

Starting Big School

Preparing for Junior Infants - a guide for families



Social Inclusion &
Community Activation
Programme

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Forbairt Áitiúil Loch Garman

Starting School: Introduction and contents

Can you believe that your child is starting school already? Does it seem like only yesterday that they were learning to crawl? This might be an emotional time but it's also one that your family can enjoy. Starting 'big school' is an important but exciting part of your child's journey of discovery and development. It's not just all about the first day. It's about the process of learning and growing and becoming more independent.

Every year in Ireland around 40% of 4 year olds start school and almost all 5 year olds are in school so it's also very normal. The most important person at the centre of this process is the child and the child's most influential educator in the build up to starting school is you, the parent.

This booklet has some ideas and information for how you and your child can prepare for starting school.

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- Junior Infants
- What is Aistear?
- How can I help my child get ready for school?
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- School Stuff and Subjects
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Junior Infants

Children start learning from the day they are born. Starting Junior Infants is just another stepping stone in their learning journey. Children can only learn when they feel happy and secure. The focus in Junior Infants is about settling in, being curious and building friendships and relationships. It's far more important that your child feels good and is looking forward to going to school than whether they can read or write before they start. The aim in school will be on helping them to reach their potential by:

- Developing their ability to speak and express themselves
- Developing their senses and use of seeing, hearing and touch
- Developing their co-ordination, their balance and their use of fingers and hands
- Improving their concentration and their ability to listen and understand
- Developing their understanding of other people, their teacher and classmates
- Developing their ability to be sociable, to co-operate and share
- Encouraging their independence and sense of who they are



Aistear

Aistear is an Irish word for 'journey' and it is the early childhood curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years in Ireland. It has 4 themes that are all linked:

- Well Being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and Thinking

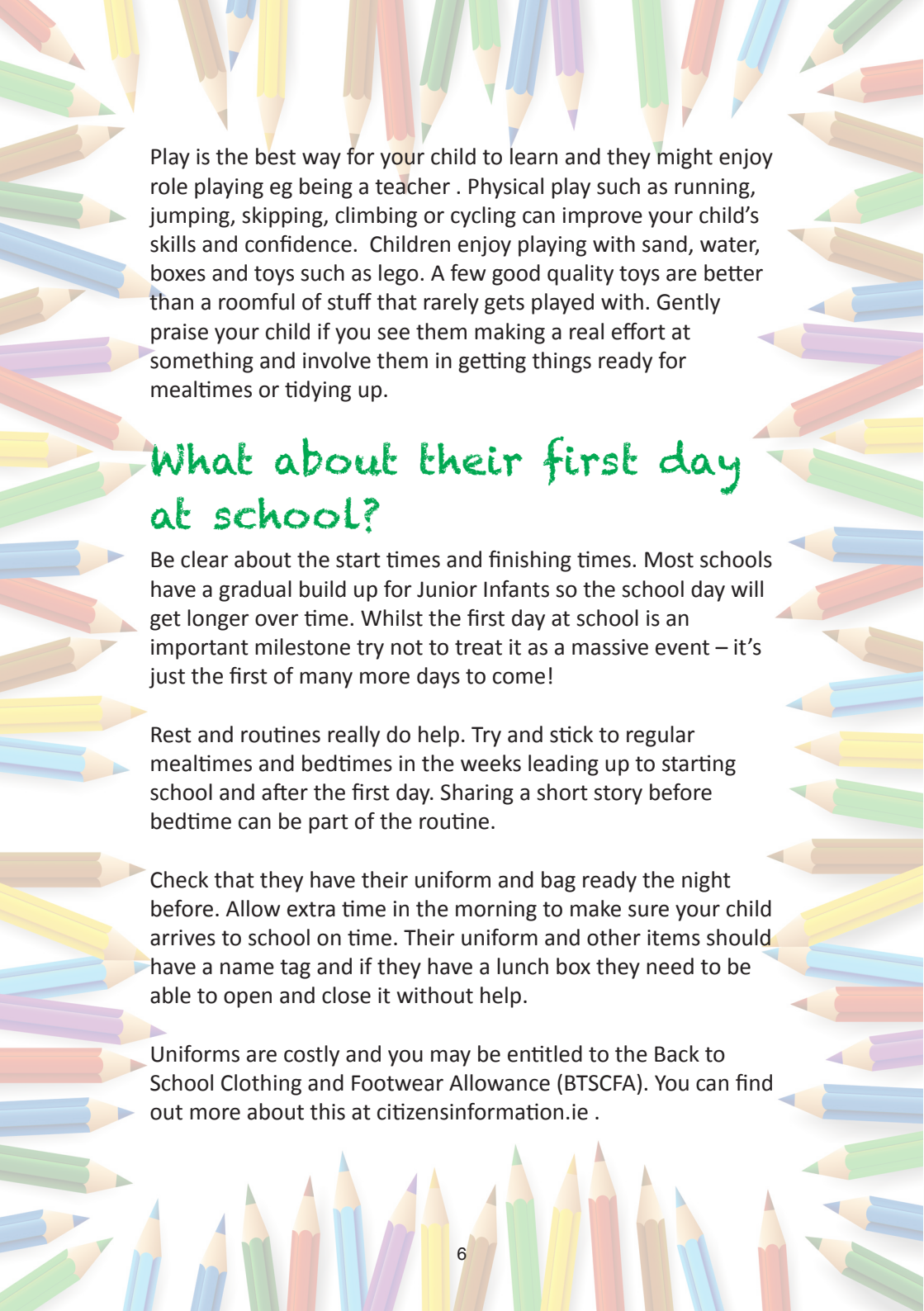
Aistear recognises the importance of PLAY and the importance of providing the safe spaces and opportunities for PLAYING. Play is vital for children and helps with their development emotionally, socially, physically and academically not to mention their ability to think. Learning should be a positive and enjoyable experience, which is why learning through play is so effective.

How can I help my child get ready for starting school?

Children learn at their own individual pace and it's important to avoid putting pressure on your child. There are lots of ways to help prepare your child for school but perhaps the most important is to encourage their independence, their speaking and listening skills and their confidence. Encourage regular mealtimes and bedtimes and plenty of opportunities to play. Make sure to take time to talk to your child in a relaxed, calm atmosphere and try to emphasise the fun and adventure to be had when it comes to starting school. Self-help skills are really important so try to ensure that your child can:

- Get dressed by themselves
- Take off and put on shoes, button and unbutton coats
- Go to the toilet, clean themselves, flush and wash hands
- Manage & look after their lunch box
- Tidy things up and put things away
- Spend some time concentrating on an activity eg listening to stories
- Happily spend time in the company of a relative or friend
- Know their full name and where they live

As a parent you can also help by bringing your child to school open days and activities. Make sure that you are clear about the times of the school day and the school policies (eg uniform, lunches). Point out the school if you are passing it and talk with your child about going to school. A positive attitude is so helpful and maybe you can share stories of your own schooldays that your child might enjoy. Encourage them to be curious and to ask questions.

A decorative border of various colored pencils (red, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown) surrounds the text on the page.

Play is the best way for your child to learn and they might enjoy role playing eg being a teacher . Physical play such as running, jumping, skipping, climbing or cycling can improve your child's skills and confidence. Children enjoy playing with sand, water, boxes and toys such as lego. A few good quality toys are better than a roomful of stuff that rarely gets played with. Gently praise your child if you see them making a real effort at something and involve them in getting things ready for mealtimes or tidying up.


What about their first day at school?

Be clear about the start times and finishing times. Most schools have a gradual build up for Junior Infants so the school day will get longer over time. Whilst the first day at school is an important milestone try not to treat it as a massive event – it's just the first of many more days to come!

Rest and routines really do help. Try and stick to regular mealtimes and bedtimes in the weeks leading up to starting school and after the first day. Sharing a short story before bedtime can be part of the routine.

Check that they have their uniform and bag ready the night before. Allow extra time in the morning to make sure your child arrives to school on time. Their uniform and other items should have a name tag and if they have a lunch box they need to be able to open and close it without help.

Uniforms are costly and you may be entitled to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA). You can find out more about this at citizensinformation.ie .

A young child with dark hair, wearing a school uniform consisting of a white shirt, a red vest, and blue trousers, is holding a blue book and a small globe. The child is looking down at the items in their hands. The background is a soft, out-of-focus outdoor setting.

Most schools will have policies about lunch items so make sure that you find out what is ok for your school. Healthy lunches can include simple sandwiches or salads, pieces of fruit, cheese and water.

You might be feeling emotional which is understandable. Try to manage your feelings, hopes and fears calmly. Be patient and model good social skills for your child by being friendly with people you meet. Starting school is completely normal and teachers are there to help your child. Reassure and remind your child who will collect them at home time. Say goodbye promptly and leave them to make the most of their first day at big school!

If your child does appear to be upset on the first day try to remain calm and have faith in the teacher and school staff to help them to settle when you are gone. Prolonging the goodbye generally doesn't help as it can be confusing for the child.

What about school stuff?

The Primary School Curriculum is there to develop each child's potential, encourage a love of learning and develop lifelong skills. The framework for Junior Infants comes from Aistear which has a focus on learning through play and fun.

Make sure that you find out as much information as you can about your child's school, the times of the school day, how to contact school and the policies and procedures. Try to ensure that your child is on time every day and that she or he has good attendance. Inform the school of any additional needs your child may have or any circumstances that may impact on your child (eg illness, bereavement).

The Junior Infant teacher would like to know a little bit about your child – what they enjoy doing, what they are good at, have they got younger siblings etc. If your child is in Pre-School you could ask about Mo Scéal (My Story). Mo Scéal is useful for sharing helpful information about your child with their new teacher.

The Primary Curriculum contains the following key areas:

- Language, Irish / Gaeilge and English
- Maths
- Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (History, Geography, Science)
- Arts, including Visual Arts, Music and Drama
- Physical Education
- Social, Personal & Health Education
- Religious and Ethical Education

By keeping things nice, simple and relaxed there are lots of ways that you can help your child enjoy their experience of starting school.

Language

It takes time to learn to read in any language and it's important not to rush or pressure children to do so. Reading should be an enjoyable experience not an unpleasant task. Before starting Junior Infants it's better for your child to talk and listen well than to know all their letters or words. Speech is an essential part of communication and if your child is able to express their thoughts, feelings, needs and questions using spoken words it will really help them.

- Make time for natural, enjoyable conversations with your child
- Listen to them and try to avoid interrupting
- Encourage them to ask questions and to explain things
- Encourage them to identify and express their feelings eg how they felt about something that happened today
- Answer, ask and encourage questions such as what/who/ where/ when/ how/ why
- Regularly share stories and read books with them
- Have books in the home and read stories in short enjoyable bursts. Avoid screens as much as possible
- Visit and join your local library
- Sing and play with words, nursery rhymes and riddles
- Talk about photos or places you have been to
- Talk about a shared experience eg 'do you remember when we went to town and....'
- Use basic English and Irish words to name colours, animals, food etc
- Encourage play with crayons, pencils, scissors, pegs, beads, building blocks, jigsaws.
- Encourage activities that involve stirring, pouring, dressing up etc. These all help to develop hand / eye coordination which will help your child with writing skills later.



Maths

Maths is another area where you can help your child by using and understanding simple 'place' words such as 'in', 'on', 'under'. It's not just about the numbers, talk with your child and make time for:

- Sorting and matching different items according to size, shape, colour, texture or use Eg does it roll, can you stack it, is it heavy
- Discuss and develop an understanding of opposites eg more/less, same/different, long/short, inside/outside, under/over, before/after etc
- Play games with simple instructions eg can you stand in the corner / sit on the chair/ hide under the table
- Use everyday maths eg how many apples are in the bowl, which one is the biggest
- Gain an understanding of left and right, front and back etc
- Count the steps as you climb the stairs

Social Environmental and Scientific Education

History, Geography and Science are introduced gradually in the early years of school. You can help introduce your child to these subjects by:

- Talking to your child about when they were born and how they have changed
- Talking about their first words
- Talking about what made them laugh, what made them cry
- Talking about where you live and things in your local area
- Talking about the different seasons and changes during the year
- Making some ice or ice lollies, talk about how the water changes
- Baking or cooking something together and talking about what you made and how you made it

Arts Education

Arts Education includes visual arts, music and drama. Children enjoy role play such as tea sets or dressing up and this helps them to enjoy the arts.

- Keep some old clothes for playing and dressing up with
- Sing songs and nursery rhymes together
- Let them play and make things with old boxes, packets, containers etc
- Let them play with different materials and textures such as sand, water, playdough
- Look at different pictures, photos and paintings and talk about them

Physical Education

PE includes all types of physical activity that can be enjoyed in groups or by individuals. It helps to improve co-ordination and also confidence and can be enjoyed indoors and outdoors.

- See if your child likes to dance or just experiment with different types of movement
- Try hopping, crawling or jumping just for fun
- Balance on one leg or try some simple gymnastics
- Enjoy going for walks
- Play with different sized balls and objects that you can throw, catch or kick
- See if your child would like to join local sports clubs & activities

Social, Personal and Health Education

SPHE covers personal development, health and wellness. It encourages independence. Helping your child to develop some of these skills before they start school gives them great confidence and makes it easier for them to make the move into Junior Infants

- Encourage them to dress independently
- If they can't manage laces try shoes with Velcro
- Make sure brushing teeth is a regular morning and bedtime habit for them
- Give them praise when they make an effort to tidy up or put things away
- Talk about emotions and feelings, name them eg happy, sad, excited, worried etc
- Talk about healthy food habits like fruit and vegetables and how they help you to be strong and healthy
- Encourage your child to make an effort and finish things, especially when they find something difficult

Religious Education

Religious Education is part of the curriculum for most primary schools in Ireland. Almost all primary schools are state funded but owned or managed by religious communities. For example around 90% of Primary Schools are under the patronage of the Catholic Church and 6% are under the patronage of the Church of Ireland.

Religious Education in schools is the responsibility of the governing body. This means that most (96%) schools are likely to teach a denominational or faith-based form of religion.

Some schools teach a multi-denominational form of education which will not be based on one specific faith but will explore a range of different belief systems.

Before your child starts Junior Infants you should be very clear what the religious ethos and expectations of the school are. Some families will feel that the religious ethos of the school reflects their own beliefs. Some families may feel the religious ethos of the school doesn't accurately reflect their own religious or ethical beliefs.

Unlike other parts of the curriculum religious education is not compulsory and there is a right to opt out. Discuss this with the school if you are considering this option and be clear what the alternatives are should you wish to make this decision.

'The best way to help prepare your child for starting school is to make time for playing and talking. Playing, talking, questioning and getting used to other people, that's how they learn.'



School Lingo

The education system sometimes use words or labels that need a bit of explanation. Here are some of the more common ones:

- BOM –** Board of Management, the BOM is responsible for school policies, procedure and governance
- BTSCFA –** Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is a scheme of financial assistance to help with the cost of uniform etc. To find out more contact mywelfare.ie
- DEIS –** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, an education initiative to support pupils and schools in disadvantaged areas
- ESL –** English as a Second Language, for many people in Ireland English is not their first language
- EYS –** Early Years Services – pre-schools, creches and childminders provide early years care and education for children
- Fine motor skills –** the ability to complete small task using hands and fingers eg opening and closing jars, threading, using lego, pencil and pens
- Gross motor skills –** the ‘bigger’ movements and balancing eg walking, running, climbing, hopping
- HSCL –** Home and School Community Liaison, a teacher with responsibility for building links with home, school and the community
- NCSE –** National Council for Special Education – a national body that works to improve educational services for people with Special Educational Needs ncse.ie

NEPS –

National Educational Psychological Service provides advice to schools on learning, behaviour, social & emotional development

Phonics –

the relationship between the sounds of a language when spoken and the letters or groups of letters that make up the language

Principal –

the principal has overall responsibility for leading the school

SET –

a teacher for children that may need some extra help at times

SNA –

Special Needs Assistant – a member of staff that acts in a caring and supportive role for a child with special educational needs

WSE –

Whole School Evaluation – a system of inspection carried out with schools by the Department of Education. You can find your schools last WSE report at education.ie or Schooldays.ie

Other resources for parents and children

Libraries are a great place for children and families. They are full of books and other creative activities. It's easy to join your local library and it's a great place for children to experience a love of books and learning.

There are many books about starting school available at your library or bookshop, here are just a few suggestions:

1. 'First Day Jitters' by Julie Donneberg
2. 'I am Absolutely Too Small for School' by Lauren Child
3. 'My First Day at School' by P.K. Hallinan
4. 'Starting School' by Janet Ahlberg and Alan Ahlberg
5. Charlie Chick Goes to School by Nick Denchfield

Here are some websites with useful information:

Wexford Library Services <https://www.wexfordcoco.ie/libraries-home>

Wexford Children and Young People Services www.wexfordcypsc.ie

Wexford Parents Hub <http://www.wexfordcypsc.ie/wexford-parents-hub>

Wexford County Childcare Committee <https://wexfordchildcare.ie/>

National Council for Curriculum & Assessment <https://ncca.ie/en>

Schooldays.ie <https://www.schooldays.ie/>

Barnardos <https://www.barnardos.ie/>

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