

Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Guide for Parents

This document is intended as a brief guide for parents in relation to the operation of the Free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. A more comprehensive Guide to the terms, conditions and procedures can be found [here](#), and parents may find some sections of that comprehensive Guide useful, particularly the Overview of the programme (section 1), information relating to Optional Additional Charges (section 2.10), Eligibility Criteria (section 3), Changes in enrolment details (section 6), and the conditions surrounding the waiving of the upper age limit and pro-rata arrangements (section 7).

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What is the free Pre-School Year in Early Childhood Care and Education?

The ECCE programme is designed to give children access to a free pre-school year of appropriate programme-based activities in the year before they start primary school. Participation in a pre-school programme provides children with their first formal experience of early learning, the starting-point of their educational and social development outside the home. Children who avail of pre-school are more likely to be ready for school and a formal learning and social environment. In general, each eligible child is entitled to one free pre-school year. Certain children with special needs may avail of a pro-rata provision over two years, provided they fulfil certain conditions (please see the section 'Children with special needs' below.)

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When will my child be eligible to participate in the ECCE programme?

Childcare services participating in the programme are required to provide age-appropriate activities and programmes to children within a particular age cohort, and therefore it is necessary to set minimum and maximum limits to the age range for qualifying children.

The ECCE programme is open to all children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months on 1st September each year.

To avail of the programme at any stage during the pre-school year commencing	Children must have been born between the following dates (both dates inclusive)
September 2013	2 February 2009 and 30 June 2010
September 2014	2 February 2010 and 30 June 2011
September 2015	2 February 2011 and 30 June 2012

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Are there any exceptions to the age-related eligibility rule?

There are no exceptions to the lower age limit. The upper age limit of 4 years 7 months may be extended where a child is not in a position to commence primary school until s/he is more than 5 years 6 months of age, due either to the enrolment policy of the local school, or because s/he has been assessed as developmentally delayed. Applications for an extension of the upper age limit will be examined on a case-by-case basis.

Please note that under the Education and Welfare Act 2000 all children must be enrolled in a primary school by the time they reach their 6th birthday. Therefore, a child who will reach the age of 6 in the course of the pre-school year commencing September 2012 will not be permitted to participate in the ECCE programme. Parents should contact their local primary school or Special Education Needs Organiser (www.ncse.ie).

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Children with special needs

Where a child has been assessed by the Health Service Executive, or treating consultant, as having special needs which will either delay his/her entry to primary school or make it more suitable that s/he avails of the pre-school year on a pro-rata basis over two years, this will be examined on a case-by-case basis. In such cases, the child may avail of the pre-school year over two years by availing of the ECCE sessions, for example, for two days in the first year and three days in the second year, or vice versa.

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Where can I enrol my child for the free pre-school year?

There are approximately 4,500 pre-school services notified to the Health Service Executive or registered with the Irish Montessori Educational Board. All of these services are eligible to apply to participate in the ECCE programme. A list of participating pre-

school services is available for parents from the local City or County Childcare Committee. The contact details for the CCCs are shown at the end of this document. Parents can contact participating services in their area to arrange to enrol their child.

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How is the Pre-School Year funded?

Pre-School services participating in the programme are paid a capitation fee for each qualifying child enrolled. Pre-school services are required to notify the Department of the details of each child enrolled in the programme, so you will be asked by the pre-school service in which your child is enrolled to complete a form which includes your child's date of birth and Personal Public Service Number (PPSN). You will also be asked to provide documentary evidence of these details (a copy of the child's birth certificate or passport, and a copy of official proof of the child's PPSN which can take the form of a copy of an official document or card showing the child's name and PPSN, e.g. a Drug Payment Scheme Card, a Medical Card, or a letter from the Department of Social Protection). In return, the service is required to provide an appropriate programme of activities in early childhood care and education free to parents.

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How will the Pre-School Year be provided?

Children will normally receive pre-school year sessions for 3 hours a day, 5 days a week, over 38 weeks (September to June). The weekly capitation fee for these sessions is €62.50. If you choose to enrol your child for fewer than 5 days per week, the capitation fee payable to the provider will be reduced on a pro-rata basis.

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Will parents have to pay additional charges in respect of the Pre-School Year?

Services participating in the programme must provide the pre-school year free to parents. However, a service may charge parents for additional services as long as (a) the services are provided on an optional basis and (b) appropriate programme-based activities are provided to any children not participating in an optional activity.

Optional additional services can take the form of various activities or services such as outings, specific teaching resources such as dance or music, and food, but should not include activities which would generally be regarded as a normal part of a pre-school service, e.g. general arts and crafts activities.

Services may also charge for any additional hours outside of the free pre-school provision.

Additional services or additional hours must be offered to parents on a purely optional basis and take-up of these options must not be a condition (real or implied) of enrolment in the pre-school service.

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Síolta and Aistear

Síolta and Aistear are the National Frameworks for Early Learning which support services for children aged from birth to 6 years. Detailed information can be found at www.siolta.ie and www.ncca.ie/earlychildhood framework.

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City and County Childcare Committees

If you would like further information regarding the ECCE programme you should contact your local City or County Childcare Committee. Click [here](#) for contact details.

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