



**INCLUSION IRELAND**

**Submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.**

**The Future Investment in Early Year's and School Age Care and Education.**

This document is in font 12 Verdana in line with Inclusion Ireland plain English guidelines.

## **Introduction**

Inclusion Ireland is the national organisation advocating for the rights of people with intellectual disabilities in Ireland. Established in 1961, our vision is of a society where people with intellectual disabilities live and participate in the community with equal rights as citizens. Our focus is on the core principles and values expressed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Inclusion Ireland works with Irish Autism Action and Down Syndrome Ireland under the 'Connect Family Network'. In this work we provide information to 130 local disability support groups all over Ireland. The Connect Family Network also provides families who have a member with a disability a voice into policy formation and implementation.

This submission is informed by the views of families in Ireland who have young children with a disability availing of childcare.

## **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**

The ECCE scheme was introduced in January 2010. The ECCE year is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs at a cost of €175 million per annum<sup>1</sup>.

The scheme allows children to access one free year of structured early year's education. Children must be aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months in the September they access the ECCE year. The upper

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<sup>1</sup> ECCE briefing note, Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2015.

age criterion may be breached for some children with a disability if a school placement is unavailable<sup>2</sup>.

The ECCE scheme is free to all participating children. Each child may access 15 hours of early year's education per week for 38 weeks (September to June)<sup>3</sup>.

### **Children with a disability**

The National Disability Authority has advised that all children should receive pre-school education in mainstream settings as far as is possible<sup>4</sup>. The government also recognises that universal services such as early year's services must be inclusive and accessible<sup>5</sup>. This is also reflected in the principles of Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education.

There is only one accommodation for children with a disability attending the ECCE year. A child may be permitted to avail of the ECCE year over a two year period on a pro rata basis<sup>6</sup>. This means they may attend for 6 hours per week in one year and 9 hours per week in a second year. This accommodation is provided on a case by case basis.

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Free Preschool year in early childhood care and education, Guide for Parents.

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Briefing Paper: Inclusion of Children With Disabilities in Mainstream Early Childhood Care and Education, National Disability Authority.

<sup>5</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Free Preschool year in early childhood care and education, Guide for Parents.

## **Difficulties for children with a disability in accessing the ECCE year**

Some children with a disability may require a support worker to access the ECCE year with their peers. This type of support is readily available in the education system in the form of special needs assistants (SNA's). A child who has additional care needs that cannot be met by the teacher can access an SNA for these care needs<sup>7</sup>. The SNA scheme has been acknowledged as allowing as many children as possible to access mainstream education<sup>8</sup>.

If a child requires SNA type support to access the ECCE scheme this support is not readily available. In some areas of the country the Health Service Executive or a disability service provider will provide access to a support worker. This is not always the case. Access to a support worker for the ECCE year depends where a child lives.

Even when a child can access a support worker/SNA, this support may not cover the full 15 hours per week of the ECCE scheme. Parents in one area report that children are granted access to a support worker for 6 hours per week over a two year period. For the child to access the full ECCE scheme the parent must pay for a support worker themselves.

In many areas of the country a child will have no access to any form of support to access the ECCE scheme. In this instance the parent must pay the full cost of a support worker. This would mean a parent must find as

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<sup>7</sup>Circular 0030/2014, Department of Education and Skills, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Value for money review of the special needs assistant scheme, Department of Education and Skills, 2011.

much as €5,700<sup>9</sup> to fund support for a child over the course of the 'free', ECCE scheme.

In one survey 35% of parents were funding or part funding a support worker for their child in pre-school<sup>10</sup>. This is a considerable financial barrier to inclusive, early year's education. Furthermore, it shows a lack of accommodation for children with a disability in accessing a government funded early year's education scheme.

"You know the value of early intervention. That is why I pay for a person to support my child in childcare" Parent in focus group.

If a parent cannot afford the cost of providing a support worker for their child they cannot access the ECCE scheme. Early Childhood Ireland noted that 11% of childcare services surveyed had turned away a child with a disability and 30% of services did not have a child with additional support needs<sup>11</sup>. The main reasons for this were lack of essential supports. The survey did not note the amount of children who could not attend the ECCE year due to a parent not being able to fund an SNA.

Managers of early childhood services noted that additional training would help their service cater better for children with additional needs<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Authors estimate, 15 hours per week for 38 weeks at a rate of €10 per hour.

<sup>10</sup> Early Childhood Ireland, Additional Needs in Early Childhood Care and Education, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

## **Case studies**

Parent: My child has multiple physical and intellectual disability issues. The public health nurse said that my child would benefit greatly from the free ECCE year. The nurse helped me to fill out a form to apply for a personal assistant with the local disability service provider. The child was refused support and can now not attend the ECCE year in September 2015. There is no way to appeal this decision.

Parent 2: My child accessed the ECCE year. However, the child needed the help of an SNA to attend as she has a severe disability. There was no funding for an SNA. I had to pay for an SNA myself to attend with my child. It cost €60 a week for 2 mornings.

## **Recommendations**

Children with a disability must have equal access to the ECCE scheme. For some children this involves having a support worker/SNA. Currently, access to such support depends on where a child lives. SNA support must be provided and funded from the exchequer where the need exists.

Access to a support worker/SNA and thus access to the ECCE scheme should not depend on ability to pay. Nor should a parent put themselves at financial risk to pay for support to access a 'free' government scheme.

Training must be provided to early childcare providers on working with children with a disability. In many cases this will allow for a child with a disability to attend their local childcare setting to access the ECCE scheme with their peers.

Health therapy services must be provided in early child care settings. This type of provision has been shown to be highly successful.

### **Key points**

- A child with a disability may require a support worker/SNA to access the ECCE scheme.
- Currently access to a support worker depends on where the child lives in Ireland.
- Some children with a disability are not able to access the ECCE scheme due to a lack of funded support workers.
- A lack of access to a support worker means parents have to pay privately for the child to access the ECCE year.
- The only accommodation for children with a disability in the ECCE scheme is to allow them to avail of the scheme over 2 years instead of 1 year.
- 11% of early year's educators have refused a place to a child with a disability due to a lack of support for the child.
- This lack of support for some children with a disability to access the ECCE scheme may have potential Equal Status implications.