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Report on the National Consultation with Young Children







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A National Consultation with Young Children on A
Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young
Children and their Families.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team from Trinity College Dublin, commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) for this consultation with young children, has benefitted greatly from the assistance of many groups and individuals.

We would like to thank Dr. Anne-Marie Brooks, Principal Officer and her team in the DCYA for the high level of professional support we have received.

We would like to thank all the children who kindly participated in the consultation, providing us with valuable data on their likes, dislikes and wishes for change in Ireland. We hope that their views will be heard and taken account of, and that their participation will contribute towards the development of the whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families.

We would like to thank Carmel Brennan and Larry Fleming for facilitating access to the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and primary school sites. We are grateful to the ELC practitioners and school principals and class teachers for their kind support and assistance in the administration of the consultation pack to parents and for supporting the data collection process.

We would like to particularly thank Margaret Rogers and her team for their very significant contribution to the consultation process. We would like to thank the Early Years Specialists who assisted with the data collection, and these are: Catherine Bond, Laura Cleere, Jennifer Henson, Karien Keogh, Siobhan O'Connell, Leah Russell and Laura Smullen.

We are also extremely grateful to the Oversight Committee for their generous input and advice.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the consultation process is to inform the development of a whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families. This Strategy, which is one of three constituent strategies under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*¹, will focus on five outcomes for children. These are that children will be:

1. Active and healthy, have physical and mental wellbeing
2. Achieving full potential in learning and development
3. Safe and protected from harm
4. In a position of economic security and opportunity
5. Connected, respected and contributing to their world

The questions posed/information sought as part of the consultation process needed to mirror the questions posed and information sought from primary school children as part of the consultation process for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*¹. These were:

1. What's the best thing about being a child in Ireland?
2. What's the worst thing about being a child in Ireland?
3. What one thing would you change in Ireland for children to be happy?

The questions needed to be tailored to the developmental stage of the very young children aged 3–5 years, which resulted in these questions:

1. What do you like about living in this area?
2. What do you not like about living in this area?
3. If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for?

An Oversight Committee was established in September 2015 to work in partnership with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) on developing and implementing the consultation process. This committee was chaired and managed by Dr. Anne-Marie Brooks, Principal Officer, DCYA, and comprised members of the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit, and other key stakeholders (see full list of members in Appendix 1). These stakeholders played a critical role in advising on the most effective way to conduct the consultation process and were consulted on every aspect of the consultation.

The consultation process was managed by experts in seeking the views of children and conducting analysis of such findings. In September a research team, led by Professor Imelda Coyne from the School of Nursing and Midwifery in Trinity College Dublin, was contracted to manage and run the consultation in cooperation with the DCYA.

The consultation was underpinned by Article 12 of the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, which entails respecting children's views and using child-centred research methods.

This is the third time that a consultation has been conducted to inform a national strategy or policy framework for children in Ireland. The first public consultation was carried out in 2000 to inform *Our Children – Their Lives*, the *National Children's Strategy 2000–2010*, during the 'Celtic Tiger' era in Ireland – an age of economic boom, prosperity, high employment and infinite opportunity. The second consultation, 'Life as a child and young person in Ireland', took place in 2011 to inform *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* and was conducted in an age of austerity, rising unemployment and emigration, and increased uncertainty as to what the future held for many families.

Response rate and demographics

The consultation was undertaken with a random sample of children in Ireland who were attending preschool in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings and junior infant classes in primary school. In November the sites were invited to participate in the consultation and the consultation packs were distributed to the directors and school principals. The pilot study was conducted in a preschool and primary school on 26 November 2015 and the data collection took place the week of 14–18 December 2015.

From the preschool sites (n=6), a total of 76 children (33 boys and 43 girls aged 3–4 years) participated in the consultation. From the primary school sites (n=6) a total of 37 children (aged 4–5 years) participated in the consultation. The total sample comprised 113 children aged 3–5 years.



Key messages from children

- Home and family relationships were the best thing about living in Ireland. Being with and doing activities with parents, siblings, grandparents were very important.
- Playing with toys and friends was another good thing about living in Ireland. Having access to outdoor playgrounds and nature was important. The children were quite aware of nature and liked rainbows, butterflies, trees, flowers and green areas.
- Children disliked being away from family, inactivity, adverse weather and lack of access to playground and play facilities.
- They disliked loud noises, dangerous environments, the dark, monsters and being hurt.
- Children's wishes were for more time with family and to do activities together (e.g. swimming, going to the playground, cinema).
- They also wished to go on holidays, be magical, find new things, have ice-cream and sweets, and have more toys and playgrounds.
- They would like to have a safe environment, less homework, less noise, and less frightening things.

Conclusion

It was evident from the range of responses that children aged 3–5 years have opinions and views on living in Ireland and that they are capable of conveying their views. The children were asked about their likes, dislikes and wishes with no restriction on topics. These findings will make an important contribution towards the development of the forthcoming whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families.



Ciara, age 4





INTRODUCTION

Background

Children aged 3–5 years are at an incredibly important stage of their life. Within the last decade they have been increasingly prioritised within Irish policy. As such, there is now a wealth of research from Ireland that focuses on young children's health and wellbeing, their learning and development, and the services which benefit them. This section will give an overview of this literature, drawing mainly on work from the Growing Up in Ireland study, the DCYA and the Centre for Effective Services.

Health and wellbeing

Investing in children's early years has major human, social and economic benefits; consequently, ensuring the health and wellbeing of this section of the population has become a key priority for policymakers. Currently, the majority of children aged 3–5 years in Ireland are in good health, according to their mothers^{2,3}. However, there are a number of key concerns in relation to children's health and wellbeing, namely rising levels of overweight and obese children and injury and accident occurrence.

Firstly, tackling and preventing childhood obesity is currently one of the major challenges for Ireland's health policy. Excessive weight gain can lead to a range of health problems including but not limited to: type 2 diabetes, stroke, coronary heart disease, and premature death. Results from Growing Up in Ireland indicate that 25% of three-year-olds and 20% of five-year-olds are overweight or obese. This has been shown to be strongly associated with social class, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds more likely to be considered overweight or obese. In examining the eating patterns and physical activity of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, research has shown that five-year-olds from households with lower social class, income and parental education consume more calories compared to their more advantaged peers⁴. These results show that children from less advantaged homes were also more likely to engage in unstructured physical play such as climbing, riding bikes or playing chasing. Conversely, children from more advantaged backgrounds were more likely to participate in structured forms of physical play. For example, there was a greater likelihood of those children attending sports clubs regularly. Another behaviour which influences the likelihood of children becoming overweight or obese is extended screen time. Research indicates that spending as much as three hours or more watching television

each day can lead to poor eating habits and the overconsumption of snack foods⁴. Reports on children's health, published as part of the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative, recommend that initiating behaviours more conducive to healthy eating in a child's early years would be an effective way to combat childhood obesity⁵.

Another key issue in relation to children's health and wellbeing is injury and accident occurrence. In most developed countries, injuries and related accidents are one of the leading causes of death among young children³. According to the State of the Nation's Children report⁶, one third of hospital discharges for injuries, poisoning and other accidents were for patients aged 1–4. Similarly, Growing Up in Ireland reports³ state that one in five children aged three had experienced an injury or accident which required hospitalisation. The most common location for a child under six to suffer an injury is within their own home. As such, there have been calls to establish specific measures aimed at preventing child injury in Ireland. Recommendations include more effective legislation, informing parents about their child's developmental milestones and environmental planning which considers the needs of children⁷.

Learning and development

Internationally, children today are conceptualised as active and competent learners. This modern approach acknowledges the fact that children do not learn or develop in a vacuum. Rather, children are responsive to the multiple contexts (family, early childhood settings, and community) of their lives and to the reciprocal relationships they form with other children as well as adults. Following on from the recognition that children develop in multiple contexts, there is a large body of research which outlines the kinds of environments which are conducive to enhanced learning and development. It has been noted that children in their early years thrive in an environment that stimulates their senses⁸. In particular, it is important that adults offer children the chance to explore, problem-solve and develop decision-making capabilities by providing interesting outdoor and indoor experiences⁹. It is of the utmost importance that the environment offers children a chance to engage in play as it is a key context for their learning and development. In addition to the physical health benefits, it has been noted that through play, children develop improved verbal skills, social skills, problem solving skills and creativity⁸.



Significant changes to certain environments can have effects on the social, cognitive and emotional development of young children. For example, a Growing Up in Ireland¹⁰ report detailing the experiences of family life for three-year-old children showed that the arrival of a new sibling, as well as changes within their preschool or centre-based ELC setting, are all important events which may impact the development of children. In addition, a number of reports have highlighted the importance of relationships with regards to children's learning and development. French⁸ emphasises that relationships between adults and children should be based on experiences of trust, autonomy and empathy. The formation of these healthy relationships and the kinds of interactions that accrue from them can have lasting consequences for children. They are particularly influential when it comes to language, intellectual functioning and communication skills¹¹.

Results from Ireland show that the large majority of mothers consider their child to be developing healthy social skills and relationships, and that very few are concerned by their child's behaviour or emotions¹¹. However, in relation to children who were struggling in this domain, there are several issues worth highlighting. Firstly, mothers who believed their child was having problems with behaviour, emotions or concentration were concerned about its impact on formal learning, their home life and friendships. It is also worth pointing out that by age five there were already discrepancies between girls and boys, with girls having developed more advanced social skills. Furthermore, children who spent three or more hours a day engaging in screen time (watching TV, playing video games) were more likely to display problematic behaviour. This was even the case when the content was age-appropriate.

When it comes to the importance of relationships to children, few have as profound an influence on their development as the relationship with parents or guardians. Reports from Growing Up in Ireland¹¹ indicate that most parents in Ireland have positive relationships with their five-year-olds. One very important aspect of this relationship is how parents discipline their children. The evidence suggests that harsh punishment can contribute towards aggressiveness in the child later in their life. Talking to a child and explaining why their behaviour was wrong is more likely to help them to respond appropriately in difficult situations in the future¹⁰. In the Growing Up in Ireland study parents were asked a range of questions regarding disciplinary action and their three-year-old child. Most mothers indicated that they explain to children why their behaviour was wrong, and over half said that they never smack their child. However, 12% of mothers reported that this is sometimes used as a form of discipline.



Early Learning and Care (ELC) services

Children's health, wellbeing, learning and development all benefit when ELC services are invested in and meet sufficiently high standards. There is a substantial amount of evidence supporting this. In the US, Zoritch et al. conducted a systematic review of a large number of studies that used randomised control trials to examine the benefits of these services¹². They found that provision in this area frequently increased children's IQ and consequently had positive effects on their school achievements. They also found evidence to suggest that there are a number of encouraging long-term effects of receiving high quality ELC. For example, those in receipt of such services were less likely to experience teenage pregnancy, unemployment or partake in criminal behaviour.

Conclusion

It is now widely accepted that ELC influences child outcomes in desirable ways. The focus has shifted towards what is needed to ensure that those services are of high quality and that all children have the chance to benefit from them. Ensuring quality is heavily dependent on the recruitment, training and professional development of the workforce involved^{7,13}. Some concerns have been expressed about the extent of training received by staff at certain levels of ELC services and a report from the DCYA⁷ indicates that the professional standards in Ireland remain low compared with EU counterparts. Well-educated practitioners are essential to providing a quality service. Staff should have a strong basis in child development to draw from and be able to apply this knowledge to the benefit of the children they interact with¹³. Other factors to consider in ensuring quality include the engagement of family members and the wider community. The benefit gained from ELC services are enhanced when services are receptive to community input⁷.

In addition to the need for quality services, improved access to ELC is also required. The cost of these services to parents is still among the highest in the OECD⁷. Although the introduction of free preschool has been welcomed and the take-up is very high, there is low participation among certain minority groups including Roma and children with disabilities. As such, it is important for services to be inclusive. Reports published by the DCYA recommend moving towards a system of progressive universalism in order to ensure that all children may benefit from ELC, while those who need additional assistance are targeted and provided for.

METHODOLOGY

Objectives

The objective of the consultation was to give young children (3–5 years) the opportunity to express their views on issues that affect their lives directly. The purpose was to gain an understanding about young children's likes, dislikes and wishes about living in Ireland to inform policy decisions concerning early childhood services and wider provision for young children and families. The consultation was with a random sample of children in Ireland who were attending preschool in ELC settings and junior infant classes in primary school. The sites participated in the consultation during the week of 14–18 December 2015.

Oversight Committee

An Oversight Committee was established in September 2015 to work in partnership with the DCYA on developing and implementing the consultation process. This committee was chaired and managed by Dr Anne-Marie Brooks, Principal Officer, DCYA, and comprised members of the DCYA Citizen Participation Unit, and other key stakeholders (see full list of members in Appendix 1). Members had expertise in education, ELC services, children, communication, project planning, study design, data analysis and Government policy and planning. These stakeholders played a critical role in advising on the most effective way to conduct the consultation process and were consulted on every aspect of the consultation design.

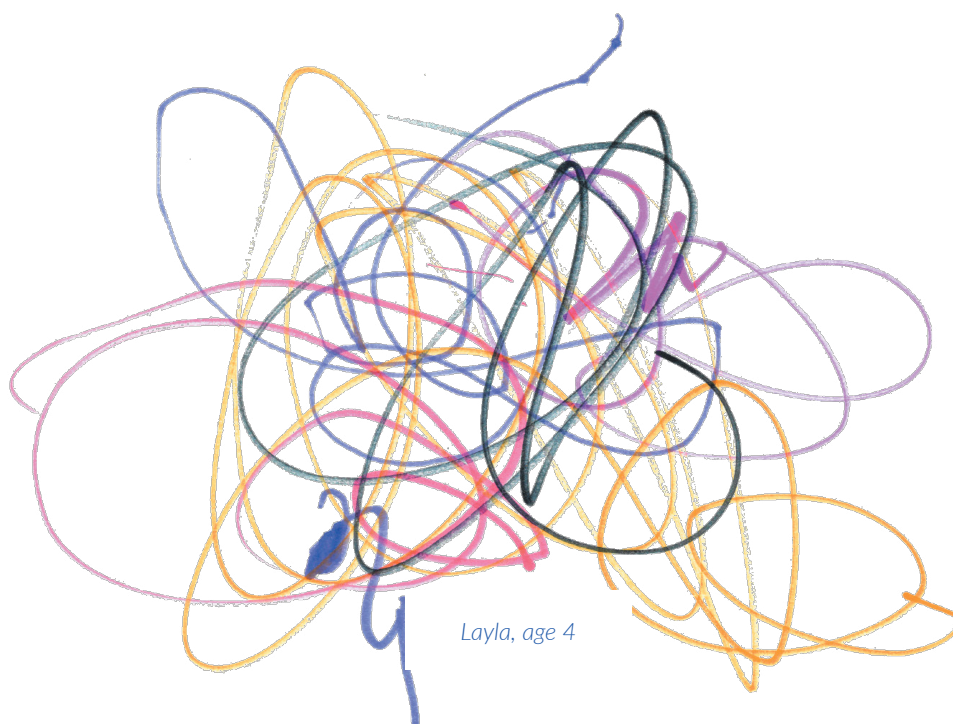
Research team

The research team consisted of the Principal Investigator (Professor Imelda Coyne), a project manager (Deirdre Mallon) and six Early Years Specialists (EYS) from the Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service. The EYS all held degrees in Early Childhood Education, with several currently studying at Masters level. The EYS researchers had considerable experience working with children from birth to six from a range of backgrounds.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Faculty of Science Research Ethics Committee (FREC), Trinity College Dublin. The research team abided by the good practice principles for undertaking research with children and the Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children¹⁴. The parents and all professionals (preschool practitioners, teachers and Principals) involved directly with the sites were informed of the study and their co-operation sought. To recruit children for the project, we obtained approval from the Directors and School Principal to send a covering letter, information leaflet, and consent form to families in which the aims and details of the project were explained and asking for parental and child consent. Parents/guardians were advised that they had at least seven days before they had to respond and that they could reconsider their consent at any point in the project.

We asked the parent/guardian to seek their child's agreement to participate in the research, using a combined information and consent form which was an adaptation of a form developed by the National Childhood Network and permission was obtained to adapt the form. The information leaflet contained pictures and a short text worded for the children's comprehension level that explained in very simple terms what was involved. A smiley chart asking children to indicate their preferred involvement by circling the appropriate figure was used to obtain assent. Consent was seen as an on-going process and children's behaviour monitored in case they needed to stop the interview/activity at any time. Children's body language can provide important cues about their preferred involvement, so researchers were very observant of both verbal and non-verbal signs of discomfort¹⁸. For example, in one site where the children were sitting on cushions in a circle, after a few minutes of the puppet exercise, the child just turned her body away from the circle and curled up and went to sleep on the cushion beside the preschool practitioner.



Population and sample school selection

Six preschool and six primary school settings participated in the consultation process and the educators at these settings managed the parental consent process on behalf of the consultation team. To facilitate each consultation team to conduct up to two consultations each day (i.e. with preschool and primary school children), each pair of preschool and primary school settings were in close proximity.

Early Childhood Ireland and the Irish Primary Principals Network assisted with selecting the settings to ensure that the sample was broadly representative. Dr Carmel Brennan, the Director of Early Childhood Ireland, in liaison with Professor Imelda Coyne, the Principal Investigator, identified and negotiated access to six preschool settings to ensure that the sample represented a mix of rural and urban settings, community and private settings. The Early Childhood Director telephoned the Director in each preschool site and their cooperation was obtained to conduct the study in their centre. Mr Larry Fleming, the Director of the primary school network, in liaison with Professor Imelda Coyne, the Principal Investigator, selected six primary schools and, to ensure that the sample represented a mix of rural and urban schools, DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

The children were accessed within the preschool and primary school setting as safety and familiarity is paramount for very young children. New environments and strange adults can be anxiety provoking for young children. Therefore, it was important to access children in an environment that they know well and in which they usually feel comfortable and are with familiar caregivers. These issues are particularly important for children who need to feel secure and who are experiencing their first major transition from home and parents.

Study design

This consultation was based on the paradigmatic view that childhood is a social construction and that children should be considered as competent social actors active in the construction of their lives and agency¹⁹. There is increasing recognition of the need for children to be co-researchers in the sense that they co-create meaning and provide insights into their worlds and share this with the researcher²⁰. To meaningfully engage with children requires adults to enter into their worlds and their understandings²¹. Therefore, researchers must be prepared to step into another world, far away from the world they inhabited when they were children^{22, 23}. Seeking children's perspectives is based on a recognition of children's agency as they actively participate in the co-construction of their own lives, culture and spaces²⁰. It is a strengths-based approach because it views young children as 'competent beings who are experts in their own lives, skilful communicators, active participants, meaning-makers, researchers and explorers'¹⁶. To ensure that children are viewed as active participants in the research process with unique perspectives on their own lives and lived worlds, researchers need to:

- Be flexible in the methodology they use and be constantly aware of the varying reactions of children.
- Recognise the importance of drawing upon methods that play to children's strengths and which directly access children's own perspectives in the school or home environment. Enable children to convey their perspective as best they can and be receptive to their view.
- Have the skills required, including: patience, warmth, humour, respect, active listening and flexibility.
- Acknowledge that children are the most important source of evidence on how their lives are lived and experienced.

Participatory arts-based mosaic approach

This consultation used a participatory arts-based mosaic approach as this approach has been successfully used to research young children's experiences and views. Clark used a 'mosaic approach' to research the views of children aged 3–5 years of early childhood provision, which entails using several methods to enable young children to document their experiences and to facilitate exchange with adults^{27, 28}. The power differences between an adult researcher and a child can be really magnified when it involves data collection from very young children because of age and stage of development. It can be worsened when the child belongs to a marginalised group because of ethnicity, language, class and disability. To offset and reduce the power-differential between adults and small children, participatory arts-based methods can really help by introducing a play element and a mechanism by which the child is more empowered. Offering different ways to communicate can help overcome communication challenges with children who may have limited language ability or shy personalities. Since there is not one single method that suits all children and all circumstances, it is important to use a variety of methods to gain insight into children's experiences. Methods must be tailored to the individual child's strengths and preferences as well as to the focus of the research¹⁶. Being flexible is a key issue so the researcher should adjust to the modes of communication preferred by the children rather than those in which the researcher feels most confident.



Aimee, age 5



Development of the consultation questions

The questions posed/information sought as part of the consultation process needed to mirror the questions posed and information sought from primary school children as part of the consultation process for *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*¹. These were:

1. What's the best thing about being a child in Ireland?
2. What's the worst thing about being a child in Ireland?
3. What one thing would you change in Ireland for children to be happy?

The questions were tailored to the developmental stage of very young children aged 3–5 years and these were:

1. What do you like about living in this area?
2. What do you not like about living in this area?
3. If you had a magic wand, what would you wish for or change?

Pilot study

A pilot study was conducted on a site where a primary school and preschool were co-located. Sixteen preschool children and eight primary school children participated in the pilot study. The data collection tools were piloted and proved to be quite successful with the children. The pilot study revealed that the process needed to be outlined clearly for all researchers on handouts to ensure a consistent approach, and that field notes needed to be written up immediately after the event. The pilot study indicated that given the short time with children to elicit their views, pre-work would need to be undertaken with the children by their educators. Hence material was distributed in advance of the consultation events for the educators/staff to prepare the children generally about likes, dislikes and wishes.

Data collection

The data were obtained using puppets, group interviews and drawings, as these tools have been shown to facilitate successful data collection and obtain rich insights from children aged 3–5 years and 2–6 years. Arts-based approaches can provide children 'with the opportunity to create their own artistic output, both to facilitate the child's engagement, communication, control and interpretation of their own experiences'³². Engaging children in fun and interactive art-based activities can help create a comfortable environment and establish trust.



Phase 1: Focus group interviews and puppets

Children generally feel safer and more comfortable with their own peer group. The children were seated on small chairs or cushions in a circle before beginning. The aim of grouping the children in a small circle was to minimise the power imbalance between the children and the researcher as children are less intimidated by talking in a group than talking individually to an adult who is a stranger to them. The puppet was used by the researcher to introduce herself, explain the purpose of the study, gain the children's interest and to describe the activity that would take place. In every site, the children liked the puppet, responded with excitement, became friendlier with the researcher and some wanted to hold the puppet. Since children often see puppets as peers and are more likely to engage in conversations with puppets than with adults, the researcher said that the puppet (called either Rory or Aoife) wanted to hear what the children liked, disliked, and would change so that he/she could tell his friends. In a sense the children directed their answers to the puppet and their replies were recorded by the researchers in a notebook. With very young children, it may be more helpful to think of group interviews as conversational encounters with a research purpose – that is listening to the children as opposed to interviewing them, and providing them with the opportunity to be heard²⁷. The researcher ensured that the children were comfortable and at ease, kept the group discussion focused, and ensured that all the children had an opportunity to contribute³³. The children appeared to feel very comfortable expressing ideas to the puppet rather than the researcher, and reacted by talking excitedly and making suggestions. The children usually took turns and gave their ideas. They often wanted to take turns holding the puppet and in one setting one little boy was reluctant to give the puppet back. The puppet proved to be a very successful means of being an 'intermediary' in consultations with young children. The circle time with the puppet lasted approximately ten minutes, which was then followed by the draw and write activity.

Phase 2: Draw and write

Drawing and talking about the drawing have been used to good effect to explore what children considered to be important aspects of their lives³⁴. The advantages of using drawings is that they provide a non-verbal expression, and the children are active and creative while they draw. Therefore, the use of the draw and write technique can elicit good data. The researcher introduced the drawing activity and encouraged the children to express what was important to them. To elicit what they would like to change, the children were also asked to imagine that they had a magic wand and to suggest what they would change. The children quickly took the lead on the drawing by moving to the tables and picking up the markers and crayons to draw. All the children became quite absorbed in

their drawings while seated around the small tables. They were excited with the provision of washable markers and liked to use a range of colours. It is important to be responsive to children's needs as some may dislike drawing, but none of the children declined the drawing activity and none felt under pressure to draw a 'good' picture³². As the drawings were being completed, the researchers asked each child to explain what was in the drawing and they wrote the child's response on the back of, or on Post-its on, the drawing. This was essential as children's narratives and interpretations of their drawings can give a better picture than the adult's interpretations of the drawings²⁵. When comparing responses across data sets, it was clear that the children's responses and descriptions of their drawings correlated with their comments expressed during the circle time with the puppet.

Phase 3: Finishing up

The data collection within each site lasted approximately 35–45 minutes. The children were encouraged to be active agents throughout the research process, and their competency was respected. The researchers were flexible in their approaches so that children felt free to talk about issues important to them. It was essential that children felt comfortable, treated fairly and protected from harm, so a staff member from each site stayed with the children throughout the data collection process. On some sites, there were two additional staff members present so that someone was available to go with the child if he/she wished to leave the group. The research team aimed to create a caring, positive, and relaxed atmosphere to the data collection. The children were monitored for non-verbal signs of anxiety, fatigue, discomfort, and boredom. In most sites, once the drawing activity was complete, the children just left the table and wandered off to play within the room. To convey thanks and appreciation, the process ended with the children being offered a selection of jelly sweets, some stickers and a certificate signed by the researchers. The children were pleased with the stickers and became excited about choosing favourite stickers. Each site was given a small box of chocolates to thank staff members for their support and help.



Ethan, age 4

SAMPLE AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Preschool sample

The preschool children sample was obtained from six preschools in ELC settings. All children in the preschool room were invited to participate in the consultation process. The intention was not to cause any upset to the children whose parents had not provided consent. In some sites these children remained in the same room and participated in the drawing exercise but their data was not retained. In only one site (Site F) the non-consented children were taken to another room for play and this did not affect the remaining seven children who quickly sat on cushions that were arranged in a circle on the other side of the room. The rooms were usually bright, with colourful pictures on the walls, and contained small chairs, tables and cushions.

Table 1: Preschool sites and sample

Sites	Location	Numbers of Children
Preschool A	Co Tipperary	24 (8 boys and 16 girls)
Preschool B	Co Laois	13 (3 boys and 10 girls)
Preschool C	Ballyfermot	8 (4 boys and 4 girls)
Preschool D	Finglas	13 (9 boys and 4 girls)
Preschool E	Lucan	11 (7 boys and 4 girls)
Preschool F	Tallaght	7 (2 boys and 5 girls)
TOTAL		76 children (33 boys and 43 girls aged 3–4 years)

Primary school sample

The primary-school children sample was obtained from six primary school settings. The aim was to have at least 8 children from each primary school to participate in the consultation process, but lack of parental consent led to less numbers in some sites.

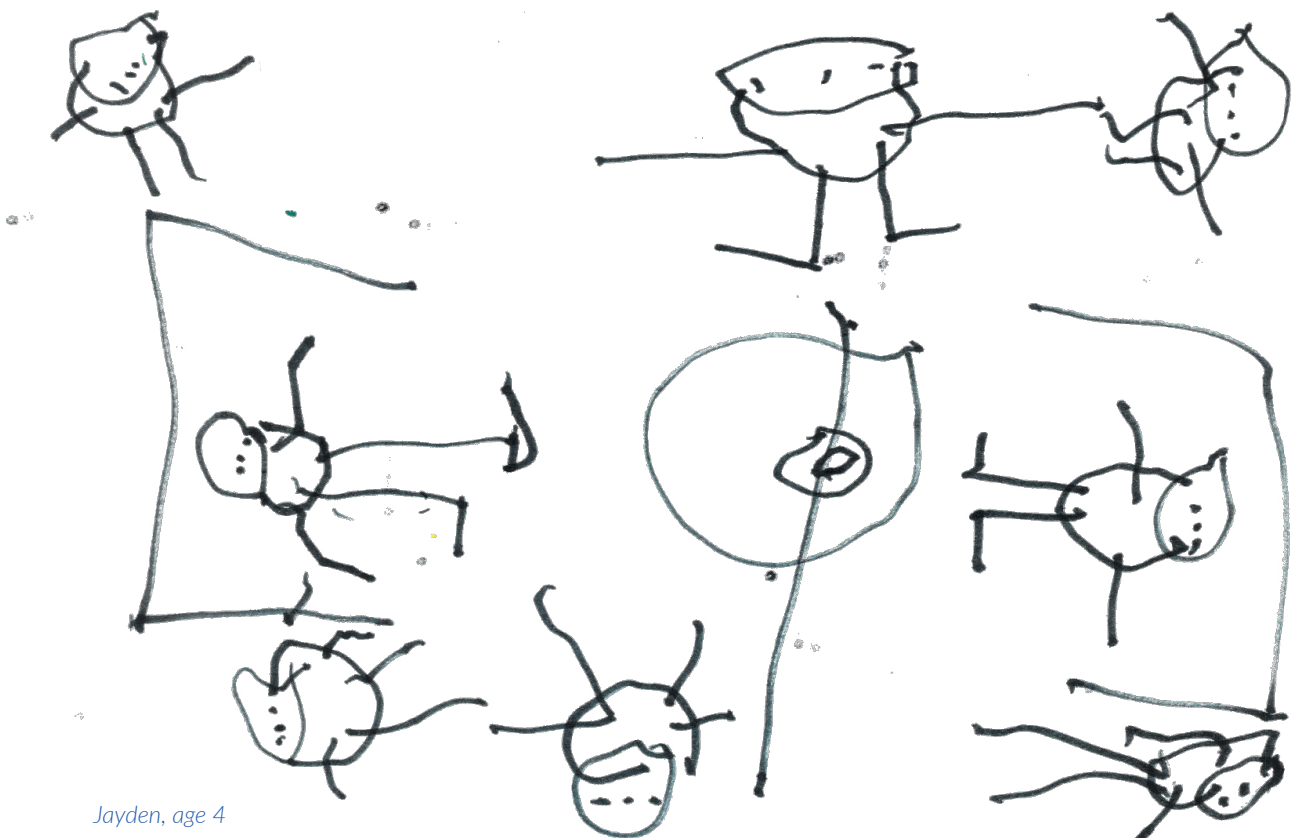
Table 2: Primary school sites and sample

Primary schools	Location	Numbers of Children
School A	Co Tipperary	6 (3 boys and 3 girls)
School B	Co Laois	6 (2 boys and 4 girls)
School C	Ballyfermot	5 (1 boy and 4 girls)
School D	Ballyfermot	8 (7 boys and 1 girl)
School E	Loughlinstown	7 (4 boys and 3 girls)
School F	Killiney	5 (5 girls)
TOTAL		37 children (17 boys and 20 girls aged 4–5 years)

Data analysis

The children participated actively in the data gathering through group interviews, and drawing, and therefore, when analysing and interpreting the data, their voices were also heard. It is important that the researchers and the children involved both the shape and the generation of outcomes³⁵. When children are involved in the interpretation of the data, the interpretations are more likely to authentically represent children's perspectives rather than adult interpretations of children's perspectives. To promote children's inclusion, we integrated interpretation in the data gathering methods, e.g. by asking the children to explain their drawings to ensure that their interpretation was reflected and captured. Therefore, each child was asked about their drawing and their responses were recorded on post-its on the drawings to reflect their comments and perspectives.

The children's comments were analysed according to the thematic approach which involves grouping similar concepts together into categories and then into key themes. The analysis of the data on the likes, dislikes and wishes resulted in a number of clear themes. The following section will detail these themes, firstly outlining those for preschool children and then for primary school children.



Jayden, age 4





RESULTS

What preschool children (aged 3-4 years) like

In total, eleven themes were identified which captured what preschool children liked about living in their area. These are listed in Table 3 and discussed below:

Table 3

Preschool children's likes	
1	Home and family
2	Doing things, going places and playing with parents, siblings and grandparents
3	Playing
4	Nature and playing outdoors
5	Going to the park/playground and playing
6	Leisure activities
7	Having hygiene care
8	Animals
9	Eating and getting treats
10	Being at preschool
11	Christmas

1. Home and family

While interpreting the preschool children's responses about what they liked about their area, it became apparent that having a family and a home were very important to them and that they derived a lot of joy and comfort from their families. In relation to their family, many children expressed their feelings of love towards parents and siblings. Similarly, the children mentioned many specific things about their home which they were fond of. These included references to their bedrooms, surroundings, trampoline, shoes, blankets, as well as the experience of being at home. They also mentioned pets (dogs, cats, fish) and names of their pets. Many children drew pictures of their houses and noted how many windows and doors were in their houses. They liked the windows and colours of their houses.

2. Doing things, going places and playing with parents, siblings and grandparents

Preschool children enjoyed many forms of interaction with members of their family. In particular, they mentioned spending time together, going places and playing at things they liked. Simply spending time with their mothers and fathers was very important to the young children, even when it just consisted of watching television, walking to school or reading a story together. The children also appreciated the chance to go somewhere with their parents, for example, on holidays, or to the playground, the swimming pool or the beach. Going to places with their grandparents was also pleasant for the children. Engaging in play with members of the family was something children were very fond of, particularly when parents or siblings were involved.

3. Playing

Playing was a very important activity for the young children. The children talked a lot about the different types of play that they like. Playing with friends or pets was very popular, as was playing with specific toys that they were fond of such as cars, trains, engines, rockets, balloons and dolls. Engaging in pretend play was also important. Some children mentioned using items such as blankets as tents or handbags in order to create imaginative games.



4. Nature and playing outdoors

The preschool children really liked nature and playing outdoors. It was clear from the responses that they had a love and appreciation for many aspects of nature. Seeing rainbows, planes in the sky, trees and butterflies were all part of this appreciation. The natural environment also offered them stimulating opportunities to play, climb, squelch in the mud, or build snowmen.

5. Going to the park/playground and playing

The preschool children relished the chance to play in the park or playground. Many of them were keen to mention that there was a green space in their local area. With regard to playgrounds, children very much enjoyed certain facilities such as slides, see-saws, roundabouts, sand and swings. Some children particularly liked the green colour of the playground.

6. Leisure activities

Children enjoyed the experience of going out to the cinema to see certain films and getting treats, but also expressed an interest in watching movies or cartoons at home on their television. Other leisure activities enjoyed by the children included swimming, reading, baking, painting, and making things. Facilities such as swimming pools were greatly appreciated by the children, as many were enthusiastic about partaking in this activity. Reading was also popular amongst the children. Finally, the children clearly enjoyed engaging in creative activities, whether it was baking or painting.

7. Having hygiene care

Another theme which emerged in relation to what the children liked was hygiene care. This theme refers to children's fondness of certain hygiene routines such as brushing their teeth and having their hair washed.

8. Animals

The preschool children were quite keen on animals. In particular, they liked the experience of going to the zoo and seeing interesting things such as crocodiles and penguins. Common animals such as dogs, rabbits, and hedgehogs were also popular.

9. Eating and getting treats

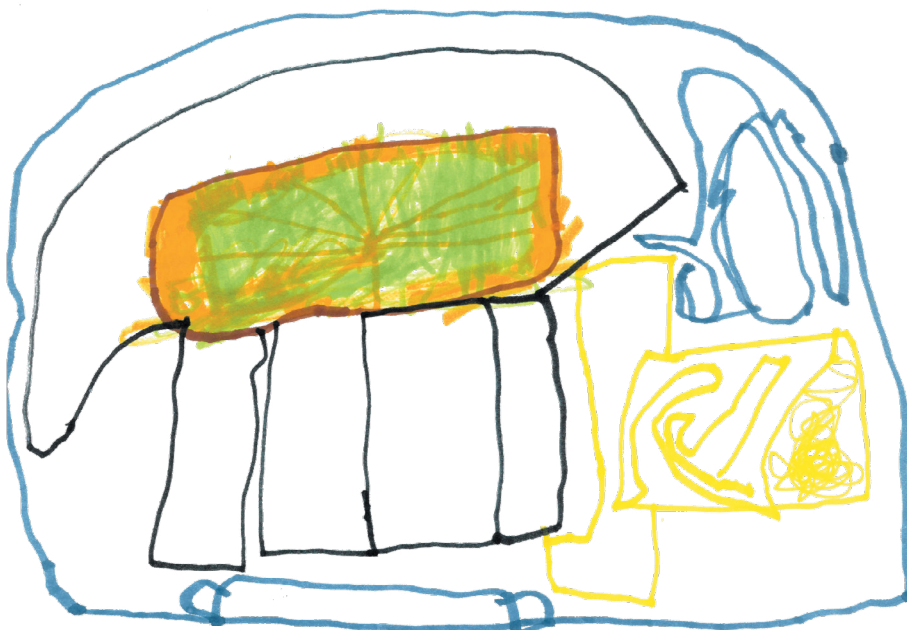
Food and eating was something the children distinctly liked. Certain types of food were favoured by the children, many of which were vegetables. Eating sweets and treats such as biscuits, jellies and lollipops was also something they quite enjoyed.

10. Being at preschool

Being at preschool was spoken about favourably by some of the children. Preschool was considered fun by these young children, and they particularly liked getting to play with certain toys and games.

11. Christmas

The children were very enthusiastic about Christmas, which is not surprising since data collection occurred in December. Specific aspects of Christmas that the children were fond of included receiving cards and presents, characters related to Christmas such as Santa and Rudolph, and having a tree in their house.



Alex, age 4

What preschool children (aged 3-4 years) dislike

After analysing the data on what preschool children disliked about living in their area, a total of nine themes became apparent. These are listed in Table 4 and discussed below.

Table 4

Preschool children's dislikes	
1	Lacking time and being away from family
2	Being disciplined and parents being cross
3	Adverse weather
4	Dangerous environment and getting hurt
5	Having no one to play with
6	Fear of animals and being harmed
7	Loud noises
8	Fear of monsters
9	Food, shopping, cleaning, getting hygiene care

1. Lacking time and being away from family

Given the appreciation the young children showed for spending time with their family, it's perhaps not surprising that when asked about their dislikes they referred to the experience of being away from their family. Children also made particular reference to not getting enough time with their father.

2. Being disciplined and having parents being cross

The children described how they disliked both the experience of being disciplined for their behaviour and when a parent is cross or in a bad mood. In terms of discipline, the children noted that they disliked being slapped or being given different forms of time-outs. In relation to a parent being cross, they did not like when someone seemed angry with them or when they were in a bad mood.

3. Adverse weather

The preschool children were not fond of certain weather conditions. These included rain, snow and storm conditions. It was the fact of getting wet or frightened by storms that led children to dislike this about their area.

4. Dangerous environment and getting hurt

The children mentioned that they disliked being physically harmed or getting hurt. They identified a number of things which may cause them injury. For example: fire, a slippery floor and getting hit with objects. The children were aware of a number of factors within their environment which may be dangerous to them, and disliked these things about their area. They mentioned, in particular, areas which may cause them to slip such as tiles, slurry tanks, the dark, and also physical objects outside their home such as electric wires and pylons, which they recognised as potentially harmful to them.

5. Having no one to play with

Given the importance of play and social interaction to young children, it is understandable that having no one to play with would be something some children disliked about their area. It appears that this issue mainly stems from there being no other children for them to play with.

6. Loud noises

One of the main things the preschool children disliked about their area was the presence of loud noises. There were many sources of noise that the children disliked, including: road works, tractors, the nearby airport, aeroplanes, barking dogs, and loud music.

7. Fear of animals and being harmed

While some of the preschool children appeared to be very fond of animals, others were fearful of ants, bugs, and foxes. They were particularly afraid of being harmed by such animals.

8. Fear of monsters

Many of the children had a fear of monsters. These monsters were imagined characters which they considered to be monsters.

9. Food, shopping, cleaning, getting hygiene care

There were a number of foods which the children claimed to dislike. These included carrots, corn on the cob, and bread. Some boys disliked the experience of going shopping. Having to clean up was something that some expressed a dislike for. In particular, they did not enjoy having to tidy up their house. Despite the fact that many children enjoyed having hygiene care, having their hair washed was something not all children enjoyed.





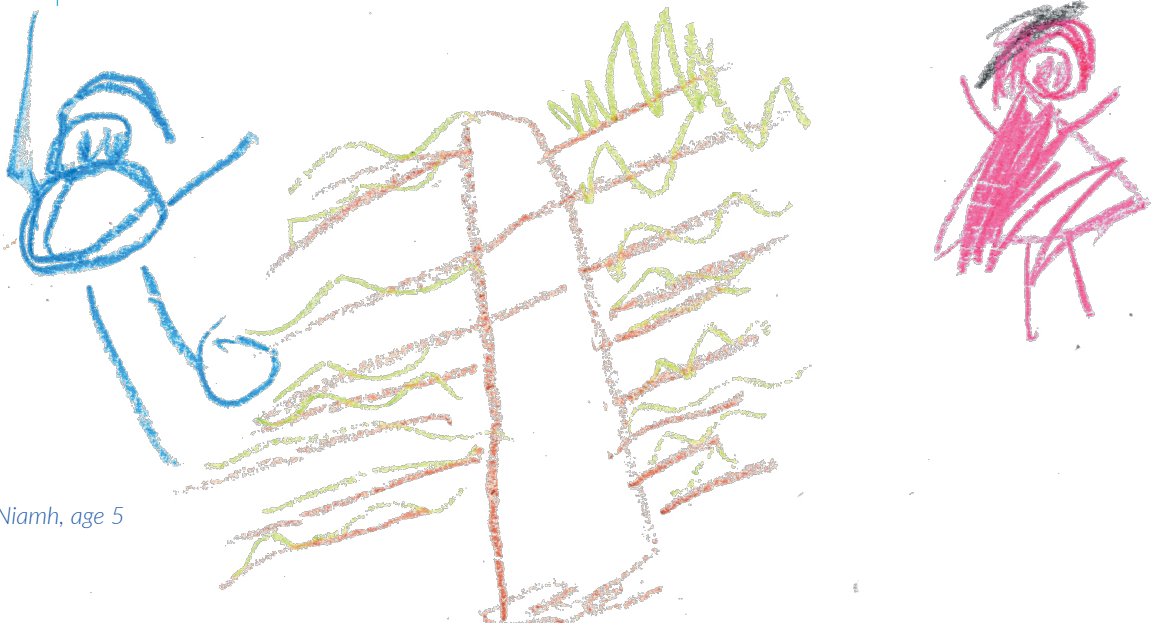


What preschool children (aged 3-4 years) would change

In addition to asking preschool children what it is they liked and disliked about their area, they were also asked about what they would wish to change if they could. In total, ten themes emerged from the data. These are listed in Table 5 and discussed below.

Table 5

Preschool children's changes	
1	Home environment
2	Being with family
3	Toys and play
4	Being magical
5	Having a pet
6	Less noise
7	Going on holidays
8	Building things
9	Trains and planes
10	Santa



Niamh, age 5

1. Home environment

There were a number of things about their home environment that preschool children said they wished they could change. This mainly involved wishing for a bigger house or garden. However, some children wished for other things such as flowers in the garden, animals or a different coloured house.

2. Being with family

It is again unsurprising that when preschool children were asked what they wished they could change, they wanted to spend even more time with their family. In particular, children tended to wish that their parents were home more often or that their mothers could come to preschool with them.

3. Toys and play

The children made a number of wishes relevant to toys and playing. A number of them wished for specific toys that they would like, for example; toy cars, trains, Lego, and books. However, some children wished for a general increase in toys or more opportunities to play. These children mentioned that they wished their preschool area was bigger and that there were a greater number of toys to play with.

4. Being magical

Many of the children wished that they were magical in some way, or that they could become a specific magical person who they were familiar with. For example, some children wished that they could become the tooth fairy so that they would be able to fly, whereas other children wished they were a princess or witch.

5. Having a pet

In addition to the appreciation many children showed for animals, some children wished that they had a pet. Examples of which pets children wished they had include dogs, bats and frogs.

6. Less noise

As with the data on children's dislikes, it is again apparent that young children would rather a quieter environment. Many children wished that noise from construction sites, people shouting, and cars, would stop.

7. Going on holidays

A lot of the children had a desire to go on holidays. This is clear from the fact that many of the children wished that they could fly to Spain. It seems that one of the main appeals of doing so was that the children liked the swimming pools there.

8. Building things

Other children wished that they could build things. They especially wanted to build houses, while others had specific ideas about building a college with a coffee shop as it would make people happy.

9. Trains and planes

The children were very interested in trains and planes and when asked what they wished they could change about their area, some wished that they could fly a plane, or be on a train.

10. Santa

Given that many of the children loved Christmas, it was not surprising that some wished for Santa to come soon.



What primary school children (aged 4-5 years) like

The primary school children from junior infants class were asked about what they thought was the best thing about being a child in Ireland. A total of eleven themes emerged from the relevant data. These are listed in Table 6 and discussed below.

Table 6

Primary school children's likes	
1	Being a kid
2	Home, garden and nature
3	Being with and doing activities with parents, siblings, grandparents and pets
4	Eating fruit and vegetables and getting treats
5	Playing and being active
6	Going on holidays
7	Drawing and colouring
8	Having toys and going to the toy store
9	Animals
10	Going to school
11	Christmas



Leon



1. Being a kid

Some of the primary school children felt that the best thing about being in Ireland, and something that they liked, was being a child or just being themselves.

2. Home, garden and nature

One of the main things the primary school children liked was their home. Many of the children noted that they were very fond of their house, whereas others specified certain things they liked such as their bedtime and watching the television. They also spoke fondly of gardens, as they liked the flowers. Nature was also popular among the primary school children, who appreciated many aspects, including trees, fresh air, rainbows and birds.

3. Being with and doing activities with parents, siblings, grandparents and pets

Spending meaningful time with different members of the family was very important to this group of children. They very much enjoyed engaging in various activities with their parents, grandparents or siblings. Cooking dinner, going to the park, and playing were all things they enjoyed doing with their parents and siblings. Some children also mentioned that they like to spend time playing with their pets at home.

4. Eating fruits and vegetables and getting treats

It was apparent that children derived a lot of pleasure from food and eating. The children were very keen on eating healthy food, including a wide range of fruits and vegetables. In particular, they liked things such as apples, oranges, cabbage and pineapple. However, the children were also very excited about receiving treats on weekends and special occasions.

5. Playing and being active

Playing was very important to the children. They liked to play inside and outside even if it was raining. Outdoor games and running and climbing trees were mentioned, as was playing with certain toys indoors. In general, the primary school children liked having a nice place to play with friends. The children liked a wide range of physical activities such as soccer, football, rugby, hurling, tennis, and basketball. They also liked unstructured play such as cycling, hopscotch and jumping on a bed. Some children enjoyed engaging in imaginative games in which they were an action figure or fictional character. These included, being Spider-Man, Batman, or a fireman.

6. Going on holidays

According to the children, getting to go on holidays was one of the best things about being a child. They found travelling on planes and staying in hotels fun, and they also appreciated going somewhere with a beach where they could play.

7. Drawing and colouring

Engaging in creative activities such as drawing and colouring was something that the children valued. In describing their affection for this activity, the children specifically talked about writing Christmas cards or their names and drawing things they liked such as rainbows and balloons.

8. Having toys and going to the toy store

Some of the children felt that having toys and getting to go to the toy store was one of the best things about being a child. The children referred to specific toys of theirs which they cared for but also the excitement involved in going to buy toys.

9. Animals

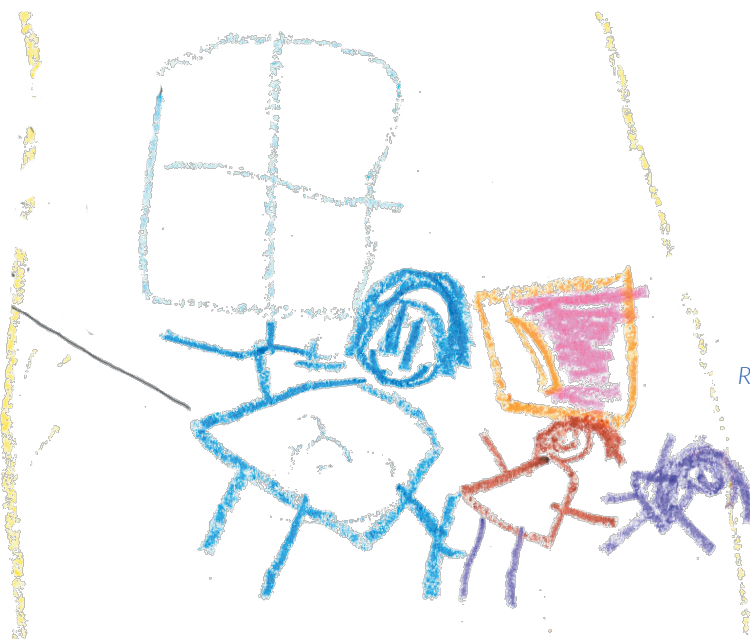
Animals were of great interest to the primary school children. Similarly to the preschool children, they especially liked dogs, dinosaurs, and birds.

10. Going to school

Some children mentioned that they liked going to school.

11. Christmas

The primary school children were also very fond of Christmas and liked putting up decorations, getting to see Santa, and receiving presents.



Roisin, age 5



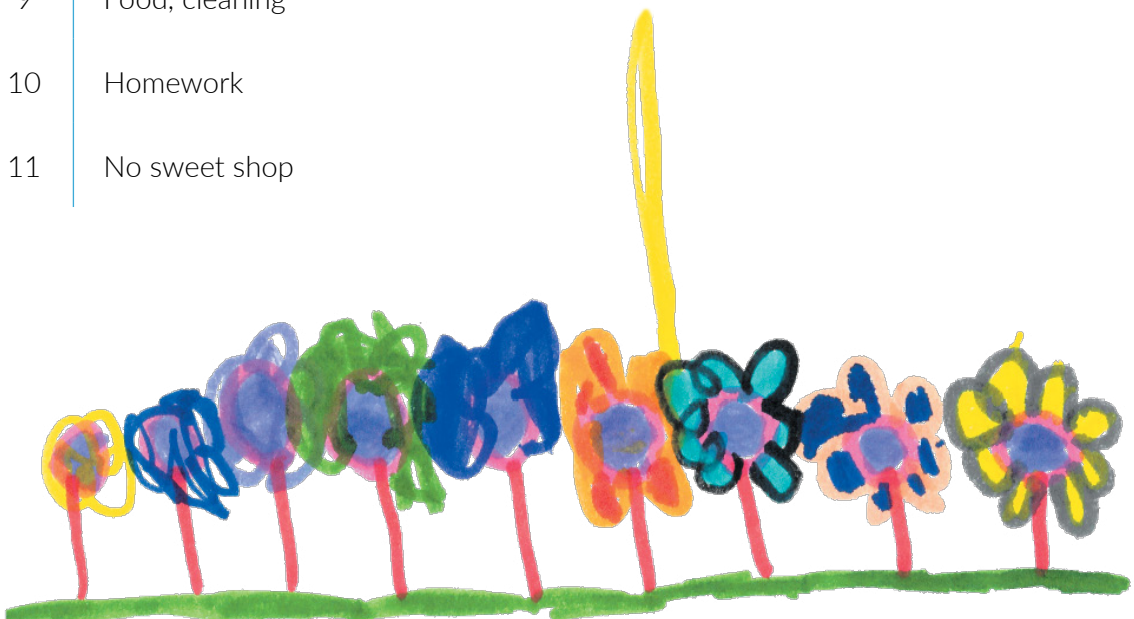
What primary school children (aged 4-5 years) dislike

In addition to asking the primary school children what they liked about being a child in Ireland, they were also asked about what they disliked. A total of eleven themes emerged from the relevant data. These are listed in Table 7 and discussed below.

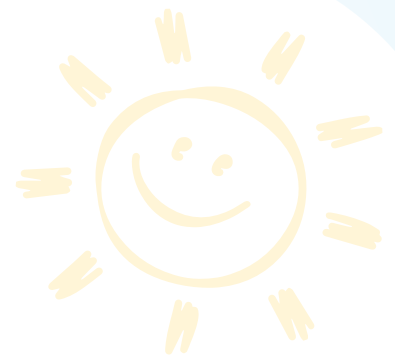
Table 7

Primary school children's dislikes

1	People being mean
2	Getting hurt or injured and the dark
3	Loud noises
4	Adverse weather
5	Inactivity
6	Animals
7	Being tired
8	No playground nearby
9	Food, cleaning
10	Homework
11	No sweet shop



Alanna, age 5



1. People being mean

The primary children disliked other people being mean to them. They gave examples of when others engaged in rough-housing, pushing, kicking or fighting in the playground, or when people laughed at them. They also found the experience of being excluded or ignored to be distressing, and specifically mentioned disliking it when their parents were too busy for them. Those involved in these mean behaviours were other children, siblings, and/or older family members. They said they would not like to be stung by a wasp, get soap in their eyes, and fall from a tree.

2. Getting hurt or injured and the dark

The children were aware of a number of ways they could get injured, or had been hurt themselves, and they considered this a negative aspect of childhood. Getting hurt by soapy water in their eyes or wasp stings was something the children did not enjoy, but they were also concerned about getting injured in more serious ways. In particular, they mentioned not wanting to get crushed or kicked, and some even spoke about not wanting to die. Some children did not like the dark as you could not see in the dark and could get hurt.

3. Loud noises

The children did not like noisy environments or objects. In particular, they mentioned traffic as something they believed was too loud.

4. Adverse weather

Some children disliked the rain mainly due to the fact that it prevented them from playing outside. They also wanted to avoid the experience of getting wet from rain.

5. Inactivity

The children disliked being brought to places where they had to wait or inactivity was required. As a result, they disliked going to shops, fuel stations or post offices. Inactivity in general was unpleasant for the children, who even described having to sit down or sleep as something they did not like having to do.

6. Animals

Despite being interested in different types of animals, some children were frightened of spiders, snakes and mice.

7. Being tired

Being tired was something that the children did not enjoy. As a result, some children disliked certain things or experiences which made them tired. For example, going up the mountains, slides and walking were all things the children felt made them tired.

8. No playground nearby

A lack of playground facilities was something considered to be a negative part of childhood in Ireland, according to the primary school children. The children found it disappointing when there were no playgrounds near their school or when playgrounds were closed and inaccessible.

9. Food, cleaning

While children seemed to generally enjoy eating and many food types, they still considered some food unpleasant. Examples of these given by the children include old bananas, rashers and mushrooms. Similarly to the preschool children, some members of the primary school group did not enjoy having to tidy up or clean. Having to clean their room was something they didn't like about being a child.

10. Homework

As this group had entered primary school, they were starting to be assigned homework. However, they disliked this aspect of being a child.

11. No sweet shop

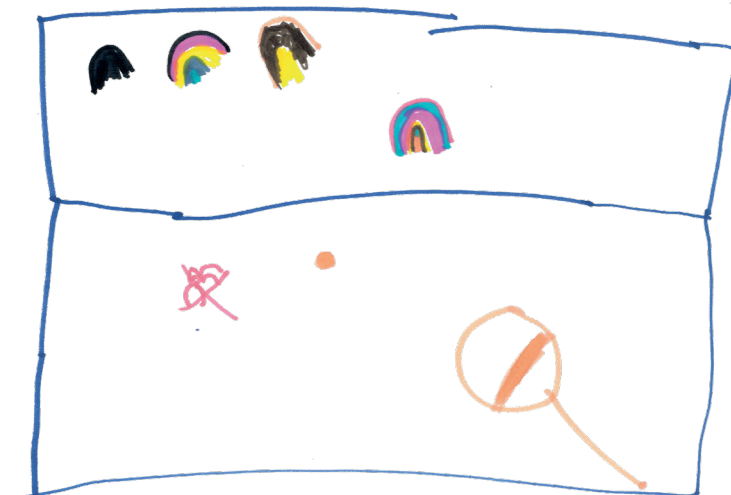
Given their love of sweets and treats, it is perhaps not that surprising that one of the things deemed to be negative was when the sweet shop was closed.

What primary school children (aged 4-5 years) would change

Finally, the primary school children were asked by researchers what they would change about being a child in Ireland. A total of ten themes became apparent, each detailing what might improve the experience of primary school children. These are listed in Table 8 and discussed below.

Table 8

Primary school children's changes	
1	Bigger home with play facilities
2	More time with family
3	Playground and toys
4	Have a pet
5	Ice cream, sweets and fruit
6	Go on holidays
7	Safety and less frightening things
8	Less homework
9	Find new things
10	Be magical



Abbie, age 5

1. Bigger home with play facilities

Many children wished to change aspects of their home, for example, some simply wished their home was bigger. Others, however, wished that their house had better facilities in the garden for playing. Specific suggestions included swings, slides, water spray and benches in the garden. With regard to play facilities, the children wished they were living closer to a park and had access to a playground.

2. More time with family

Many of the children's wishes were related to their desire to spend more time with their family. These included wishing that their parents were at home more or would pick them up from school. Other children made wishes about their siblings. Some wished that they had a sibling, while those with siblings often wished they would be nicer.

3. Playground and toys

A lot of children wished for specific toys and these were often related to interests such as Lego, musical instruments, books, crayons, dolls and video games. The children expressed a number of wishes about the playground. Several children in one site wished for a playground near their school, as there was not one nearby. Others suggested improving facilities at the playground, for example, by including more slides.

4. Have a pet

Having a pet was something many children expressed a wish for. Some of their wishes include having a brown and white puppy, a girl dog, a goldfish, a mouse and a green frog. One child wished that his dog was alive again as he had died recently.

5. Ice cream, sweets and fruit

Some children felt that they would prefer more ice cream and sweet shops. Children also wished that they had more fruit.



6. Go on holidays

Going on holidays was very popular with the children for a range of reasons. As a result, some children wished to go on holidays.

7. Safety and less frightening things

Some of the children wished that their area was safer. In particular, they wished that there were more traffic lights on the roads near their home. Some children would like to get rid of frightening things such as spiders, spiky leaves, and cartoon characters (Batman, Hulk and Spider-Man).

8. Less homework

Perhaps as a result of their dislike of homework, some children wished that they had to do less, or none at all.

9. Find new things

One wish from the primary school children was to find new things. For example, one child wished to discover dinosaur bones.

10. Be magical

Similar to the preschool children, the primary school group often wished that they could be magical in some sense. It was mentioned by some children that if they were magical they'd change all of the houses into castles, change rocks into balloons and turn themselves into a fairy.



Anna, age 5



CONCLUSION

It is evident from the themes outlined above that both preschool children and primary school children share a number of common likes, dislikes and wishes. Much of what was discussed by the children is consistent with the literature focussing on this age group. Both groups of children illustrated the importance of family relationships, and the necessity of spending quality time with family members. This came up in the context of likes, dislikes, and wishes. The literature confirms the importance of these relationships, and the need for young children to form healthy attachments⁸. It is crucial that they do so for the benefit of their learning and development, and emotional wellbeing. Fortunately, the majority of mothers in Ireland consider their child to be developing healthy relationships and social skills¹¹.

Another aspect of childhood that came up for the both groups was play. Play is central to the childhood experience, and that is evident from the fact that both groups deemed it something they liked, something they disliked being denied, and something they wished could be improved. A number of themes came up that were related to play in some way. Both groups stated explicitly that they enjoy playing both indoors and outdoors. Both toys and the natural environment were important in facilitating play. It is well known that engaging in these activities greatly aids the learning and development of young children, particularly in the case of verbal skills, problem solving and creativity. However, there are also physical health benefits. These are very important given Ireland's efforts to address childhood obesity⁴.

However, in relation to play, both children often wished that facilities were improved. In particular, it was specified by the groups that they wished for a greater amount of toys. It was also brought up several times by the children that, while they love the playground, proximity was an issue for some. The literature emphasises the importance of providing children with stimulating environments and opportunities to play and explore⁸. Similarly in an earlier consultation, primary school children wanted more places to play, better playgrounds and more free time to play³⁶.

Another common theme for the children was in relation to food and eating. Both groups suggested an appreciation for a wide range of foods, many of which were healthy and nutritious. This is important as it has been noted in the literature that establishing healthy eating behaviours early in life can be effective in preventing childhood obesity⁵.

However, the children were also very keen on sweets and treats. Research suggests that an overconsumption of snack foods and sugary foods can lead to excessive weight gain in children⁴.

A positive take from the discussions with children is that they both expressed an interest and enthusiasm for preschool and school, respectively. This attitude has been documented elsewhere, with reports from Ireland suggesting that young children generally adjust quite well to the transition to school². However, the results here shed light on the fact that not all children are fond of having to do homework, which is likely a new experience for them.

Finally, both groups of children brought up topics which are perhaps typical of their age group. For example, they illustrated the imaginative capabilities of children with their wishes to be magical. In both the preschool and primary school group, the children believed they would be happier if they could have magical powers or become a magical figure known to them. This, again, is an important part of play for young children. Further, both groups were very fond of Christmas and Santa. Receiving presents and putting up decorations was very exciting for both groups.



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Holly, age 4



APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Oversight Committee	
Anne-Marie Brooks	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Bairbre Meaney	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Vera McGrath	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Anne O'Donnell	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Bernie McNally	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
Imelda Coyne	Trinity College Dublin consultation team
Deirdre Mallon	Trinity College Dublin consultation team
Carmel Brennan	Early Childhood Ireland
Maria Doyle	Irish Primary Principals Network
Larry Fleming	Irish Primary Principals Network
Margaret Rogers	Better Start National Early Years Quality Development Service
Michelle Hart	National Childhood Network
Pippa Woolnough	Barnardos
Ciairin de Buis	Start Strong
Toby Wolfe	Start Strong

Appendix 2

Preschool children's likes, dislikes, changes	
Likes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Home and family 2. Doing things, going places and playing with parents, siblings and grandparents 3. Playing 4. Nature and playing outdoors 5. Going to the park/playground and playing 6. Leisure activities 7. Having hygiene care 8. Animals 9. Eating and getting treats 10. Being at preschool 11. Christmas
Dislikes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lacking time and being away from family 2. Being disciplined and cross parents 3. Adverse weather 4. Dangerous environment and getting hurt 5. Having no one to play with 6. Loud noises 7. Fear of animals and being harmed 8. Fear of monsters 9. Food, shopping, cleaning, getting hygiene care
Changes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Home environment 2. Being with family 3. Toys and play 4. Being magical 5. Having a pet 6. Less noise 7. Going on holidays 8. Building things 9. Trains and planes 10. Santa

Appendix 3

Primary school children's likes, dislikes, changes

Likes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Being a kid 2. Home, garden and nature 3. Being with and doing activities with parents, siblings, grandparents and pets 4. Eating fruit and vegetables and getting treats 5. Playing and being active 6. Going on holidays 7. Drawing and colouring 8. Having toys and going to toystore 9. Animals 10. Christmas 11. Going to school
Dislikes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People being mean 2. Getting hurt or injured and the dark 3. Loud noises 4. Adverse weather 5. Inactivity 6. Animals 7. Being tired 8. No playground nearby 9. Food, cleaning 10. Homework 11. No sweet shop
Changes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bigger home with play facilities 2. More time with family 3. Playground and toys 4. Have a pet 5. Ice-cream, sweets and fruit 6. Go on holiday 7. Safety and less frightening things 8. Less homework 9. Find new things 10. Be magical



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