
- initial staff observations of the children in their new learning environment.

Individual education plans for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Looked After Children (LAC) should be informed further by all information gained through close liaisons with parents and other professional staff.

In addition to this normal practice, staff should sensitively gather any relevant, additional information on how parents feel the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their child/family and plan accordingly to meet the needs of these children.

DE has issued guidance on curriculum planning and delivery and also guidance on School Development Planning:

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/circular%20curriculum%20planning%20202021.pdf

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-school-development-planning-202021

Remote/Blended Learning and the use of Digital Technologies

In most cases, after a short period of induction, it should be possible for settings to deliver pre-school education for all pupils five days per week.   However, for a small number of children, face to face school time may be reduced, for example those who are advised not to attend for medical reasons. For these children, the pre-school will adopt a remote / blended learning approach.

Settings should focus on maximising face to face teaching time for all pupils. However, they should also be prepared to revert to remote / blended learning with immediate effect should a further lockdown or unexpected incident of partial closure occur, and pre-school education provision should be planned accordingly.

The effective use of digital technologies can, under 'normal' circumstances, support play-based learning and foster collaboration between home and the pre-school setting.   Where a remote/blended approach to learning is necessary, digital technologies can facilitate and promote:

a)   **Meaningful interactions**
       The traditional informative emails, text messages and social media posts can be greatly enhanced by photographs, audio and video recordings, (e.g. pre-school virtual tours, staff introductions, explanation and demonstrations of planned activities to do at home, children learning through play at home and in the pre-school etc.). These two-way communications can serve to:
       ▪ strengthen relationships between pre-school staff, parents and children;
       ▪ model effective teaching practice to parents;
       ▪ record a child's learning, development and progress;
       ▪ provide the stimulus for discussions between adult and child regarding the learning taking place at pre-school or at home.

b)   **Purposeful learning activities**
       There are countless opportunities where the use of digital technologies can enhance exploratory play, problem-solving, creativity, collaboration and discussion within remote/blended learning. https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning

Ideas of how to continue learning and support children's development at home need to be presented in an easy, realistic and practical manner with the relevant provision of resources for families who require them.

While resources, activities and ideas may be shared with parents through various online forums, the recommendation of limited screen time should be highlighted for young children. Instead, emphasis should be put on the greater potential of learning opportunities gained through the enjoyment of songs and stories as well as concrete, open-ended and creative play experiences both indoors and outdoors. This blended approach ensures promotion of digital and non-digital access to a range of activities that will enhance beneficial interactions between adults, children and their peers.

To ensure a remote and blended approach is working well, staff need to self-evaluate their practice, for example:

- Reflect on previous practice during the lockdown and ask reflective questions like:
  - Should we continue to share monthly newsletters/weekly planners of play based learning activities?
  - Should we continue to direct parents to websites such as:
    - Getting Ready to Learn (GRTL) https://www.gettingreadytolearn.co.uk/parents/
    - EA Supporting Learning https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning
    - parental engagement website https://www.eani.org.uk/parental-engagement
    - The EA SEN Early Years Inclusion Service https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/early-years-inclusion-service-sen-eyis
- Reflect on their current practice and ask reflective questions like:
  - How do we know the interests, needs and circumstances of the children and their parents to inform our curricular planning?
  - How should we seek regular feedback to review and amend our practice for remote/blended learning? Perhaps, conduct a simple online survey for parents or an evaluation questionnaire to find out what is and isn't working.
  - What does good quality screen time learning look like for parents? Should we do an online parenting program on early years promotion of learning?
  - Are online communications conducted safely? Do the staff need training to assist them in adopting a blended learning approach?

For further information on remote/blending learning approaches, consult the ETI publication (June 2020) on remote and blended learning curricular challenges and approaches. https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/remote-and-blended-learning-curricular-challenges-and-approaches

Staying Safe in the Online Learning Environment

Pre-school settings will usually have acceptable online use policies in place. It will be important that any new arrangements should be discussed, agreed and included within the appropriate updated policies.
Pre-school leaders and staff should keep personal data safe when working from home and follow their GDPR policy around the distribution methods of sharing information. Staff should only use the

trusted networks or cloud services and comply with any rules and procedures about cloud or network access, login details and data sharing.

"Education and training providers need to satisfy themselves that any new policies and processes in response to coronavirus are not weakening their approach to safeguarding or undermining their child protection policy." https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/safeguarding-remote-and-blended-learning-challenges-and-approaches

Professional Learning

Leaders and staff will need the time to plan effectively for a blended learning approach. They may also need access to specific professional learning opportunities to develop skills in facilitating online learning approaches. These may be facilitated through the professional learning opportunities planned for 2020/21 through the Continuity of Learning project and the Education Restart Programme.

Examples of how the Pre-School Curriculum could be mapped to COVID-19 related changes

Many children will have had their playgroup or Sure Start placements cut short due to the Lockdown. Most children will have been in the home environment for a long period of time where the availability of opportunities with other children and adults may have been limited. Therefore, promoting the personal, social and emotional development needs of the children will take precedence in planning the curriculum for this restart term. While some children will need an emphasis on PSE, other children will adapt well and will require stretch and challenge in their experiences. Planning needs to be child-led to reflect these differences.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Staff should plan for a learning environment where children experience positive emotions associated with safety, happiness, security, good relationships and fun. (This is especially needed for children who have been living in families with increased anxieties related to COVID-19.)

▪ Explore emotions and feelings
  - Children should be helped to identify, recognise and name emotions through the use of stories, songs, wipeable puppets, circle time, table top games, role play, etc.
  - Children should be encouraged to form positive relationships with their peers and the staff, considering the needs of others through the following possible teaching strategies: care and empathy modelled by staff, use of timers/visuals to encourage turn taking and sharing of resources with their peers, opportunities to experience talking and listening techniques, role play opportunities and outdoor collaborative activities to explore the art of forming relationships with others, an adult should always be close by to assist with conflict resolutions etc.
  - Children should be provided with supporting approaches to achieve self-regulation. Play gives children the SPACE to work through their irregular emotions e.g. musical activities can release stress, arts and crafts are therapeutic in nature and can assist with calming the emotional state, outdoor activities and gardening can relieve stress and exercises such as yoga are very helpful in encouraging children to participate in de-stressing, breathing techniques.

- Preparation of the learning environment with lots of relevant visuals including, photos, signs and pictures to support daily routines and procedures will ensure that the children have a clear understanding of the rules and routines of the setting. Strategies such as songs and music could be used to indicate transition points. Giving pre-warnings of any spontaneous changes to the day avoids anxiety and creates a safe and secure atmosphere for the children.
  - For children who struggle with their emotions, have a safe area to retreat to when they need to have time on their own.
- Staff should build the resilience of children through a nurturing and safe environment in which they can make decisions, take risks and take on responsibilities.

Responsibilities may include:

- Take responsibility for themselves: hang up coats, using a tissue and disposing of it, use the bathroom independently as much as possible, practice the 'dab cough'.
- Take responsibility for care of the environment. (For instance tidying up equipment after they have used it within their bubble but not touching the equipment within another bubble. Looking after living things – fish, planting and digging outdoors.)
- Take responsibility for their own personal safety as far as possible and talk about it (through stories, songs, role play, incidental conversations about children's own experiences of keeping safe e.g. mummy/granny wearing a mask at the shops or standing on the designated markings).
- Understanding and co-operating with rules and routines of the playroom:
  - regular hand washing;
  - maintaining social distance at activities and from adult.
- Establishing positive attitudes to health and hygiene:
  - hand washing;
  - choosing healthy food;
  - being physically active.
- Making decisions – provide choice of activity and materials, allowing the children to lead (even though the choice may be slightly more limited due to infection control).

Physical Development and Movement

- Children should be provided with the time, space and freedom to be physically active (this may have been denied to them during the lockdown period). Periods of physical activity contribute not only to their physical development, but also to their emotional health and well-being, confidence and self-esteem.
- Planned and spontaneous play encourages gross motor skills such as running, jumping, kicking, balancing. Staff can model games and activities that require no equipment.
- Indoor and outdoor rules may have changed due to COVID-19 infection control measures and staff should be understand and be aware of them so that they can be taught and modelled to children. Children need to be aware of their own safety and the safety of others.
- Action rhymes, songs, stories and dance can combine physical development with emotional/ well-being and safety strands.

Language Development

At the heart of early language development is the relationship between the child and the staff with consistent staff members, fostering early language and communication skills with them.

- Staff will be informed about some of the children's needs, interests and preferences in advance of the induction and they will be able to use this knowledge to engage the children and support them with their conversational skills.
- Staff need to observe and listen to the children in order to assess and match the use of appropriate age and stage language encounters. (Some children may want to talk about their home experiences or ask questions relating to Coronavirus e.g. Why do we have to wear masks? etc)
- To assist children with speech difficulties/non-verbal/newcomer children, staff could provide them with visual aids and their own resources to express their thoughts, feelings and ideas.
- The use of visuals through routines as well as carefully selected stories, rhymes and songs depicting varying levels of sequence will aid the children's attention and listening skills and support their skills for following instructions.
- Through the provision of meaningful print, signs and visuals, children will begin to associate print with meaning. (COVID-19 signs will add to this.)
- Relevant role play areas will provide stimulus for the discussion of their experiences. This will be particularly important for some children who need to express their fears and emotions through home play/hospital play in response to a personal situation related to COVID-19 in the family.
- Mark making might be modelled in role play by staff as a doctor/nurse or a parent making a shopping list.
- Opportunities for more boisterous role play can be planned for outdoors.
- Use of fun stories as well as age appropriate factual books. There are a number of early years stories and factual books relating to COVID-19 which can develop the child's understanding of the current world we live in.

Early Mathematical Experiences

The learning environment should provide the children with the following early mathematical experiences:
- Recognising a variety of shapes and symbols to indicate social distancing from real life and purposeful contexts, e.g. shopping in local supermarket.
- Developing an awareness of numbers /numerical pictures to indicate the number of children at activities or within a space.
- Developing an awareness of space though staff modelling the use of symbols on the floor to indicate spacing where, and if, applicable.
- Sorting and matching equipment to storage during tidy up time/home time.
- Understanding the length of time it takes to wash our hands properly. Staff could use lots of different action songs to model this to keep children focussed – perhaps use a wipeable puppet or pre-school mascot who has forgotten the routine of washing their hands and needs help from the children.
- Understanding the sequence of time - using visuals and other cues such as music to indicate the order of the day and transitions points.

The Arts

Creative activity supports children's emotional health and well-being and assists in developing creative thinkers. It gives children opportunities to participate in activities that parents may not wish or have the resources to do at home. It gives children who cannot write and articulate fully their

thoughts and feelings, the opportunity to express and convey their emotions and ideas. The emphasis is on the enjoyment of the process rather than the product. In a changing environment where so much may need to be controlled, it is important that children are given the confidence to develop their own ideas and have these valued by staff and parents.

Staff should provide the children with safe spaces and safe materials to work with and then be present to support sensitively the development of the children's own ideas, for example, through:
- Exploration of sensory materials.
- Expression of thoughts, feelings and imagination through a range of art, dance and dramatic play opportunities. This may be in small groups/ 'bubbles'.
- Outdoor creative activities.
- Painting, drawing and model making. This will help children to experiment, take risks, explore their ideas and increasingly represent their world.
- Use of malleable materials. These not only support the development of fine motor skills but can also support children's emotional regulation. (Decide on malleable materials you are going to use and methods of distributing and sharing them etc.)
- Music activities allow children to explore their emotions and feelings and express themselves beyond verbal communication.
- Use of found/disposable materials such as twigs and stones for art work
- Explore texture by using pine cones or leaves to paint with

The World Around Us

The children will bring a range of home experiences to the pre-school. The first few weeks will focus on their new world of pre-school, learning about the staff, their environment and the daily routines. Staff should be sensitive to children's questions and help them to make sense of their world including COVID-19 related experiences.

Many children will not yet be at this stage and will need additional support to make sense of their relationship with others and the world around them. Some examples are:
- Children should be given opportunities to freely explore the designated areas indoors and outdoors, or the area designated to their "class
- Provision of first-hand experiences that can be explored through their senses should be offered.
- Use of stories, pictures and photos to talk about their own family and the world around them can be beneficial. Photos of family members and staff can stimulate discussion and could be important for children who are finding transitions difficult.
- Staff can be creative in providing the children with opportunities to explore natural materials such as sand/water/dough/clay or during gardening activities.
- Provide large and small wipeable building construction materials to develop conversations and extend their knowledge about the world around them. (Perhaps add tape, ground stickers etc. for them to create buildings with restrictive rules due to COVID-19 e.g. ice cream parlours.)
- Talk about body parts (hands and washing, nose and sneezing).
- Talk about and act out roles in the community such as 'people who help us'. Key health worker children may particularly benefit from talking about the role of those working in hospitals /care homes. Photos of these parents in uniform may be useful for display/teaching purposes. Parents should not be invited into the setting for this purpose.

Irish Medium Education (IME)

This section is directed at practitioners in IME settings, which involve a number of additional specific challenges. It provides some recommendations and guidance on issues specifically relating to Irish language acquisition and parental support.

Irish Language Acquisition

The majority of children in IME come from English-speaking homes. Pre-school education provides the first step for these children on their journey through an immersion education process/experience setting and it provides the first critical building block in terms of children's acquisition of Irish.

Successful language acquisition requires regular, sustained, systematic exposure to the language over extended periods. The longer and more consistent the exposure, the more embedded the language and the more robust the base; a gradual, incremental approach to language acquisition, is characteristic of IME pre-school provision.

Language is the engine that drives the curriculum forward and supports and facilitates the provision of productive, enriched learning opportunities. Appropriate language competence on the part of the learner is fundamental in providing the learner with the necessary wherewithal to engage in and maximise the learning opportunities offered. Quality pre-school experiences are the first fundamental step in progressing through IME.   It is vital that children's positive pathway through IME is not compromised at this most early stage.

The following provides some recommendations as to how, in changed circumstances, practitioners may continue to maintain and provide opportunities for, motivating productive language learning experiences that will contribute to successfully mitigating any negative impact on children's progress, arising from this current COVID-19 crisis.

Providing an effective immersion environment

The main vehicle to language exposure is the nature and frequency of the language of communication used by staff.

Staff should continue the practice of speaking and using Irish at all times when they interact and communicate with children and with one another, while also being aware of the increased importance of:
- non-language clues to facilitate comprehension;
- a frequent sustained flow of language within the appropriate language register;
- strategies of sequential repetition, restatement, expansion and modelling.

Planning

Effective planning is the key to the provision of a successful language immersion environment and the need to optimise and maximise language experiences is critical.

Effective planning can help identify those areas of language experience which are most readily accommodated within the learning environment. These will include the language of:

- social interaction;
- daily routines;
- praise, encouragement, comforting and caution;
- organisation and transition;
- a significant range of some of the most important building blocks of language, including core naming, describing and doing words

An increased emphasis on hygiene allows for frequent usage and reiteration of language associated with toileting, handwashing, and body parts.

An increased emphasis on outdoor play accommodates frequent usage of language associated with physical activity, physical movement, body parts, clothing and the World Around Us.

The development and maintenance of listening skills, concentration, focus and attention is less of a challenge within a small group context, enhancing the environment for children's experiences in relation to core language activities such as story-telling and language games. Skilful team planning will ensure proper coordination of these activities to optimise the advantage for all children.

Practitioners are also advised to refer to the following Altram publications which are available in hard copy or online through Altram.

'Support material for CCEA Preschool Curricular Guidance (2018): Irish-Medium Early Years Immersion Education,

'Two Windows on the World', 2018

'A Language Plan for Irish-Medium Preschool and Early Years' Immersion', 2018

Parental Support

The challenges for IME pre-school settings and the degree of language support available from within the home are compounded through the difficulties of creating online content which duplicates the sustained characteristics of a language immersion pedagogy implemented within the pre-school.

However, it is important that parents are reassured that they do indeed have a role, that it is an important role, and that while they are not in a position to provide the richness of the language environment that can be provided for children in an English-medium setting, that they have a role supporting their children on their journey in IME. This role has two strands:
- generalised support;
- Irish language support.

Generalised support refers to the support that parents can give in relation to:
- their children's health and well-being and including recommendations relating to hygiene, diet, sleep and playing outdoors;
- learning support including hints on supporting mathematical development and exploration of the physical world, along with links to relevant websites or online programmes;
- the value of enriching language experiences in the home language, including hints on playing with their children, enjoyable home activities, story time and useful books;
- It is important that parents understand that conceptual and skill development through the home language is of vital importance to their children and quality home experiences such as these

confers immense benefits on their children, even within the context of a language immersion experience in a different language.

Recommendations to English speaking parents in relation to **Irish language support needs** to be realistic, practical and supported by appropriate resources. Practitioners should direct parents to all useful resources which are available. Altram has access to a range of language packages for parents, some of which have been created by Altram itself, or in collaboration with other organisations. Some statutory agencies have developed parent support portals including for IME, such as the EA Supporting Learning website https://www.eani.org.uk/irish-medium-education-resources. Other IME child-focused organisations are currently in the process of creating suitable online materials for parents and children.

RELEVANT DOCUMENT LINKS FOR ALL SETTINGS

https://ccea.org.uk/pre-school/curricular-guidance-pre-school-education

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-re-opening-school-guidance-new-school-day-revised

https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-re-opening-school-guidance-new-school-day-pre-school-education-supplementary

https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning

https://www.eani.org.uk/pre-school-education-resources

https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/remote-and-blended-learning-curricular-challenges-and-approaches

https://www.etini.gov.uk/publications/safeguarding-remote-and-blended-learning-challenges-and-approaches

https://www.etini.gov.uk/articles/inspection-and-self-evaluation-framework-isef

https://www.eani.org.uk/ea-staff-hub/hr-online/health-wellbeing

https://www.gettingreadytolearn.co.uk/parents

https://www.altram.org/