



# Relate

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The journal of developments in social services, policy and legislation in Ireland

## Childcare in Ireland

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is responsible for Ireland's national policy framework for children and young people. The current national policy document for the years 2014-2020 is entitled *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures*.

A key part of this framework is to reduce childcare costs for families, provide good-quality pre-school education and early intervention, and offer affordable childcare to parents on low incomes or attending approved educational courses. As a result, the Government has approved a number of measures aimed at reducing childcare costs from September 2017. These measures will be applied to the early years childcare programmes.

This issue of *Relate* describes some of the childcare options now available in Ireland. Various factors such as the child's age, whether full-time or part-time care is needed and personal preferences should be taken into account when choosing childcare.

## Legislation and the role of Tusla

The minimum requirements under which a service must operate are set out in the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016. By law, pre-school childcare facilities must notify and be inspected by the Child and Family Agency, Tusla.

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate, under these Regulations, carries out regular inspections on all services. The aim is to inspect each facility on average every

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18 months. These inspections are unannounced, therefore allowing the inspection team to see the service as it works on an everyday basis. Providers are then given time to respond to the report's findings and provide any clarifications or extra information as needed. The reports are published on [tusla.ie](http://tusla.ie). The published reports are available to the public to enable them to make informed decisions when it comes to the care of their children.

### ***Garda vetting***

The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 require that any staff, students and volunteers engaged in the direct care of children should be vetted by the Garda Síochána National Vetting Bureau in accordance with the National Vetting Bureau (Children and Vulnerable Persons) Acts 2012 to 2016. Service providers must ensure that this vetting is carried out before the person is appointed or allowed access to any child attending the service.

It is an offence under the National Vetting Bureau Acts to have any non-Garda vetted staff members engage directly with children attending a service.

## **City and County Childcare Committees**

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There are 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) across Ireland. These were established in 2001, and aim to encourage the development of childcare locally.

CCCs offer a wide variety of services in their area including:

- Providing information to parents on local childcare facilities and parent networks
- Supporting the delivery of the three main national programmes (Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme, Community Childcare Subvention, Childcare Education and Training Support Scheme)
- Providing support and guidance to local service providers and parents on national programmes and service quality in keeping with national frameworks and policy objectives
- Co-ordinating and providing childcare training
- Providing a local centre of information for all things early education and childcare

CCCs are the first point of contact for service providers seeking approval for childcare places under childcare programmes administered by the DCYA.

Lists of local childcare providers are available for parents from their local CCC. Parents can also contact the Tusla early years/pre-school inspector in their area for information about local childcare services or access inspection reports about a facility on [tusla.ie](http://tusla.ie).

## **Types of childcare**

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### **Full-day care**

This is a structured childcare service for more than five hours per day and may include a sessional service. Service providers care for children aged from three months to six years, depending on the individual provider. Some may also include an after-school facility. In full-day care, sleeping arrangements and food preparation must meet standards set out by Tusla. Providers of full-day care include day nurseries and crèches. Part-time daycare services run for more than three and a half hours and less than five hours.

### **Sessional services**

These childcare services offer a planned programme consisting of up to three and a half hours per session (such as a morning or an afternoon). Generally, they cater for children from three to five years of age, though they may also be provided for younger children.

Sessional childcare service providers include:

- **Montessori groups** focus on individualised education
- **Naíonraí** are playschools operating through Irish
- **Playschools** give children an opportunity to play with other children of a similar age, learn to share and take turns and to understand the rules of the classroom, such as listening
- **Early Start Programme** is a one-year scheme for three- and four-year-old children. It is offered in selected schools in designated disadvantaged areas.

### **Childminders**

Childminders care for children in the minder's own home. A childminder can care for up to five children under six years of age (including the childminder's own children). Parents and childminders arrange their own terms and conditions.

## Drop-in centres

A drop-in centre offers a childcare service for short periods during the day. These centres are often provided in shopping centres, leisure centres and accommodation facilities. The service is provided as part of a customer or client service and children are looked after while the parent is availing of a service or attending an event.

## School-age childcare professional bodies

Services for schoolchildren can include breakfast clubs, after-school clubs and school holiday programmes such as summer camps. Depending on the service, there may also be homework supervision, planned activities or a meal.

## Universal childcare funding programmes

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There are two programmes in place that offer subsidised childcare for all parents, regardless of their means. These are the Early Childhood Care and Education scheme, which offers free pre-school places to all children aged from three, and the new Universal Subsidy, which pays a subsidy directly to childcare providers for children aged between six months and three years. This reduces parents' overall childcare bill from the childcare provider.

## Early Childhood Care and Education scheme

The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme provides early childhood care and education for children of pre-school age. A capitation fee is paid to participating playschools and daycare services. In return, they provide a pre-school service free of charge to children within the qualifying age range for a set number of hours over a set period of weeks, matching the primary school year.

Childcare services taking part in the ECCE scheme must provide an appropriate pre-school educational programme that adheres to the principles of Síolta, the national quality framework for early years care and education.

Children are able to start ECCE when they reach three years of age and continue until they transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than five years and six months at the end of the pre-school year). Children are able to enroll in pre-school at three different points (September, January and April) in the school year in order

to access the scheme. The school year is normally from September to June.

If the child is over the eligibility age requirement due to special needs, an exemption may be made from the upper age limit for the ECCE scheme. There are no exemptions to the lower age limit.

The pattern of hours of free pre-school education depends on the type of service that the child attends and the weekly pattern that the service operates. There is no charge to parents for the playschool or daycare hours provided under the ECCE scheme. However, if the child attends for extra hours, the parent will have to pay for these extra hours in the normal way.

## Daycare services

If the child attends a full-time or part-time daycare service, the normal pattern for free pre-school education is three hours per day over the school year. If the child attends for longer than this each day, the parent will be charged for the extra time. The parent will also be charged for the extra number of weeks attended.

## Sessional services

If the child attends a half-day or sessional service, such as a playschool, naíonra, or Montessori, the normal pattern for the free pre-school year is three hours a day, five days a week, over the school year. Parents of children who attend for more than these hours have to pay the difference.

If the sessional service cannot open for five days a week, the normal pattern for the free pre-school year is three hours and 30 minutes a day, four days a week, over the school year. This only applies to services that have already been granted permission to run their service over the school year.

A service may charge parents for extra activities. However, these must be optional and the service must provide other appropriate activities to children who do not take part in the optional activity.

To get a place on the ECCE scheme, the parent must apply to a participating playschool or daycare service and the childcare provider must register the child up to seven days in advance of the childcare start date. The parent will need to provide a copy of the child's birth certificate or passport and PPS number. The service may ask the parent for a booking deposit, which cannot be more than four times the weekly capitation fee. Any deposit paid must be returned by the end of October of the year the child starts in the service.

The child can be moved to a different childcare provider but four ECCE weeks' notice must be given. An ECCE week is one where the school is not closed for holidays.

A list of participating services is available from the local CCC.

### *Children with special needs*

A new Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in 2016 for children with special needs starting ECCE in September 2016. AIM supports a child-centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support, moving from universal to the targeted, based on the needs of the child and the pre-school provider. The model offers tailored, practical supports based on need.

Levels 1-3 of the model involve a suite of universal supports that are designed to promote and support an inclusive culture within pre-school settings by means of educational and capacity-building initiatives for providers and practitioners. Where a pre-school service provider, in partnership with a parent, considers that some further additional support may be necessary to meet the needs of a particular child, they can apply for one or more additional targeted supports under Levels 4-7 of the model.

Additional targeted supports could take the form of expert early childhood care and educational advice and mentoring (Level 4), specialised equipment, appliances and minor alterations (Level 5), therapeutic supports (Level 6) or additional capitation to fund extra assistance in the ECCE pre-school room (Level 7).

When a parent has identified a pre-school for his or her child, the service provider, in consultation with the parent, will consider what supports may be needed to ensure the child's participation in pre-school. Where it is considered that the child needs additional support, the pre-school service provider can apply, in partnership with the parent, for targeted supports under AIM.

Information and guidance on AIM is available from the local CCC.

## Universal Subsidy

From 21 August 2017, a new Universal Subsidy is available to children in Tusla-registered childcare services who are above the age of six months but below three years (the age when they can start the ECCE scheme). This subsidy is not means tested and is deducted from the overall bill the parent gets from the childcare provider.

The childcare provider must be registered with Tusla and in a contract with the DCYA to offer the Universal Subsidy. Parents should contact their childcare provider to check if they are offering the Universal Subsidy.

The Universal Subsidy cannot be given at the same time as a targeted subsidy. However, the parent can choose which subsidy is of greatest benefit. Targeted subsidies include the Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme, the After-School Child Care (ASCC) scheme, the Childcare Education and Training Support (CETS) programme, and the Community Employment Childcare (CEC) programme.

The Universal Subsidy consists of:

- Full-time (five hours or more): €20 weekly subsidy
- Part-time (3:31 hours to 5 hours): €10 weekly subsidy
- Sessional (2:16 hours to 3:30 hours): €7 weekly subsidy
- Half-sessional (1 hour to 2:15 hours): €3.50 weekly subsidy

The subsidy is paid directly to the childcare provider and is deducted from the overall cost of the childcare. A list of childcare providers offering the Universal Subsidy is available from the local CCC.

## Affordable childcare programmes

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There are a number of targeted affordable childcare programmes intended to provide childcare at a reduced cost for families on lower incomes, and also to support parents to return to work or education. Individual circumstances dictate which scheme and what rates are applicable to parents and their children.

### Community Childcare Subvention

The Community Childcare Subvention (CCS) programme supports parents on a low income to avail of reduced childcare costs at participating community childcare services. The DCYA pays for a portion of the childcare costs for eligible children, a payment described as a subvention payment, with the parent paying the remainder.

From September 2017, the CCS programme will fund Tusla-registered childcare providers to provide reduced weekly fees to certain parents and guardians. Under the CCS scheme, parents in training, education or low-paid employment can avail of childcare at reduced rates.

A person may get assistance with childcare costs for a child who is under 15 years of age on 1 September 2017, if they are a parent or guardian and fulfill one of the following criteria:

- Has a medical card or GP visit card
- Has a low income
- Is in school
- Is in further education
- Is job training
- Is getting a qualifying social welfare payment

Parents cannot get the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme and a CCS fee reduction at the same time. Parents can choose the scheme that is of greater benefit to them. There are four different bands, each of which provide different rates of subvention depending on the parents' circumstances:

**Band A** receives a weekly fee reduction of €145 for a full-time service, €80 for a part-time service, €45 for a sessional service and €22.50 for a shorter hours service. This band applies to parents or guardians who have a medical card and are getting certain social welfare payments or taking part in certain employment schemes. The child of a secondary school student with a medical card can qualify for a childcare place under Band A, whether or not the secondary school student (the parent) has a qualifying social welfare payment.

**Band AJ** receives a fee reduction of €80 for a full-time service, €80 for a part-time service, €45 for sessional service and €22.50 for a shorter hours service. This band applies to parents or guardians who have a medical card and are getting Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Allowance or Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

**Band B** receives a fee reduction of €70 for a full-time service, €35 for a part-time service, €25 for a sessional service and €12.50 for a shorter hours service. This band applies to parents or guardians who either have a medical card but don't have a payment listed in Band A or AJ or have a payment listed in Band A or AJ but don't have a medical card.

**Band D** receives a fee reduction of €50 for a full-time service, €25 for a part-time service, €17 for a sessional service and €8.50 for a shorter hours service. This band applies to parents or guardians who either have a GP visit card where a child is six years of age or older or no longer qualify for Band A or AJ this year, but who were verified as being on Band A or AJ at the end of the previous school year.

Full details of these bands, the eligibility criteria and the subvention amounts are available on the DCYA website, [affordablechildcare.ie](http://affordablechildcare.ie).

The two parents can consider which of them has the greater CSS eligibility. The parent who appears on the registration will be the parent verified by the DCYA. Parents have the right to appeal their band rate if they believe an error has occurred. Appeals are processed through the childcare provider.

Childcare providers operating the CCS programme in local areas can be found through the local CCC. A refundable booking deposit may be required by the childcare provider in order to hold a child's place. The maximum amount of the deposit is two weeks' payment. This deposit must be returned once the child is registered with the provider.

## Childcare for homeless children

Since January 2017, children aged up to five whose parents are homeless (and those transitioning from homelessness to permanent accommodation) are offered free childcare for 25 hours a week. This free childcare for homeless children includes 15 hours of ECCE (where children are eligible) or school hours. It also includes a daily meal. There is also a sessional option. Parents should not be asked to pay any top-up or additional payment for these hours. The eligibility of the applying parent is determined by Focus Ireland or the local authority (if outside of Dublin).

## After-School Child Care scheme

The After-School Child Care (ASCC) scheme supports people with low income to return to work. The scheme provides subsidised after-school childcare places to people with children of primary school age who find employment, increase their hours of employment or take up a place on an employment support scheme.

The subsidised after-school childcare places are provided by local childcare providers (both community and commercial). Parents pay their contribution directly to the childcare provider. Parents getting Family Income Supplement (FIS) who increase their working hours can also apply for the scheme.

Parents may be eligible for the scheme if they have one or more children aged between four and 13 years who are in primary school and:

- Are currently getting either Jobseeker's Allowance, Jobseeker's Benefit, Jobseeker's Transitional Payment, One-Parent Family Payment or are on an employment



support programme and have been getting the payment (or a combination of any of the qualifying payments) for at least three months or

- Have been getting Family Income Supplement (FIS) for any length of time and have increased the number of hours of work

To avail of the scheme parents must either:

- Start a new job (including a job under the JobsPlus initiative) or
- Increase the number of hours currently worked or
- Take up a place on an employment support programme (except the Community Employment scheme)

Parents on a Community Employment (CE) scheme are not eligible for the ASCC scheme. However, they should check their eligibility for a childcare place under the Community Employment Childcare (CEC) programme (see page 7).

Self-employed people who are getting Jobseeker's Allowance and people who are signing for credits only are also not eligible for the ASCC scheme.

### **Childcare places**

If an after-school childcare place(s) is allocated, the parent is entitled to a total of 52 weeks of after-school childcare (regardless of the number of children they have) provided their circumstances do not change.

If the service is used only part-time in a week, this is counted as one full week. The parent is entitled to a maximum of 52 weeks on the scheme, even if the scheme is only used on a part-time basis. Provided the parent's circumstances do not change, the entitlement will last for 52 weeks from the date that the after-school childcare place is first taken up. The childcare provider will notify the parent when the end of the eligibility period is approaching.

In the case of a job loss, the parent is no longer eligible for the scheme. However, if the parent finds employment again, they may be entitled to use any weeks remaining from the 52-week provision if still eligible.

A parent can apply for ASCC up to 26 weeks after starting a new job, taking up additional employment or starting an employment support scheme.

If there is any change in circumstances that may affect eligibility for the scheme, the parent must immediately notify the local Intreo Centre or Social Welfare Office. For example, eligibility may be lost in the following circumstances:

- Loss of a job
- Reduction in hours of employment

- Leaving an employment programme
- The child is no longer of primary school age

If the parent meets the criteria and is offered a place on the scheme, they can get after-school childcare at a subsidised daily rate of €3 per day per child (€15 per week), which the parent pays directly to the childcare provider. The scheme also offers an optional pick-up service at no additional cost.

If full-time childcare is needed during holidays, the additional cost is funded by the scheme for up to 10 weeks. However, the childcare scheme cannot be used only for holiday periods; it must be used during the school year in order to be eligible for school holiday childcare.

Parents can contact their local Intreo Centre or Social Welfare Office for more information on ASCC.

## **Childcare Education and Training Support scheme**

Subsidised childcare places are available under the Childcare Employment and Training Support (CETS) scheme for applicants for vocational training courses who may be in need of childcare in order to complete their course. CETS can provide full-time, part-time or after-school childcare places. It was announced in March 2017 that parents attending secondary school would now be entitled to receive childcare funding under CETS.

To be eligible under the scheme, the parent must be the main carer of a child or children and they must need assistance with childcare in order to take up a training opportunity.

Participants on the following further education programmes are eligible to apply for CETS funding:

- Approved Education and Training Board (ETB) courses
- Approved Youthreach courses
- Approved Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) courses
- Back to Education Initiative (BTEI)
- Secondary school students completing the Junior or Leaving Certificate cycle

The number of places available under CETS is limited. Places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. If a place cannot be found for the child of an eligible parent, the parent should contact the local CCC and let them know the area in which the childcare place is needed.

The maximum amount per child that childcare providers may charge to parents per week is:

- Full-time: €25 per week
- Part-time: €15 per week
- After-school: €5 per week
- After-school with pick-up service: €15

Childcare providers may not charge for weeks where the service is not open.

The parent must let the course provider know that they have childcare needs and want to be considered for CETS. When a place on a course is offered, a list of local childcare providers will be included with the offer letter. This letter should be used to book a place for the child or children with a childcare provider.

A childcare provider may ask for a refundable booking deposit to hold a place for the child. The maximum amount of the deposit is two weeks' payment. This deposit must be returned once the child is registered with the provider.

When the course starts, the individual will receive a letter confirming that they have started the course and giving the start and finish dates. This letter should be shown to the childcare provider to confirm the duration of the childcare place.

## Community Employment Childcare programme

The Community Employment Childcare (CEC) programme provides childcare places for Community Employment (CE) applicants who need childcare so that they can begin or continue a CE scheme.

Individuals may qualify for a childcare place while on CE scheme if they:

- Have been offered a place on a CE scheme
- Are the main carer of a child or children
- Need assistance with childcare in order to take up a place on a CE scheme

Places will be provided for 50 weeks in a 12-month period. If the individual is absent from CE for a prolonged period he or she will not be able to avail of childcare through the CEC programme. The number of places available under the CEC programme is limited. Places are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis.

If the child is participating in the ECCE scheme at the same time as the parent is on CE (either morning or afternoon), that child cannot transfer to a childcare place on the CEC

programme. However, if the parent is attending CE on an alternative time of day to the child's ECCE programme, the child may be eligible for a childcare place on the CEC programme too.

The maximum amount per child that childcare providers may charge parents per week is €15 for part-time or after-school care.

The CE sponsor will tell the parent about the CEC programme and provide a list of childcare providers participating in the programme. The parent should then contact a participating childcare provider in the area to book a childcare place under the CEC programme. The letter of offer of a CE place can be used to do this.

If the parent is already on a CE scheme, a letter can be provided by the sponsor stating that the parent is on CE. The childcare provider will accept this letter and offer the child a place, if there are places available.

If a childcare place cannot be found in the local area, the parent should contact the local CCC and let them know the area in which the childcare place is needed.

## Childcare for Programme Refugees

Ireland currently has a resettlement quota of up to 4,000 Programme Refugees. To support the Programme Refugees in their resettlement and integration into Irish society, the DCYA established the Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement (CCSR) programme.

This funding was incorporated into the existing CCS programme (see page 4) to enable Programme Refugee parents to attend a language and orientation course within their reception centre for eight weeks. The scheme also provides funding for childcare for a full year following the parents' move into the community (which adds up to 60 weeks in total).

Parents within the CCSR programme cannot be asked to make any financial contribution towards their child's childcare cost.

Parent(s) must give a letter of eligibility from the Department of Justice and Equality to the registered childcare provider. Registration of a child can occur anytime from the start of the programme year (21 August 2017) to the end (17 August 2018). If a child is eligible for 60 weeks this carries into the following programme year (2018/2019). A child will only receive up to a maximum of 60 weeks in total over two programme years.

The Citizens Information Board provides independent information, advice and advocacy on public and social services through [citizensinformation.ie](http://citizensinformation.ie), the Citizens Information Phone Service and the network of Citizens Information Services. It is responsible for the Money Advice and Budgeting Service and provides advocacy services for people with disabilities.

**Head Office** t 0761 07 9000  
**Ground Floor** f 01 605 9099  
**George's Quay House** e [info@ciboard.ie](mailto:info@ciboard.ie)  
**43 Townsend Street** w [citizensinformationboard.ie](http://citizensinformationboard.ie)  
**Dublin 2**  
**D02 VK65**

## Childminding grants and tax incentives

As part of the National Childminding Initiative, childminding development grants are available to childminders from the local CCC. If an individual is interested in becoming a childminder, they must contact the local CCC to avail of their Quality Awareness Programme. On completion of this Programme, childminders may avail of a capital grant of up to €1,000 under the Childminder Development Grant Scheme. This can be used to buy safety equipment or toys, or to make minor adjustments to the childminder's home to enhance or establish the childminding service.

A set of guidelines on good practice for childminders is also available on [dcya.gov.ie](http://dcya.gov.ie).

### Quality Awareness Programme

Quality Awareness Programmes (QAPs), offered by local CCCs, have been designed mainly for those hoping to open a childminding service or to avail of the grant scheme discussed above, but are also open to all childminders looking to improve the quality of their service or to refresh their knowledge.

The main objectives of the QAP is to:

- Enhance the knowledge and skills of childminders
- Develop childminders' confidence
- Encourage networking and support between local childminders
- Increase awareness of the issues involved in provided a quality childminding service

The QAP is a ten-hour course divided into five two-hour classes, which are delivered over a number of weeks. Times and frequency differ from area to area. The course covers topics such as child development, child well-being, play, hygiene and health and safety. Following completion of a QAP, childminders can go on to pursue further recognised qualifications via their CCC or avail of other accredited training options, if they wish. More details are available from local CCCs.

## Childcare services tax relief

A childminders' tax relief is available for people who look after up to three children in their own home.

In order to qualify, the childminder must:

- Not receive more than €15,000 income per annum from the provision of childcare services
- Provide the service in their own home
- Not mind more than three children at any one time
- Be registered as self employed with their local tax office
- Notify the Health Services Executive (HSE) that they are providing childcare services
- Include the childcare service income in their annual income tax return (Form 11), where the relief can be claimed

If another person provides childcare services with the childminder in the childminder's home, the €15,000 income limit is divided between the two minders.

The relief must be claimed on or before the tax return due date of 31 October each year.

The information in *Relate* is intended as a general guide only and is not a legal interpretation