

Ireland's First 5: A Whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019-2028

Summary

This Whole-of-Government, 10-year strategy focuses on supporting the development, health, and well-being of children from birth to age five and their families.

The strategy is built on four main goals: strengthening families and communities, ensuring optimum physical and mental health, promoting positive play-based early learning, and creating an effective early childhood system. Key actions include expanding parental leave and flexible working options, improving parenting support, enhancing child health services, making early learning and care more affordable and accessible, and tackling early childhood poverty.

The strategy emphasises evidence-based policy, cross-government collaboration, and progressive universalism, providing universal supports with additional help for those most in need.



Target audience

- Policy makers and all those working in early years



Delivery settings

- National and local government



Objectives

'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.'

(First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028)



Professionals involved

- Policy makers,
- early years providers
- healthcare professionals
- education professionals



Costs

€1.37bn per year



Responsible organization:

Government of Ireland, led by Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth



Country
Ireland

How can this practice be implemented?

- Align priorities across departments.
- Ensure strong brand management.
- Garner political support and political champions.
- Ensure robust governance and accountability frameworks for implementation.
- Embed cross-departmental reporting process.
- Ensure there is a dedicated team to oversee implementation.
- Facilitate cross departmental meetings to build relationships.
- Produce annual implementation reports
- Review and re-set of actions and targets (with 3-year implementation plans under a 10-year strategy).
- Share success when milestones are reached.

Implementation Highlights

Implementation involves robust governance, investment in workforce development, quality assurance, research, and ongoing monitoring.



Impact

The strategy has made early childhood a national priority, improved co-ordination across government (health, education, welfare, and children and family services), increased public investment, improved the parenting support offer and is progressing with professionalising the early learning and care workforce.



Further information:

First 5 implementation team,
Department of Children, Disability
and Equality (first5@dcde.gov.ie)

What makes this a good practice?

Impact: does it work?

Effectiveness and efficiency

The strategy is a long-term social investment, bringing together government departments to enhance efficiency. By investing in childcare, professionalisation of the early years workforce, expansion of parental leave, improved coordination of services and reforms to childcare quality and access, the strategy takes a prevention-focused approach to produce long-term gains and reduce the need for more costly interventions later in life.

Reach: who can benefit?

Equity and access

The strategy has a strong focus on disadvantaged children and families, specifically: poverty, lone-parents, children with disabilities, traveller and Roma children, and families facing social exclusion. Support is targeted to reduce barriers to childcare access and increase access to early learning.

Transferability and scalability

A whole of government approach could be adopted by other governments seeking to address fragmentation.

Integration: keeping it going and working across sectors

Sustainability

Through long term and preventive investment, the strategy builds sustainability into support for children and families over time.

Intersectorality

It is a whole-of-government approach, with leadership from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Participation

Parents and families played a role in development of the strategy, for example, through open policy debates and targeted consultations and evidence submissions; and are involved in monitoring implementation - though the breadth and depth of engagement is unclear.

References and additional tools to favour translation

- Costeira C, Lopes I, Lopes S, Pedrosa VV, Custódio S, Cioga E, Silva CG. Practices and Challenges in Portuguese Early Childhood Intervention: A Descriptive Study. *Children (Basel)*. 2026 Feb 22;13(2):304. doi: 10.3390/children13020304
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