

# Updating *Aistear*

## Written submission template for organisations, groups and individuals

This template is intended to help you (and your colleagues) develop a written submission in relation to Updating *Aistear*. Please e-mail your completed submission to [aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie](mailto:aistearsubmissions@ncca.ie)

### **Individual submission details**

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<b>Date</b>	
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### **Organisation submission details**

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Position</b>	
<b>Organisation</b>	
<b>Date</b>	
<b>E-mail</b>	

**Do you consent to this submission being posted online including your name and organisation\*?**

Yes  No

Yes  No

**Please provide some brief background information on your organisation (if applicable).**

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The remainder of the template includes two sections. Section 1 invites your overall comments and observations on *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

Section 2 is structured according to the Principles, Themes and Guidelines for Good Practice. Each section is briefly summarised as a support for working on the submission.

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# Section 1

## **Please outline your overall comments and observations on updating *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.**

Our overall comments and observations for Section 1 are set out below in bullet points. A SWOT analysis is undertaken for this submission followed by the development of SMART goals for achieving what needs to be enhanced or updated as per NCCA instructions. Our comments in Section 2 are derived from our extensive research in Developmental Social Neuroscience and Developmental Psychology in the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. We feel this perspective is missing from Aistear in its current form. While we recognise that Aistear clearly emphasises the ‘how to’ of teaching practice in early years education, research suggests that the ELC sector continues to struggle with quality teacher-child relationships. We therefore propose updating the Framework with knowledge regarding early brain development, Infant Mental Health (IMH) and socioemotional development. We are confident this can be achieved from a developmental neuroscience perspective. In our view practitioner understanding of adult-child interactions is poorly understood. We therefore feel this is not only fundamentally relevant vis-à-vis achieving quality early education, but is also relevant as regards a contemporary view of early childhood development.

### **Aistear SWOT Analysis:**

- **Strength:** Design layout, use of colour and clear Principles and Themes
- **Weakness:** Content is superseded by new research in child well-being and developmental studies.
- **Opportunity:** Update with neuroscientific knowledge regarding the pivotal role of the adults in children’s socioemotional well-being, currently in development in Trinity College Dublin.
- **Threats:** (factors with the potential to reduce Aistear’s impact): Lack of knowledge of social development; poor training content.

### **Aistear SMART Goals:**

- **Specific:** The goal is to update the Aistear curriculum framework with psychological research that reflects up to date and contemporary study in child development. Our goal as researchers is to locate, assess and evaluate studies from the field of Developmental Social Neuroscience, Affective Neuroscience and Developmental Psychology and support this process by contributing analysis of this research.

- **Measurable:** Assess via the voice of the child in the statutory inspection process of early years settings. We propose years education inspections (EYEI) by DE inspectors under Tusla (Early Years Inspectorate, 2018), are best placed to ensure application of new child development knowledge in early years settings. Concurrently, we are in the process of developing training content based on conceptual and empirical research in Developmental Social Neuroscience in early years settings and as always, we welcome collaboration with NCCA.
- **Attainable:** As researchers with the School of Education in Trinity College we would like to extend an expression of interest to the NCCA to be involved in the sectoral dialogue as stakeholders by means of this proposal.
- **Relevant:** By providing up-to-date research that will support updating Aistear
- **Time-bound:** Within the time frame as proposed by the NCCA

## Section 2

### **Principles of Aistear**

Aistear is based on 12 Principles of early learning and development. Each principle is presented using a short statement. This is followed by an explanation of the Principle from the child's perspective. This explanation highlights the adult's role in supporting children's early learning and development. The Principles can be accessed [here](#).

**Please give your feedback in relation to updating the Principles of Aistear. Please indicate what is working well with the principles and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

As mentioned at the outset, the established format of Principles and Themes works well. The format enables educators to understand the "how to" of teaching practices in early childhood, i.e. appropriately playful learning experiences, active learning, and the learning environment. However, the Framework is missing opportunities to point out and highlight exactly why reciprocal adult-child interactions are vital from a child development perspective. Since Aistear's publication in 2009, child development research from the fields of Developmental Social Neuroscience (DSN) and Affective Neuroscience (AN) has enabled us to better understand the vital aspect of caregiver-child interactions. Coupled with Developmental Psychology, this research is important for children's early social and emotional development.

This research links early brain development and attachment to socioemotional well-being and situates this as essential to mental health throughout childhood and into adolescence and adulthood (see Schore, 2016; De Hann & Gunnar, 2009).

In addition, this research has contributed a wealth of understandings of emotional development in early childhood, i.e. how early experiences influence holistic development over time, and how lifelong psychological well-being and resilience develop within early adult-child relationships (Gold, 2017; Schore, 2003,2003b; Gerhardt, 2015; Seligman, 2014; Dalli et al, 2011; Tronick, 2007; Mustard, 2006).

Most notable from this research is the applicability of neuroscience research and related fields, to development of an infant/toddler pedagogy. Our reviews of this topic has yielded many central concepts for early educators, namely why establishing and maintaining attuned adult-child interactions is an imperative. This is especially true for infants and toddlers who we now know from infant research, are more insightful and aware of the social behaviours of others than was previously believed (Hodgers, 2017) whilst relying solely on adults for socialisation.

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While we are aware that updating Aistear is an opportunity to address issues of duplication and/or streamlining the Framework (NCCA, 2021), we also believe our research can be a key enabler of the required infrastructure that will support quality education in the early years going forward (Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare 2022-2028 (DCEDIY, 2022).

In summary, from our review of the research, we believe it is relationships between adults and children which are key to supporting children's experience of early years education. Thus the impact of neuroscientific research regarding attachment, socioemotional well-being, early brain development and infant mental health, has direct applicability to updating the early education curriculum framework. In addition, we have ensured it's synergy with the expectations of First 5 (Government of Ireland, 2018), for both the Early Learning and Care (ELC) sector and mainstream primary education. The experiences of young children in early education settings over the past two years during the COVID-19 pandemic are also a reference point for our research in quality adult-child relationships in early education.

**What Needs to be Enhanced or Updated:**

- Update Aistear's Principles and Themes with additional knowledge about early brain development, attachment and socioemotional development from a neuroscientific perspective.
- Update with Developmental Neuroscience research which also sets out clearly the significance of meaningful experiences. The mechanisms of neuroplasticity and the factors that derail learning i.e. the negative consequences of stress on early learning, memory and emotional health.
- Update with the neuroscience of Attachment. This emphasises relationships and the functional behaviour of the adult (i.e. eye contact, tone of voice and affective emotional states such as joy, interest and excitement) in regulating young children's emotional and behavioural well-being.
- This information has the potential to enhance practitioner understanding from the child's view, imbue a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of each individual child's early brain development, their right to equality and a deeper understanding of diversity.

# Section 3

## Themes of *Aistear*

*Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework presents children’s learning and development using four Themes. These are:

1. Well-being
2. Identity and Belonging
3. Communicating
4. Exploring and Thinking.

The themes describe what children learn—the dispositions, attitudes and values, skills, knowledge, and understanding. Each theme begins with a short overview of its importance for children as young learners. The theme is then presented using four aims. Each aim is divided into six learning goals. *Aistear*’s Themes can be accessed [here](#)

**Please give your overall feedback in relation to the themes of *Aistear*. Please indicate what is working well with the themes and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

The Themes are well named and the four areas encompass a psychosocial approach to development. However they are no longer entirely aligned with child development research. This research has expanded since *Aistear* was first published to include stress and early brain development, the influence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s), and Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDG) for children who experience ACES. We propose the Themes be updated to convey a fuller consideration of these fields to reflect research which suggests that emotionally-attuned caregivers buffer children’s emotional well-being (Shonkoff, 2011). We therefore propose a deeper level of understanding these effects, especially in areas related to memory, learning, and social development (Zero to Three, 2022). We see this as a more sustainable approach to quality pedagogy.

### **To Be Enhanced or Updated:**

- Update with an explanation of the link between healthy early brain and emotional development and corresponding psychological experiences, such as adult-child intersubjectivity which enhances children’s lived experience.
- Include a brief reference to how intersubjectivity experiences can and do play a role in establishing neural pathways which are experience-dependant on activation.
- Include information on the truly remarkable growth in the early years which takes place in terms of brain and behavioural development. For example, the

emergence of new emotions and behaviours that overlap and coincide with high levels of synapse density around the age of eighteen months (Schore, 2016).

- Integrative this wider perspective with ideas and suggestions for the types of learning experiences that adults might provide.
- Collaborate with Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI) so that practitioners are trained and enabled to support these processes.



# Section 4

## Guidelines for Good Practice

*Aistear* has four sets of guidelines, focusing on different aspects of practice:

1. Building partnerships between parents and practitioners
2. Learning and developing through interactions
3. Learning and developing through play
4. Supporting learning and development through assessment

These describe how the adult can support children's learning and development across *Aistear's* principles and themes. *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice can be accessed [here](#)

**Please give your overall feedback in relation to updating *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice. Please indicate what is working well with the guidelines and what might need to be enhanced or updated.**

Children's learning and development has always been seen as inseparable from the social learning context (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky 1978), and this is clearly reflected in *Aistear's* Guidelines for Good Practice. However, updating with contemporary research is now timely for achieving the aims and goals of *Aistear* going forward.

- *Aistear* needs a greater explicit focus on striving for low stress environments and quality relationships, and the attachment needs of very young learners in educational settings.
- ELC settings and primary school classrooms would therefore benefit from updating *Aistear* with the latest neuroscientific research on the neurobiology of social and emotional development and a greater focus on the psychology of early years education.
- Updating with a clearer emphasis on socioemotional and behavioural development and on the protection of early brain and emotional well-being will ensure *Aistear's* continued relevance and impact in quality early years education.

## **Data Protection**

The NCCA fully respects your right to privacy. Any personal information which you volunteer to the NCCA will be treated with the highest standards of security and confidentiality, strictly in accordance with the Data Protection Acts. If you require further information related to data protection please visit <https://www.ncca.ie/en/privacy-statement> or you can contact the NCCA's Data Protection Officer at [dpo@ncca.ie](mailto:dpo@ncca.ie).

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