

Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

A new model for supporting children with a disability to access the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme

Introduction

The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) focuses on enabling access and participation to ECCE by children with disabilities, taking account of their functional ability and their support needs. The model recognises that children with disabilities are a diverse group, with needs that can vary from mild to moderate to severe or complex, while also having different functional abilities and differing requirements for support. The consultation and final report of the Interdepartmental Group (IDG) identified that any model developed to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in preschool should be needs-driven. Therefore the access to supports outlined in the model is based on identifying the abilities and support needs of the child, rather than diagnosis. It was agreed that a development profile (IDG Report, September 2015), later amended to an 'Access and Inclusion Profile' would be developed to guide services in identifying supports necessary for children with disabilities to access the ECCE programme. The range and diversity of supports required is illustrated by the seven levels of the model. Level 4 of the model (Expert Educational Advice and Support) addresses the needs of early years practitioners across the country to have timely access to advice and support from experts in early years education (and disability in particular) to assist them to meet each child's individual needs.

Purpose of the Access and Inclusion Profile-

The use of an Access and Inclusion Profile ensures that decision-making and the provision of support guided by this profile is consistent and equitable. This will address concerns raised in the IDG that decision-making, service availability and support has often been diagnosis or assessment dependent and/or varied as a result of children's geographical location. In addition to identifying key areas of functional need in order to tailor individualised supports at multiple or individual levels of the model, the use of an Access and Inclusion Profile limits the degree to which individual beliefs and/or the perspectives/concerns of decision-makers could skew or negatively affect decisions as has been found in some studies (Guscia, Harries, Kirby and Nettelbeck, 2006; Harries, 2008).

The development of key parameters (domains) under which the functional needs and abilities of all children are considered in a reliable manner, will lead to consistency, transparency and demystification of decision-making in relation to children with disabilities, nationally. These domains are informed by the overall model vision of ensuring that all children, including children with a disability, will be able to meaningfully participate in the ECCE Programme in mainstream pre-school settings (apart from exceptional circumstances where specialised provision is in the child's best interest). Therefore the domains relate to key areas that have relevance for the participation of children with disabilities in preschool settings including physical (including gross and fine motor skills sensory and health needs), communication (including expression, intelligibility and communication supports), learning and behaviour (including exploring, thinking, problem solving, self-regulation, disposition, interactions).

The purpose of the Access and Inclusion Profile is:

- To assist the service provider, in partnership with the parent, to ascertain a child’s abilities and needs in order to support them to fully participate and access the ECCE programme.
- To assist the service provider, in partnership with the parent, to ascertain the setting’s strengths and challenges in supporting the child to fully and meaningfully access and participate in the ECCE programme.
- To identify the need for expert educational advice and support enabling the Early Years Specialists (Access and Inclusion) to prioritise their response.
- To guide the Early Years Specialist and setting, in supporting the child’s participation and access to the ECCE programme.
- To assist in identifying if any additional support may be needed to enable the child’s participation in the ECCE setting (Level 4-7)

Research undertaken in developing the Access and Inclusion Profile-

In developing the model and given the time constraints in producing a report for Government research was focused on sourcing existing models and resources to inform the work of the IDG. Samples of developmental profile and assessment tools in use in Ireland and other countries were examined. The findings of the NDA report *Identifying the care support needs of children with disabilities* (2012) informed this process. Tools were selected on the basis that they could be completed by Early Years Educators and / or parents, without professional input. These included:

Title	Source	Location
Preschool Access Profile	Department of Education and Children’s Service	South Australia
Portage Developmental Assessment (Revised 2015)	The Portage Project	USA
Developmental Milestones Checklist	Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)	USA
Development Checklist Birth – 5 (updated 2012)	Early Childhood Direction Centre	University of Syracuse, USA
Ages and Stages Questionnaire	Center of Human Development, University of Oregon	University of Oregon, USA
Early Years Development Journal	National Children’s Bureau	UK
Domiciliary Care Allowance Specialist Report and Guidelines	Department of Social Protection	Ireland
Assessment form for Primary School Support	Department of Education and Skills	Ireland
Mayo Early Intervention Team Preschool Assessment Tool (2015)	Mayo Early Intervention Team	Ireland

Rationale for the Proposed Approach

The Preschool Access Profile (DECS/PAP) was sourced by members of the IDG and recommended as a tool that was suitable to the work of the group. The criteria for selecting or adapting a profile tool were:

- It would include comprehensive indicators and descriptors of children’s developmental domains and consider the functional needs of the child in the context of his/her ECCE setting
- it would be designed to be used by practitioners and parents and would not require specific administrative licencing or training;
- it would be tailored specifically to use for children aged 3-5 in the context of a preschool setting and
- it would encompass both abilities and needs and was not diagnosis dependent
- Ideally it would take a strengths based approach – prioritising ability over need or disability.

On application of all of the above criteria, the Preschool Access Profile (DECS-PAP) was found to meet all criteria with the exception of the final one. It was found to perform better than all of the other profiles and tools when assessed against the above criteria meeting four of the five criteria. Permission was sought and received from the Department of Education and Child Development, South Australia, to use and/or adapt the Profile.

Rationale for Tailoring an Individual Access and Inclusion Profile for the new Model

Having reviewed the DECS-PAP guidelines an adaptation, changing the language from deficit to strengths based was undertaken by the Better Start team (see Appendix 1). In addition some items were added or amended based on feedback and suggestions from colleagues in the Project Group and through HSE consultation. While this did not functionally change the domains, descriptors or process of completing or applying the tool, it is important to acknowledge that, in modifying the profile, we understand that we cannot rely on the original evidence base, confirmation of which has been sought from the Department of Education and Children’s services, South Australia.

The document was also ‘localised’ removing all references that would not apply in an Irish context.

Testing, Piloting and Evaluation

The Access and Inclusion Profile was initially tested through consultation with ECCE providers.

Forty-one ECCE service providers were invited to complete the Profile to ensure it is usable and fit for purpose. Thirty-one providers completed it within the agreed timeframe. Feedback indicated that the Profile was clear, fit for purpose and easy to complete. As a result no changes to the profile were made. It will be reviewed after the first year of implementation. The Profile document, in common with all aspects of the model implementation will be subject to monitoring and evaluation.

Considering the strengths, capacity and needs of the ECCE setting

Implementing inclusive practice requires a whole setting approach and therefore it is essential to consider the strengths, capacity and support, training and advice needs of the setting team. The current PIP service profile gathers data on staffing, numbers of children attending, qualifications and whether services are in receipt of higher capitation for degree level staff, which provides quantitative measures of quality and capacity. It has been suggested that a further section be added within the Access profile which seeks to capture additional information on the setting. It is proposed that some of this information could be auto-populated from PIP. This would ensure that:

- 1) information is only being collected once but is being used for multiple purposes in line with good knowledge management,
- 2) specialists are not wasting valuable time collating information on the child and the setting as the profile will automatically deliver a composite picture of this information to them (this aligns with a stated aim of the profile which is to enhance service efficiency and reduce the lead-in time for responding to requests), and
- 3) in viewing the profile, parents and providers can clearly see that both the capacity of the setting *and* the needs of the child are being considered.

This has been incorporated into the profile in a section on Information on the Preschool Setting which asks simple closed questions (Yes/No) in relation to policies within the setting, accessibility of the indoor and outdoor learning environment, staff knowledge and training and adaptability of the curriculum.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that the Access and Inclusion Profile itself is but one element of the documentation and process of implementation of the complete model, relating primarily to Level 4 – accessing expert education advice and support. In relation to level 4, documentation includes:

- The Access and Inclusion Profile,
- Parental Consent form
- Guidance on Completing the Access and Inclusion

It will be incorporated into a wider process of information, advice and support provision across all 7 levels of the model for supporting children with a disability to access the ECCE programme.

Appendix 1

Original PAP Items:

Gross Motor planning / spatial awareness

Child needs assistance with:

Descriptors	Occasionally	Regularly	Frequently
Walking (may use wheelchair or walker)			
Transferring and positioning			
Moving safely around the preschool environment (e.g. limited vision)			

Better Start Access and Inclusion Profile

	Never	Occasionally	Regularly	Frequently
Gross Motor Planning/ Spatial Awareness				
Can stand without support				
Can sit without support				
Can walk independently				
Can run independently				
Can jump independently				
Can move with the use of an aid (e.g. walking frame, wheelchair)				
Has good balance				
Can transfer and position themselves without support				
Can move safely around the pre-school environment				