



**Response to the Department of Education's Consultation
Document 'Learning to Learn: A framework for Early Years
Education and Learning'**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PlayBoard is the lead agency for the development and promotion of children's and young people's play in Northern Ireland. The organisation provides a range of innovative services designed to strengthen service delivery through advice, support, training and tailored provision.

Since its inception in 1985, PlayBoard has campaigned, lobbied, raised awareness and developed partnerships in order to put play on the agenda of policy makers and resource providers.

1.2 PlayBoard is a membership organisation which exists to promote, create and develop quality play opportunities that aim to improve the quality of children's lives. This is achieved through a number of key functions:

- Having an inclusive and engaged membership voice;
- Engaging with a diverse range of stakeholders to achieve increased recognition and understanding of the importance of play and playwork;
- Research, Policy and Information services;
- Supporting Playwork workforce development;
- Driving Organisational growth and development;

PlayBoard's vision is of *'A society that respects and values the child's right to play as an intrinsic and essential right of childhood'*

PlayBoard welcome this opportunity to respond on behalf of our membership to the 'Learning to Learn: A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning' consultation.

2.0 CONSULTATION PROCESS

2.1 First and foremost, we would like to register our disappointment in the length of time allocated for the consultation process by the Department.

Guidelines for consultation by Government Departments recommend that departments allow for a 12 week consultative period. Not only has the consultation period for 'Learning to Learn' taken place over the Christmas holiday period, it has also coincided with OFMDFM's consultation on a Childcare Strategy.

Given that the audience for both consultations is essentially the same, it is disappointing that conflicting pressure has been brought to bear on organisations to complete detailed consultative processes on 2 issues which are connected, albeit across 2 different government departments.

Given the critical importance of the issue, and the fact that the consultation has run over the Christmas holiday period and coincided with consultation by OFMDFM on a Childcare Strategy for Northern Ireland, the department's allocation of an 8 week consultation period does not in our view constitute a sufficient level of time to enable all interested parties to engage within the process fully.

- 2.2 The consultation document does not clearly identify the mechanisms the department have employed during the consultative process to ensure that children, young people and parents are able to have their say on the proposals.

We would highlight that Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) places an obligation on government departments to ensure that in making decisions which affect children, that children have the right to voice their opinion.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child have stated clearly:

"As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child...they make choices and communicate their feelings, ideas and wishes in numerous ways, long before they are able to communicate through the conventions of spoken or written language...the right to express views and feelings should be anchored in the child's daily life at home and in his or her community; within the full range of early childhood health and education facilities as well as in legal proceedings; and in the development of policies and services, including through research and consultations".

We would ask that the department give assurance that during the consultative process, appropriate efforts have been made to engage with children in order to ensure that their views and perspectives are taken into account in line with Article 12.

From a parental perspective, we would seek assurances from the department that appropriate mechanisms have been put in place during the consultation process to enable parents and carers to consider the proposed actions and articulate their views and opinions on same.

3.0 ROLE OF PLAY IN ENHANCING CAPACITY TO LEARN

- 3.1 The importance of play to the lives of children and young people and its central role in shaping long-term social, health and educational development cannot, and should not be underestimated.

Indeed, the critical importance of play in the lives of children and young people is recognised under Article 31 of the UNCRC:

"State Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."

- 3.2 An increasing body of research into the development of the brain during the formative stages of a child's development (0 to 18 months) is highlighting the pivotal role of play. Such research shows that approximately 75% of brain development occurs after birth. Play helps to support that development by stimulating the brain and creating connections between nerve cells.

Through play the brain develops in support of a range of fine motor skills including the ability to hold and manipulate items (for example a pencil or crayon) and gross motor skills such as running and jumping. Furthermore, play aids the development of language and socialisation skills; supports the communication of emotions and enables children to develop an ability to be creative and to problem solve.¹

- 3.3 Writing in "Play for Change: Play Policy and Practice: A review of Contemporary Practice", Lester and Russell state *"...it is believed that play shapes the structural design of the brain. We know that secure attachments and stimulation are significant aspects of brain development; play provides active exploration that assists in building and strengthening brain pathways. Play creates a brain that has increased flexibility and improved potential for learning later in life"*.

- 3.4 The importance of play in early stage brain development and to longer term learning is further highlighted by Bodrova and Leong who note *"Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well-developed memory skills, language development, and are able to regulate their behaviour, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning"* (2005).

¹ Anderson-McNamee, Jona K and Bailey, Sandra J (2010) "The Importance of Play in early Childhood Development", Montana State university

- 3.5 From the perspective of preparing for formalised education, school readiness is a multifaceted concept that incorporates young children’s physical well-being and motor development; social and emotional development; approaches to learning, language development and emergent literacy.

Key determinants of school readiness therefore include family factors including economic risk and the home environment; literacy practices at home during early childhood care and education; early childhood care and education; school transitional practices; and community and neighbourhood effects (including poverty and crime).

- 3.6 Early investment in children has a positive impact on a child’s cognitive, social and motivational skills, contributing to enhanced readiness for school and impacting on the longer term². Children who get a good start in life are more likely than other children to go into better paid and more secure jobs, to have stronger and more lasting relationships and to enjoy better health³.
- 3.7 It is PlayBoard’s view that if we are to effectively support and enhance the child’s capacity to learn during their formative months and years, it is imperative we ensure that children are afforded the opportunity to engage in unstructured, free play opportunities from birth.

Unfortunately, whilst “Learning to Learn” alludes to the importance of “positive and supportive environments and the impact on brain development” in its early sections, it fails in our view to recognise the critical importance of play to early stage development during the earliest month’s of a child’s life.

By failing to recognise the importance of play, and by failing to establish any clear actions aimed at promoting and supporting play from birth by parents/carers etc., it is our view that the strategy misses an opportunity to promote actions which could fundamentally support brain development and enhance the child’s capacity to learn in later life.

- 3.8 We would highlight that the Northern Ireland Executives Play and Leisure Policy (area 2: Championing Play and Leisure) contains specific actions aimed at enhancing parental recognition of the benefits of play.

We would encourage the department to liaise with OFMDFM in order to identify mutually beneficial cross-departmental working opportunities

² “Long term effects of Preschool Investment on School performance and Labour market Outcome”, Lakshmi, K. Raut, July 2003

³ “Prevention and Early Intervention with Children in Need”, Little, M and Mount, K. (1999)

which may exist within this area.

4.0 AGE FOCUS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTS/CARERS

- 4.1 Having reviewed the 'Learning to Learn' document, we are disappointed that whilst the strategy professes to be aimed at the age range 0 to 6, the focus appears to be very firmly on the 3 to 6 age group.
- 4.2 Given the importance of the earliest stages of a child's life in establishing the basis for future learning capacity and the critical role of parents/carers in creating a positive learning environment, we are disappointed that the department has failed to provide any tangible actions aimed at the 0 to 3 age group.

5.0 FOCUSED COMMENT ON KEY ACTIONS

- 5.1 PlayBoard would like to highlight a number of key comments in relation to specific goals, outcomes and actions as detailed within the consultation document:

5.2 *Over-arching Goal – Raising Standards*

As previously highlighted, the focus for the actions contained within the document in general, and this goal in particular is very much on the 3 to 6 group and on formalised educational settings.

Whilst key action 1.2 references that 'The department will ensure that experiences in primary school build more effectively on the child's previous education and learning experience', no tangible actions are outlined which would, in our opinion ensure that that the pre-education experience was a positive one for all children.

The document currently does not provide focused action relating to raising standards for those children with disabilities or Special education Needs (SEN). If children with disabilities or SEN's are to be provided with quality opportunities to learn it is critical that they are afforded access to high quality early years provision, provision which is sadly often lacking at present.

5.3 *Over-arching Goal – Closing the Performance Gap, increasing access and equality*

We would again highlight the need to broaden the focus of the framework beyond formalised provision for the 3 to 6 age group and those in residing in Sure Start areas.

With regards to Sure Start, whilst welcoming the departments work on extending Sure Start provision from the top 20% most deprived to the top 25%, we would highlight that the children in most need do not

always neatly fit into artificial boundaries determined by deprivation measures and statistical units. Whilst recognising the financial pressures impacting across government spending, we would encourage the department to give further consideration as to how focused support could be provided to those in most need, regardless of their area of residence.

We welcome the commitment to collaborative working with other government departments contained in action 1.5. We would in particular highlight the need for the department to explore collaborative working opportunities with OFMDFM with regards to implementation of the Play and Leisure policy.

5.4 *Over-arching Goal – Improving the Child's Learning Environment*

We note that under the overarching goal 'Improving the Child's Learning Environment' the outcome identified by the department is stated as being "High quality education and learning services delivered in safe, nurturing and accessible environments in partnership with parents and carers as their child's first and ongoing educators.

Having reviewed the actions outlined within the document we have been unable to identify any which focus specifically on the role of parents and carers as 'first and ongoing educators' during the early years of a child's life.

We would urge the department to address this critical issue by establishing focused and discreet actions aimed at ensuring that children aged 0 to 3 years are given opportunities which build on their natural play instinct both within and outside of the home environment.

Recognising the central role of parents and carers, we would strongly advocate that the department give consideration to establishing focused actions aimed at enhancing parents and carers understanding of the importance of play to child development, and at enhancing their capacity to create playful environments which stimulate the brain development and learning process.

With regards to action 1.8 (a) relating to introducing flexibility in class size up to a maximum of 30, we are concerned that such a move could bring have a detrimental impact on the quality of education provided.

Not all settings have the infrastructure to allow for such change, and without capital investment to ensure that settings are capable of coping with increased class sizes this could be a counter-productive move, leading to a reduction in the quality of the learning experience for the children.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 Whilst PlayBoard welcome the publication of 'Learning to Learn' by the department, we do feel that in its current form the framework will not have the required level of impact to significantly enhance children's capacity to learn.
- 6.2 In particular we would highlight the need for the framework to move beyond the formalised, educational setting approach and provide actions for the full 0 to 6 age group as opposed to the 3 to 6 age group as it currently does.
- 6.3 We highlight in particular the body of evidence highlighting the importance of play in supporting brain development, thereby enabling children to develop those early skills which are key to the learning process i.e. language development, problem solving etc.

If we are to create early learning environments which maximise the opportunity to develop skills during the 0 to 18 month period it is essential that the department deliver focused actions aimed at parents and carers. These should focus on the importance of play as a mechanism for enhancing development and as a key component of future learning capacity.

- 6.4 We would urge the department to reconsider the framework, taking into account the comments made within this response, and would also support those submissions made by sectoral colleagues including Early Years, NICMA and the Child Care Partnerships.