



Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland



A Whole-of-Government Strategy for  
Babies, Young Children and their Families  
2019-2028

Summary





# ABOUT FIRST 5

## Introduction

*First 5* is a whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. It is a ten-year plan to help make sure all children have positive early experiences and get a great start in life.

The *First 5* Strategy uses evidence to identify goals, objectives and the specific actions required from across Government to support children (and their families) in the early years of life. *First 5* commits to major initiatives on family leave, children's health services, parenting supports, child-friendly communities and Early Learning and Care services among a broad range of actions. The Strategy will significantly enhance early childhood and make a huge contribution to the lives of young children, society and the economy over the short, medium and long term.

## A vision for early childhood

All babies' and young children's early years will be valued as a critical and distinct period which should be enjoyed. Families will be assisted and enabled to nurture babies and young children and support their development, with additional support for those who need it. Those providing services for babies, young children and their families will be equipped to contribute to their learning, development, health and wellbeing. Community contexts will help babies and young children make the most of their early years and fulfil their potential.



The vision for early childhood is based on the most important aspects of young children's lives: good health in early childhood that starts in pregnancy, time with parents in a nurturing and playful home environment where material needs are met, high-quality play-based Early Learning and Care (ELC), positive transitions to primary school, and a supportive, inclusive wider community context.

*First 5* sets out a roadmap to develop integrated, cross-sectoral and high-quality supports and services – an effective early childhood system – that will realise this vision and help all babies and young children in Ireland to have positive early experiences. Families are central throughout *First 5* given their critical role in supporting young children.

### **A healthy childhood starting from pregnancy**

An effective early childhood system will support parents to prepare well for pregnancy, access good quality antenatal care, make healthy choices during pregnancy and have positive birth experiences. This means making available high-quality information resources and enhancing health services, including additional contacts with expectant mothers, to ensure excellent maternity care.

In a child's early months and years, an effective early childhood system will support parents to form strong attachments, maintain positive mental health, make healthy choices and will provide child health reviews, vaccinations and screening on a universal basis. Children with additional needs will be identified as early as possible and receive appropriate support.



### **Time together with parents especially in the first year in a nurturing and playful home environment where children's material needs are met**

An effective early childhood system will enable children to be cared for at home by fathers and mothers during their first year through more generous parental leave entitlements. It will support mothers to begin and to continue breastfeeding and equip parents to understand and support child development, nutrition and safety and promote early learning and play. More intensive interventions will support vulnerable families to overcome short- or long-term challenges.



An effective early childhood system will give parents choices about balancing working and caring. That means access to family-friendly arrangements that support work-life balance and ensuring that income from work is sufficient to support a family, supplementing it where necessary, so that all families have adequate resources and children's material needs are met. It also means making Early Learning and Care, of different types, affordable and of high quality, so that participation in employment, whether full time or part time, is a viable option for parents in the confidence that their children are being well cared for.

### High-quality play-based Early Learning and Care (ELC) experiences

An effective early childhood system will ensure that those caring for young children are equipped to support early childhood development. In the case of care by family, friends and neighbours, this means making information, resources and supports more widely available in the local community. In more formal, paid-for provision, this means an appropriately qualified and valued workforce, a consistently implemented curriculum framework and adherence to quality standards and regulations, particularly for publicly subsidised ELC.



### Positive transitions to primary school

An effective early childhood system will support the transition to school by enabling greater communication between ELC settings, primary schools and parents, particularly for children with additional needs; supporting more play-based, child-centred learning in the early years of primary school; and equipping primary schools to accommodate young children through smaller class sizes, more time and space to play, and interactive teaching styles.



### Supportive community contexts

An effective early childhood system will ensure that communities are inclusive, with places to play and learn, opportunities for parents and young children to meet, and comprehensive supports and services that foster early development and respond to additional needs, proactively engaging all children and parents. This means community public space designed with babies and young children in mind, support for parent and toddler groups and other places for young families to meet, along with integrated services where the workforce within and across health, Early Learning and Care, primary education and family support services share a common language and work together.



# A VISION for EARLY CHILDHOOD

**A HEALTHY CHILDHOOD  
STARTING FROM  
PREGNANCY**



**NURTURING AND  
PLAYFUL HOME  
ENVIRONMENT  
WHERE MATERIAL  
NEEDS ARE MET**



**SUPPORTIVE**



**COMMUNITIES**



**TIME TOGETHER  
WITH PARENTS,  
ESPECIALLY IN THE  
FIRST YEAR**







**HIGH-QUALITY  
PLAY-BASED EARLY  
LEARNING AND  
CARE EXPERIENCES**



**POSITIVE  
TRANSITIONS TO  
PRIMARY  
SCHOOL**



# FIRST 5 BIG STEPS AND FRAMEWORK

A framework of four Goals, nine Objectives, five Building Blocks and 37 Strategic Actions outlines the route to make this vision a reality. This framework is presented in *First 5* at a glance.

This framework is the basis for a wide range of actions across the breadth of children's lives. These actions are detailed in the full *First 5* Strategy.

There are five major areas of action in which the Strategy will drive change: the *First 5* Big Steps.



## 1 Access to a broader range of options for parents to balance working and caring

In order to support children to spend more time with their parents, especially in the first year, *First 5* sets out plans to develop a new parental leave scheme. This will deliver extended entitlements to paid leave for both fathers and mothers. This scheme will be accompanied by a range of measures to develop greater family-friendly flexible working arrangements.



## 2 A new model of parenting support

*First 5* will streamline and improve existing parenting supports provided across a range of Government Departments and State Agencies. Accessible, high-quality information and guidance will be made available for parents to promote healthy behaviours, facilitate positive play-based early learning and create the conditions to form and maintain strong parent-child relationships. A continuum of parenting services - ranging from universal to targeted - including high-quality parenting programmes, will also be made available. A new Parenting Unit will be established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to lead this important work.







### 3 New developments in child health

A key action will be the development of a dedicated child health workforce, focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage. The Strategy sets out new measures to promote positive health behaviours and the mental health of babies, young children and their families, and to enhance the National Healthy Childhood Programme. The delivery of these measures will be led by the recently established Healthy Ireland Office in the Department of Health in partnership with other key Government Departments and Agencies.



### 4 Reform of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) system

*First 5* builds on the very significant developments in Early Learning and Care (and school-age childcare) over recent years and seeks to further improve affordability, accessibility and quality. Measures include introducing the Affordable Childcare Scheme, moving progressively towards a graduate-led professional ELC workforce, the extension of regulations and supports to all paid childminders and school-age childcare services, and the introduction of a new funding model for ELC. Under this model, employers will be supported to provide more favourable working conditions that will attract and retain staff. These reforms will be underpinned by a strengthened governance structure at national and local level.



### 5 A package of measures to tackle early childhood poverty

*First 5* identifies new measures that will address poverty in early childhood. These will include expanded access to free and subsidised Early Learning and Care, extensions to the Warmth and Well-Being and Warmer Homes Schemes, Community Cooking Programmes and the introduction of a meals programme to some ELC settings. In addition, the introduction of a DEIS-type model for ELC settings will create further opportunities to narrow the gap for disadvantaged children.

# First 5 AT A GLANCE

## Goals

# A

**Strong and supportive families and communities**

# B

**Optimum physical and mental health**

# C

**Positive play-based early learning**

# D

**An effective early childhood system**

## Objectives

**1. Balance working and caring**

**2. Information, services and supports for parents**

**3. Practical and material resources**

**4. Positive health behaviours**

**5. High-quality health services**

**6. Positive mental health**

**7. Positive home learning environment**

**8. Affordable, high-quality Early Learning and Care**

**9. Supported transitions**

# 1

**Building Block 1: Leadership, governance, collaboration**

### Strategic Actions

- 1.A Implementation and governance
- 1.B Early childhood system leadership
- 1.C Collaborative projects

# 2

**Building Block 2: Regulation, inspection, quality assurance**

### Strategic Actions

- 2.A Develop, enhance, implement standards
- 2.B Reform regulation and inspection

## Strategic Actions

1.1 Parental care for children particularly during the first year	1.2 Family-friendly flexible working	
2.1 Information and resources for parents	2.2 Tiered model of parenting support	
3.1 Measures to address family income and early childhood poverty	3.2 Suitable accommodation for families with children	3.3 Child-friendly communities

4.1 Positive health behaviours in families	4.2 Health behaviour supports in child-serving settings and communities	4.3 Child safety and injury prevention
5.1 Develop National Healthy Childhood Programme	5.2 Therapeutic and medical care for babies and children	
6.1 Early identification of mental health issues	6.2 Access to mental health supports	

7.1 Playful home learning environments	7.2 Parental engagement in children's early learning	7.3 Participation in out-of-home learning
8.1 Affordable high-quality ELC	8.2 Availability of subsidised high-quality ELC	8.3 ELC that promotes participation, social inclusion and diversity
9.1 Information exchange to support transitions	9.2 Continuity between ELC and primary settings	9.3 Supports to sustain learning during transitions

### **3** Building Block 3: Skilled and sustainable workforce

#### Strategic Actions

- 3.A Identify and address staff requirements
- 3.B Improve initial training and CPD for all early childhood staff
- 3.C Professionalise ELC; support employers to attract and retain high-quality workforce

### **4** Building Block 4: Research, data, monitoring and evaluation

#### Strategic Actions

- 4.A Support early childhood research
- 4.B Develop administrative and outcomes data
- 4.C Robust monitoring

### **5** Building Block 5: Strategic investment

#### Strategic Actions

- 5.A Public funding
- 5.B Strategic investment
- 5.C Tracking progress



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