

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

Under this scheme, qualified children receive a free pre-school year of 3 hours per day, 5 days per week, over the course of the pre-school year of 38 weeks (opening 183 days). In return for providing this place free of charge, the service receives a capitation fee of €64.50 per week for each child (rising to €75 in pre-schools with higher qualified staff). Certain services, which are unable to open 5 days per week (e.g. for planning permission reasons) have been allowed open 4 days per week, and open 3 ½ hours per day, over 41 weeks, for the same annual capitation.

If a qualified child attends such a service, s/he is entitled to a **free** place as outlined, and **it cannot be a condition of enrolment that you pay additional fees and/or avail of 'optional' extras**. Booking deposits must not exceed two weeks capitation, and must be fully refundable in September 2010. If you believe that a participating service is trying to circumvent these rules, please contact your local City or County Childcare Committee, and they will pursue the matter in confidence.

If a child attends a service which is open 50 weeks of the year, e.g. they have a full-day place in a crèche, they receive a free 2 hours 15 minutes session each day, with their crèche fees being reduced by €48.50 per week for each of the 50 weeks. Where a child attends for 3 or 4 days, and has at least 3 sessions of 3 hours 45 minutes each week, they will receive the full capitation and fees reduction.

Over 53,000 children, or over 83%, are already participating in the scheme. Internationally, this is amongst the highest ever participation rates at the start of such a scheme. A further 4% of qualified children attracted targeted support under other Government schemes, which means that 87% of children who commence Junior Infants in September 2010 will have received free pre-school provision. It is hoped that this participation rate will increase further this year. Almost every pre-school service is in the scheme, however, your local City/County Childcare Committee will be able to provide you with a list of the services operating in your area.

### **Types of services in the scheme**

Aside from the differences between the 38-week pre-school model and 50-week full daycare services, there are a number of educational philosophies in participating services. These include Montessori, Steiner-Waldorf, High/Scope, play-based and a combination of these approaches. Whatever their differences, all are based on helping children to 'learn how to learn' and international research consistently shows that children who attend quality pre-school prior to entering the formal educational sector will have better long-term outcomes. More immediately evident to you as a parent will be that children enjoy their pre-school experience, will gain new friends, and will be far more confident and prepared when they start 'big school' the following year.

### **Choosing a service**

In choosing a service, you may wish to consider the following criteria;

- Whether you also require additional childcare, over and above the pre-school session provided for under the scheme
- The time of the session (some services operate both morning and afternoon sessions)
- Whether your child's current friends/playmates will be attending that service
- Whether it operates as a 'feeder' for the primary school your child will attend
- The educational approach of the service
- The quality of the facility (e.g. does it have a good outdoor play area?)
- The qualifications of the staff
- The friendliness of the staff, and how well they relate to children
- Whether it operates through the English or Irish language
- The views of parents who sent their children to the service in previous years
- Optional extras available (and any charge for these)

All services are required to observe their requirements under the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, concerning accessibility to children with special needs, and must make reasonable accommodation for such children. Similarly, any service which discriminated on the grounds of nationality, ethnicity or membership of the Traveller community would not be eligible for entry under the scheme.

### **When to start pre-school and primary school**

If your child was born between 2 February and 30 June 2007, s/he may enter the scheme either from September 2010, or September 2011. Given a child will only avail of the scheme once, parents in this position are strongly urged to ensure that the year chosen for the ECCE scheme is the one immediately preceding Junior Infants.

If you believe that your child may not be ready for primary school aged 4½, but are worried that delaying his/her entry until 5½ will be to his/her disadvantage, you should know that there is no evidence that children who start school later have worse outcomes, and indeed substantial evidence suggests it can be very much to their benefit, if preceded by a quality, age-appropriate pre-school programme.

Children who have Special Needs, or who cannot start school until aged over 5 years 7 months (e.g. as a result of local schools not accepting children until after their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday) may appeal the upper age limit of the scheme. Parents of children with a significant level of disability but who are attending mainstream pre-school, and who believe they would benefit from a second year of free pre-school provision, may make applications for such an additional year. Such applications will be considered by the Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs (OMCYA) on a case-by-case basis.

### **Application process**

In September, the pre-school service selected by you will ask you to complete and return a Parent Declaration Form. You will be asked to give the Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) of your child and, for Data Protection purposes, to sign a declaration confirming your agreement to this. The service will then forward your Parental Return Form, by registered post, to this Office. This Office will use the PPSNs provided to verify the date of birth of children and that they have not previously availed of the scheme. A pre-school may ask for evidence of a child's Date of Birth to ensure that s/he is entitled to the free provision.

### **What if....?**

#### **...I want to move from one service (or scheme) to another?**

Parents can apply to the OMCYA to transfer a child to different service. Transfers will be allowed in January and again in April of each year and must be applied for not later than 6 weeks in advance of the transfer date. A Transfer Form is available and should be used. It should be noted that transfers from a 38 week service to a 50 week service are not permitted. Similarly, transfers between the ECCE and other support schemes, are not generally permitted. Transfer forms are available from participating services and must be signed by both the original and the new service.

#### **... I decide to start my child from January (or April)?**

Parents can enter their children into the scheme during the course of the year, at the start of the next term using the transfer after the starting date of September, by using a Transfer Form. It should be noted that late entry to the free Pre-School Year will not qualify a child for a free pre-school place in the following academic year.

#### **... I change my mind about availing of the scheme in the 2010/11 year, and decide I would prefer to avail of it in the 2011/12 year instead?**

Services will already have been funded from the start of the year, and providing a free place to your child on that basis. Therefore, if you decide to defer taking a free pre-school place, you will only hold onto your eligibility for the following year if the service agrees to have the capitation for your child deducted from its

current payments (e.g. if you agree to repay the amount to the service). If you can agree a basis for this, and the service confirms this in writing to this Office, the place can be deferred for your child. Such a deferral will also depend on your child being eligible to start in the scheme from the following year.

**... my child receives support under another State-funded pre-school or childcare programme?**

Children cannot, generally, receive funding under more than one State pre-school or childcare programme during the same academic year, as this would amount to double funding.

**.... I can't find a place for my child?**

If you are having difficulties finding place for your child, your City/County Childcare Committee will help you find the most convenient and/or suitable service with vacancies for your child.

**.... we are not Irish citizens?**

The scheme is available for children who are resident in the State and have a valid PPS number, regardless of their nationality.

**.... I am an Irish citizen, but my child lives in another EU State?**

Your child will generally be eligible for whatever pre-school provision or support that is provided in the State of his/her residence.

**.... the service nearest to me is not participating in the scheme?**

Almost all services are in the scheme. If your local service is not, your child will have to attend an alternative service to participate in the scheme. The scheme is voluntary, in much the same way as funding for National Schools. A pre-school is entitled to operate outside the scheme if they adhere to the minimum requirements under the Pre-School Regulations, which regulate the pre-school/childcare sector.

**... the service is charging for 'optional extras' that aren't really optional?**

It is recognised that some pre-schools have additional optional activities, and that it would not be reasonable to prevent them charging for these. For example, trips to the zoo are not key parts of an ECCE curriculum, and therefore a reasonable charge may be made. However, charging extra for 'optional extras' which, in reality, are items which are clearly part of what would be expected as part of a pre-school service (e.g. arts and craft materials, report books etc) is not permitted under the scheme. Nor is it permitted for services to combine a list of extra services into one optional list.

Where an optional extra is genuinely optional but happens during class time, e.g. swimming lessons, children not attending the optional activity must have a full content-based session as normal, and both groups of children must be under the required levels of staff supervision required by the scheme. No additional activity should be held in such a way as would leave non-participating children feeling excluded (e.g. looking on as other children have dancing lessons), and if a service is unsure as to whether this would happen, additional optional events should happen outside the normal times/days of the session.

If you believe that a service is operating outside the rules of the scheme, and additional charges are not optional in practise, you are asked to contact your City/County Childcare Committee in confidence.

**The Childcare Directorate  
Office of the Minister for Children & Youth Affairs**