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Early Years Manager's Network A Case Study



Key Terms:

NEYAI:	The National Early Years Access Initiative (2011-2014). It focuses on improving access to quality services for children (0-6 years) and their families, living in disadvantaged areas. It is an umbrella for 11 projects throughout the country, including Start Right Limerick.
Start Right model area:	Relates to the Southside area of Limerick City and includes the parishes of Southill, Our Lady Queen of Peace and Our Lady of Lourdes.
Early Years settings:	Term used to describe Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services.
Practitioners:	Term used to describe staff who work with children in Early Years settings.

Early Years Manager's Network

Overview

The Southside Early Years Manager's Network is a peer support network for Early Years managers on Limerick City's Southside, the model area for Start Right Limerick.

The Network offers valuable opportunities for managers with a common focus, to come together, to support one another, to access and share information, and to organise collective activities such as training and outings.

There are three broad features of the Network. It provides opportunities for:

1. Peer Support
2. Professional Development
3. Linking Early Years settings with wider community and statutory services and supports

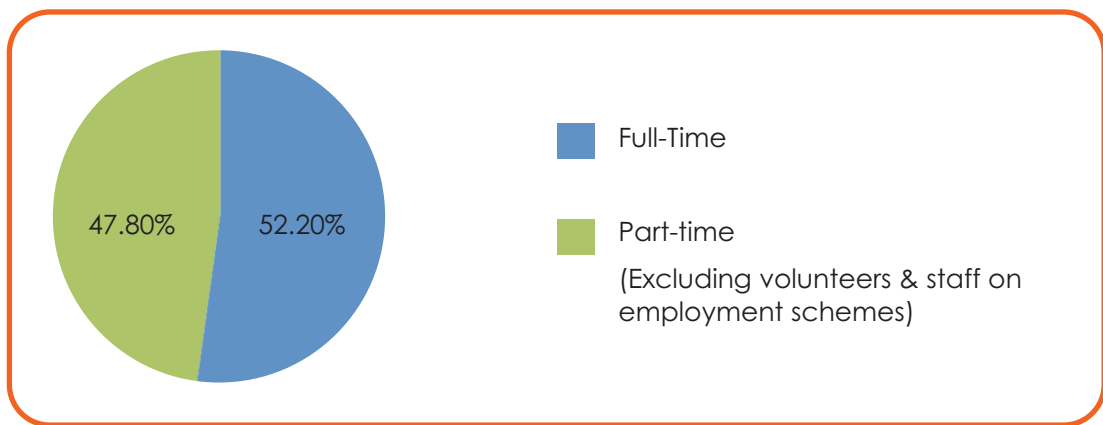
The Network is also
representative of the
diversity of community and
not-for-profit EY service
provision in Ireland



The National and Local Picture of Early Years Settings

Nationally, the Early Years (EY) sector is made up of approximately 4,300 settings which combine private, community and not-for-profit types of services. 130 of these are part of the National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) and 9 are in the Start Right model area.

The EY sector is relatively unique in that employment is almost equally divided between full-time (52.2%) and part-time (47.8%), excluding volunteers and staff on employment schemes. In comparison to the rest of the Irish economy, the EY sector has twice the amount of part-time workers.



In addition, women are more likely to work part-time compared to men (35% compared to 14%). As a result, the sector employs approximately 24,000 people, which is almost exclusively female. The Southside EY Manager's Network is representative of this, comprising of 9 female managers from a variety of community based Early Years settings.



Key Supports in Early Years

A City and County Childcare Committees

EY settings in Ireland tend to operate independently from each other and from statutory and community services and supports. However, there are a number of bodies who do work with Early Year's settings locally and nationally to improve the quality of their services, such as:

- City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs), which are funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs
- Voluntary Childcare Organisations such as Barnardos and Early Childhood Ireland.

The CCCs support the development of EY settings locally and are a main point of contact for settings when accessing Early Years schemes such as Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Community Childcare Subvention (CCS), Childcare Education and Training Supports (CETS).

Some key objectives of the CCCs are:

- To enhance and develop information sharing and learning systems
- Develop local childcare networks with the ultimate aim of enhancing the quality of services for children.

The Pobal annual surveys of the Early Years sector show a decrease in Early Years settings being members of networks supported by their City and County Childcare Committees over the last number of years. There was a slight decrease between 2011 (55%) and 2012 (56.6), but a significant decrease in 2013 (21.5%).

Limerick Childcare Committee (LCC) has supported the development of city and county Early Years networks over the years. The networks have been informal gatherings where managers and practitioners could access peer support, training and workshop events. While networks have worked very well and feedback suggests they were beneficial, much like the national picture, some have tended to fade out over time. Three possible reasons for this are:

1 As relationships develop, managers and practitioners become more comfortable in linking in with each other outside of meeting times. As a result there is less need to have meetings.

While this is a positive outcome, it means they have less opportunity to become aware of local EY matters and to have a collective voice in arranging events such as training.

2 Opportunity for membership and participation in other childcare organisations may be a factor.

3 There may be lack of clarity around the purpose of a network. The advantage of informal networks is that members can guide the meetings and have the opportunity to openly discuss issues and share information. However, if the purpose of the network is not clearly defined and agreed, then it may lose focus and members may be unsure as to why they are attending.



B Voluntary Childcare Organisations

During interviews managers spoke about being members of Voluntary Childcare Organisations. While the general feeling is that being a member is important and has its benefits, there is a difference between accessing information over the internet and hands-on support. While there is contact, there is a sense that there is little on-site engagement. One manager noted:

“You’re talking about the difference between hands on people, hands on support. It’s ok being involved in all those organisations, but...you join up, you look at our website and you see what we have...and the thing about it is...it costs money”

(Sinéad- crèche Manager)

One manager recalls having the support of a development worker from the National Children’s Nurseries Association (NCNA). She found the informal approach very beneficial, but it has been six years since she had any hands-on support from the NCNA (now known as Early Childhood Ireland).

C Voluntary Management Committees

Community childcare settings are generally run by Voluntary Management Committees. Effective committees are made up of major stakeholders (parents, members of the community, child care professionals, local businesses, etc.) who have skills and knowledge that can support the development of the service.

Effective Management Committees play an important role in the delivery of high quality care and education and should have a good understanding of:

- Quality Early Years practice. This includes child development, the importance of play, the role of Early Years practitioners, policies and procedures, and working with parents.
- Legislation that regulates Early Years services in Ireland.

Through one-to-one discussions with managers and attendance at Network meetings it became clear that a number of services lacked support from their Management Committees. While structurally they seemed to work well, it was felt that the committees:

- Were unaware of current changes in the Early Years sector
- In some instances, lacked the knowledge and skills to support the managers, staff and parents to deliver a high quality service.

Start Right organised an ‘Information and Quality Training’ event for Management Committees and invited each chairperson. Unfortunately, there was very little uptake and, as a result, the event had to be postponed. Given the core function of management committees in the running of EY settings, their impact on quality and positive outcomes for children, further ideas to engage committees are being explored at Network level

Before the Development of a Network

Informal interviews and discussions were carried out with all 9 Early Years Managers in the Start Right model area. They identified a number of challenges they encountered before the development of what is now known as the Southside Early Years Manager's Network:

- There was very limited contact between Early Years settings
- Managers experienced a number of challenges in up-skilling staff, including financial, viable numbers and suitable locations
- Settings operated in isolation from other community services and supports.

síolta

Aistear
Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



Peer Support

Isolated Settings

Managers felt their settings were isolated from other Early Year's settings, even those in close geographical proximity. They also felt that they were somewhat 'different' and as a result had unique needs. Some settings were part of a wider service, for example a primary school or domestic abuse refuge. However a sense of isolation and difference meant they did not feel connected with other settings. One manager felt; *"You can be very much on your own"* [Kay-preschool manager] and another said *"I never had anybody except my own team that you could bounce things off"* [Sinead-Crèche Manager].

Lack of contact with other managers

Before Start Right, managers had opportunities to meet other managers and practitioners at training and networking events, but the majority did not know each other. Training and networking events did not support long term connections. Some managers knew of local crèches or preschools and knew the names of other managers, but they had not actually met each other.

Seeing each other as competition

The reality for settings operating in the same geographical area is that they rely on a steady intake of children to keep their service going. Some managers have said there was a reluctance to form close relationships with other Early Years settings because there was an element of seeing each other as *"the competition"* [Claire-Crèche manager].



Professional Development

Professional development is a continuous learning process that includes personal and professional growth. Accredited and non-accredited education and training opportunities are important features of professional development. Also, ongoing reflection on knowledge, practice and values are at the core of good practice in Early Years.

To operate the Free Preschool Year (ECCE Scheme), EY settings must meet certain conditions:

Qualifications:

- A preschool leader who holds (or is in the process of reaching) a minimum Child Care qualification of level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) by September 2015
- All preschool assistants must hold a minimum qualification in Child Care at level 5 on the NFQ.

Síolta & Aistear:

- Use the two national frameworks - Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework - to guide and benchmark practice.

A survey carried out by Start Right in 2011, when the project began, shows qualification levels held among staff in Southside settings.

Qualification level on NQF	Start Right Figures 2011	National Figures 2012
Level 7 and above	17%	12.4%
Level 6	14%	34.8%
Level 5	45%	39.4%
No Recognized Childcare qualification	24% Other*	7.4% 6%
Total	100%	100%

Note: Other* - include non-accredited childcare course (2.8%), accredited course outside Ireland (1.1%), FETAC Level 4 (2.1%)



Challenges to participation in training include:

Cost

- Cost of training and cost of staff cover for daytime training
- The Early Year's sector is under-resourced and, compared to other sectors, EY practitioners are not well paid. Many settings have had to accept pay cuts and reductions in funding over the last few years. This affects their ability to up-skill practitioners and to retain qualified staff.

Timing of training, staff availability and motivation for training

- Daytime training does not always suit as practitioners are required to be in their settings, to maintain adult to child ratios
- Motivating staff to give up their own free time to engage in training is very challenging when they may already feel undervalued in their work
- Managers spend a lot of time on the floor covering staff breaks. It is difficult to release staff for day training events and most services cannot afford to pay relief staff
- The time pressure and daily demands that staff are under further affects their ability, motivation and willingness to engage in training
- Services that want to engage with Siolta and Aistear, for example, have limited capacity and resources to do so. While training is available through other agencies (i.e. Limerick Childcare Committee and Barnardos), many of the services had not formally engaged with either framework prior to working with Start Right.

Training suitability

- During interviews, many managers expressed the belief that external agencies do not fully understand the local context and the day-to-day demands on EY staff. Early Years settings in the Start Right model area. These settings work, to a large extent, with families who experience disadvantage and as a result have a particular set of training needs compared to other services. For example, some families may have social work intervention, may be at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness and others may have a parent that is in prison. These are very specific issues that require specific responses that generic training does not provide.

Linked services

Early Years settings were disconnected from each other but also from other statutory and community services and supports. For example, managers were unaware of how Early Years settings could play a role in connecting families with Barnardos or with Limerick Social Service Centre, services that provide parenting support, counselling, financial advice and family advocacy.

There was also a lack of awareness around the referral process for children and families on to other therapeutic services, for example Speech and Language Therapy or Early Intervention. If there was a developmental concern about a child, managers generally would advise parents to contact their doctor. Many were also unaware of who the local Public Health Nurse was, or in what ways it might be beneficial to link in with her/him.

The First Network Meeting

What?	A highly significant event, which laid an important foundation for the development and success of the Network.
Why?	The first meeting was an information session on the objectives of Start Right, the implications for all settings in the NEYAI evaluation and an opportunity for managers to discuss the development of a Southside Early Years Manager's Network.
Who?	Attended by Early Years managers from the Southside and some principals of local primary schools.
Where?	A conference room in a local hotel. The room was set up for a business meeting and, as such, was formal. The atmosphere was uncomfortable at first and managers were slow to interact with each other.
When?	September 2012
Venue Chosen	Local meeting room provided by Limerick Regeneration, Limerick City and County Council - A free resource for local community groups.
Outcomes:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• It set the precedent for further meetings• It was decided by the managers that no minutes/records would be taken at further meetings• It would be an informal forum to share information• Start Right Coordinator and Development Worker would organise and facilitate Network meetings<ul style="list-style-type: none">- E-mail managers for agenda proposals- Facilitate the introduction of other professionals- Coordinate a light lunch to be provided for all• Suitability of venue<ul style="list-style-type: none">- It needed to be local for convenience- Sustainable in the long term- Low or no cost.

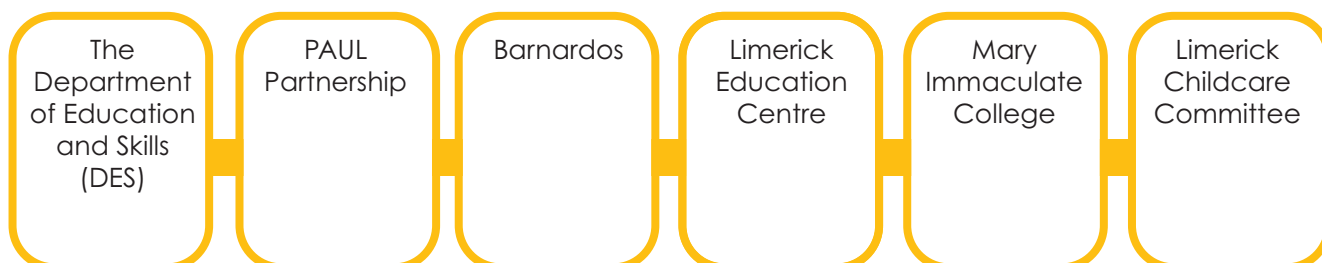




Addressing Training Needs

The Start Right Professional Development Subgroup is tasked with a number of actions around supporting the up-skilling of Early Years (EY) professionals in the Start Right model area. The subgroup is made up of 9 members from 6 organisations.

Professional Development Subgroup



Professional Development (PD) Subgroup

An EY Manager's Network was identified by the PD subgroup as:

- A resource that would provide managers with access to training and learning opportunities both formally and informally
- A forum for bringing Early Years settings on the Southside together
- An effective way to share consistent and systematic information between Start Right and EY settings
- A way to develop collaborative relationships among EY settings and other services and supports.

The Network has been a beneficial place for managers and Start Right to discuss and explore their training needs. The Network provided a starting point to discuss:

- How training might be rolled out
- Who should attend
- Where meetings should take place
- How resources could be shared.

One of the first Start Right activities in identifying training needs involved managers and practitioners completing a training questionnaire. This questionnaire identified preferences for

30% day release training

27% night training

11% preference for a combination of day, night, on-line and weekend training.

The questionnaire also identified the following preferred training topics.

- Aistear
- Art and Craft workshop
- Behaviour Management
- Building Resilience in the Early Years
- Buntús
- Child Development
- Conducting Risk Assessments
- Developing Outside Play Areas
- Drama
- Early Literacy
- Early Numeracy
- Emergent Curriculum
- English as a Second Language
- First Aid
- How to deal with Language Delay
- Manual Handling
- Music and Movement
- Observations
- Play Ideas for Babies, Toddlers and Preschool
- Sign Language
- Síolta
- Small Group Activities
- Staff Professionalism
- Storytelling
- Understanding Transitions
- Using Puppets in Play
- Working with Traveller Families





A key element of Start Right's work is sustainability. With this in mind, managers were encouraged to think about how they could work together to reduce barriers to training and development opportunities. A number of creative solutions were discussed and implemented:

On-site open training

Open training events were organised to take place on-site within Southside EY settings (crèches and preschools), where staff of other EY settings were invited to attend. A number of settings took part in this initiative which was a particularly significant step towards working together and a first for these Early Years settings. It highlighted how managers can maximise the use of existing resources, by avoiding venue rental, catering etc. It provided opportunities for managers and practitioners to observe other EY environments, and to interact with, and discuss practice with others.

Daytrips to other centres and conferences

Trips were organised through the Network and supported by Start Right. Visits included:

- ReCreate, creative resource centre in Dublin
- Barnardos Brighter Futures centre at Knocknaheeney in Cork
- The NEYA dissemination conference in Dublin
- Speech and language conference in Cork.

Accredited training

Through the work of the Professional Development Subgroup, Start Right offered fully funded specialised training for early childhood practitioners in the area of inclusive practice. This Level 6 Certificate in Inclusive Care and Education (0-6 years) was designed and delivered by Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. 34 Early Years practitioners from the Start Right model area have graduated from this course to date.

Staff site-exchange visits

A key element in up-skilling practitioners developed in the form of the Early Years staff site-exchange visits. Through discussions with managers and practitioners, it was clear that many of the practitioners had never worked in another Early Years setting, outside of their own. In some cases they had not worked with another age group. This was mostly true of practitioners who were participating in the Community Employment (CE) Scheme. Exchange visits were organised so that practitioners 'swapped' EY settings and spent time observing, sharing knowledge and reflecting on their own practice.

On-site support and mentoring

Start Right has been working intensively with most of the Early Years settings and provide on-site mentoring, training and support. This work has been successful because of the strong relationship between Start Right and the EY practitioners on the Southside. Trust was built up over time, with Start Right meeting the needs that the practitioners themselves identified. The Start Right Development Worker describes mentoring as "a gradual process that needs time. You have to give relationships time to develop". The need for on-site support has reduced over time, as managers and practitioners have grown more confident in their practice.

Working with the Early Years Inspection Service was key to Start Right being able to organise staff site-exchange visits. Regulations for Early Years services require that information relating to all staff, such as Garda clearance certificates, CV's, qualifications and references, must be on file within the premises and available for viewing upon inspection. Start Right consulted the Early Years Inspection Service who then supported procedures which made the staff site-exchange visits possible. These visits were a peer learning exercise that provided ideas for planning and developing quality practice, as well as strengthening communication across Southside EY settings.

Outcomes from the staff-exchange visits:

- 1 Provided an opportunity for sharing knowledge in a way that a workshop/classroom would not
- 2 Observed other practitioners in their daily routine
- 3 Self-reflected on their own practice
- 4 Appreciated room layout and equipment usage
- 5 Stimulated curriculum ideas
- 6 Provided an opportunity for professional development
- 7 Linked with other service in their own local area

Overall, feedback was very positive. One practitioner said:

“I went to four different settings and I found the visits to be extremely beneficial. Not only did I get to network with other practitioners in the community, I also picked up some wonderful ideas on ways to improve my setting” [Jane-Early Years Practitioner].





The Role of Other Agencies

The Southside Early Years Manager's Network has been a forum for managers to discuss and make connections with other agencies and professionals, many of whom they would not generally have the opportunity to meet.

Statutory and community services and supports

The development of the Network has been a collaborative process between Southside Early Years managers, Start Right and a number of community and statutory services and supports.

Start Right invited a number of other professionals to Network meetings, including;

- Incredible Years Programme Manager
- Limerick Childcare Committee Development Worker
- Limerick City Children's Services Committee Coordinator.

Input from these provided information on their roles, and the ways in which they can support the Network and work with EY settings.

Members of the Start Right Team

- Speech and Language Therapist
- Creative Therapist
- Public Health Nurse.

Referral Pathways

A key 'Referral Pathways' meeting was organised by Start Right and attended by Early Years managers, two school principals and two Home School Liaison Officers. This meeting:

- 1 Encouraged agencies to work together to ensure better outcomes for children
- 2 Provided information on identifying (possible) additional needs in children up to the age of 6 years
- 3 Provided information on the referral process and the professionals involved
- 4 Connected EY managers, primary school Principals and Home School Community Liaison Officers with HSE staff
- 5 Highlighted the differences in referring preschool and school-aged children.

Tusla Early Years Inspection Team

An invitation was issued from the Network to the Tusla Early Years Inspection Team to attend a Network meeting. Managers felt this would provide a space to have an open conversation and a chance to collectively ask questions. In Spring 2014, the Inspection Team's Line Manager attended a Network meeting. It was a significant event, where managers and the Inspection Service met informally as opposed to the regular inspection visits.

Outcomes:

- 1 Managers asked questions and they found it helpful to hear the perspective of the Inspection Service
- 2 The Network empowers managers to have a collective voice. This was a particular strength of the Network on this occasion, when a manager voiced a direct concern about Early Years Inspection procedure
- 3 The Line Manager noted that inspectors noticed significant improvements in the levels of quality in EY settings on the Southside
- 4 The meeting highlighted how services and the Inspection Team might work more collaboratively in the future

The Line Manager talked about the restructuring of the Early Years Inspection services and its transfer from the HSE to Tusla, the new Child and Family Agency. He gave a commitment to an open-door policy and encouraged managers to continue to develop constructive links with the Early Years Inspection Team.





Creating Change

As outlined earlier, there are three broad strands to the Southside Early Years Manager's Network. It is a forum for:



Peer support



Professional development



Linking Early Years settings
with wider community
and statutory services
and supports

Peer Group

Peer support was highlighted by all Southside managers as one of the most significant strengths of the Network. Most of the managers did not have peer support prior to engaging with Start Right.

When managers were asked how they had initially felt about a Network, responses were mixed. Some felt “*delighted*” at the prospect. The opportunity to get to know other managers and to form relationships was seen as very positive. Others have said they felt “*apprehensive*” about coming together and wondered if and how it would work. The primary concern flagged was that all settings operated in the same model area and perhaps saw each other as competition. In that sense, there was an element of being much more “*guarded*” in the beginning. However, they now work together more and have formed comfortable relationships that encourage peer support and draw on shared experiences.

An example of how the Network fostered peer support within and outside the Network meetings was highlighted by one manager. The setting she manages is very near to another setting and previously there was very little contact between them, whereas now there is “*a bond, that we can call on one another if we need help, so that’s great*” [Emer-preschool manager].

A shared understanding of challenges

In discussion with managers, there is agreement that they previously felt isolated and considered their struggles were unique to them. Through Network meetings and hearing about other managers experiences they are reassured to know that others struggle with very similar issues such as staffing, funding and quality assurance.

Managers feel when there is “*just the recognition that your issues are my issues*” [Sinead-Crèche manager], when “*you know you’re not on your own...others have dealt with similar things to you and they’re there to guide you*” [Emer-Preschool manager]. “*Where you hear somebody else is feeling the same way... just helps your confidence*” [Claire-Crèche manager].

Access to and sharing information

Accessing and sharing information between settings has been positive and has opened up new channels of communication. Given the diversity of EY service provision within the Network it is useful for managers to discuss differences and similarities. For example Early Years settings are inspected by Tusla Early Years Inspection Service, whereas Early Start programmes are inspected by the Department of Education and Skills. It is useful for managers to share this information.



A safe place to seek advice

Managers have said how pleased they are with the level of comfort to open up and ask for advice within the Network. When someone brings an issue to the table and asks for advice, the Network is seen as a safe place to have a discussion and problem solve. It is a place where managers listen and feel that they are heard.

Feeling part of an EY community

The Southside Early Years Manager's Network promotes a general sense that managers are part of a wider Early Years community. One manager said *"we have more of an idea of the development of all the services in the area...you're feeling part of the community"* [Maeve-Preschool manager]. As a result of being part of the Network, managers:

- Feel less isolated
- Have formal and informal discussions and are a source of support for each other
- Are more open to sharing information
- Work more as colleagues than competitors
- Support one another with practical issues such as paperwork and the various requirements of EY schemes
- Have a shared understanding of Early Years practice
- Have a collective voice
- Seek out advice during, and outside of, Network meetings.

Managers working together

The Network fosters an ethos of Early Years managers working together with a common goal - to provide high quality early childhood care and education that enhances child outcomes. The following example highlights how managers working collectively can have a direct positive impact on children and families.

During the lifespan of Start Right, one of the Early Years settings on the Southside closed down. Many of the Network managers worked with Start Right and the local Family Resource Centre (FRC) to make sure that every child had an alternative childcare place and that the transition was as smooth as possible for children and families.

Another example was when one sessional setting in the model area struggled to recruit a suitable manager. The Network played an important role in identifying a suitably qualified and experienced candidate from the pool of EY settings on the Southside.

Professional Development

The Network has provided a platform for professional development within each Early Years setting on the Southside. Discussions about training needs at network meetings provided a basis for Start Right to explore training options with managers. Start Right organised comprehensive training for staff based on a combination of observed and those identified by managers and practitioners themselves.

Professional Development activities

The Network has also provided a foundation for using new and creative ways to up-skill practitioners, such as;

- On-site support and mentoring
- Staff site-exchange visits
- Onsite open training
- Daytrips to other centres and conferences.

These activities provide opportunities for managers and practitioners to experience the full diversity of Early Years practice. Practitioners are encouraged to discuss and reflect on their own practice and are motivated to make positive changes in their settings. Early Years managers are open to new ways of supporting staff to develop professionally. Managers realise the potential of their own resources to provide training opportunities for their staff. They now know that if they identify a training need, they can collectively decide to host training in their setting (i.e. Traveller Culture awareness training has been identified as a collective need and has been organised for early 2015).

Working together in this way:

Reduces costs for settings

Fosters a culture of being open to discussion and working together

Promotes relationship development and helps to build confidence

Highlights a solution focused approach in meeting setting needs

Encourages the use of community facilities beyond the traditional 9am-5pm model

Reassures practitioners that they are not alone, that others experience similar issues in their work



Training qualifications

Accredited training was a need identified by a number of the managers. Start Right, in discussion with the managers, provided funding to assist in the up-skilling of staff.

2011

6 out of 9 services had a total of 14 staff with no recognised childcare qualification

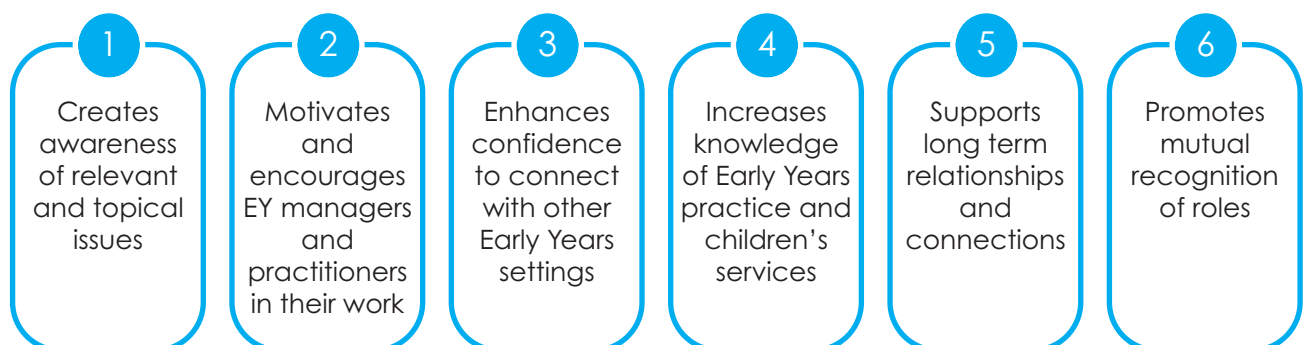
January 2014

- This number was reduced to 1
- 9 practitioners had completed FETAC level 5 training
- 5 practitioners were in the process of achieving level 5 accreditation
- Other practitioners who had achieved level 5 trained to level 6 and some went on to study degree level

Professionalism

Network meetings, though informal in style, are professional, an aspect that is encouraging for managers. There was a concern by some initially that meetings might lead to managers criticising and complaining about services and the EY sector, and would facilitate little more than a “collective moan”. However one manager explained how she was pleased to hear other managers discussing relevant issues about children, families and the wider community. She said; *“I found it refreshing because some of the managers were talking about the needs of the kids...I didn’t feel that alien from other managers...I found it much more like moving towards something”* [Gillian- Early Years Manager]. This professional aspect of the Network, which highlights a focus on outcomes for children and families, is an important characteristic of meetings.

Developing professionally together



Linking Services

Linking services

Through their engagement with Start Right, Early Years managers on the Southside are now connected with other professionals from statutory and community services and supports. They are more aware and have a broader understanding of children's services, local issues, other agency roles and how they can link with them.

Early Years staff now have a much clearer understanding of the referral process for children into other services. They have key information about the various agencies involved in referrals.



Child Psychology

Physiotherapy

Child and
Adolescent Mental
Health Services
(CAMHS)

Community
Dietitian

Early
Intervention

Eye/Optometry
Services

Occupational
Therapy

Public Health Nurse

Community
Welfare Officer

Social Work

Dental Health

Speech &
Language Therapy

Audiology

Start Right

Early Years settings can
play a vital role in:

- Supporting parents
- Reducing waiting times
- Maximising the use of existing resources
- Ultimately improving outcomes for children

Engagement with Parents

Promoting effective engagement with parents is a core part of Start Right's work. Through discussions with managers and practitioners, Start Right staff became aware of challenges around having sensitive conversations with parents.

A combination of strategies has contributed to EY settings being more prepared and open to working in partnership with parents. They are more aware of the importance of having a difficult or sensitive conversation with a parent around a child's needs and in referring children for assessment.

- The referral pathways meeting
- Comprehensive onsite Síolta mentoring (Standard 3: Parents & Families)
- Facilitated training sessions for staff about communicating with parents
- The funded Level 6 training in Inclusive Care and Education (0-6 years)
- Input from other professionals at Network meetings.

When referring parents to other settings or services, managers now feel more confident because they know each other's names. This means they can make it more personal for parents when referring them on. One manager commented

"The parents go off to the other service, and it gives them a leg up going in the door...[Maeve] sent me...it makes a difference, it makes them feel more comfortable" [Maeve-Preschool manager].



Sustainability of the Southside Early Years Manager's Network

Managers consider the Network to be a strategic resource and there is agreement that it should be sustained and developed further in the long-term. One manager summed it simply; *“Why we should stay connected is because we’re all part of the same community and we’re all delivering an early childhood service”* [Maeve-Preschool manager].

In order to continue, the Network members need to consider:

- The purpose of the Network
- Start Right's future involvement, in light of the project's operational withdrawal as it draws to close
- If the Network needs to be anchored by an agency. If so, by who?
- A sustainable venue
- Challenges
- Self-sustainability.

Network purpose

Some managers feel it is important to explore what the Network wants to achieve and that this information should inform how it is sustained over the long term. As one manager explained; *“To keep connected we need to all have a focus”*. She said, factors to consider are *“what we want to cover [and]...why are we meeting”* [Maeve-Preschool manager].

For example, it is felt that if the Network is exclusively a peer support structure for Early Years settings, then having ongoing input from external agencies would not be necessary.

Start Right's involvement

Start Right has played an important part in the establishment and maintenance of the Network to date and has had a presence at all meetings. However, Start Right's role is in facilitating the development of a network that can be self-sustaining in the long term.

Start Right is one of eleven National Early Years Access Initiative (NEYAI) projects, and is due to draw to an end in February 2015. Managers have, therefore, been encouraged to take an independent lead in developing the Network further.

Anchoring the Network

Some EY managers feel the Network needs to be anchored and supported by a specific agency. Having formal agency involvement gives it a level of professionalism, in addition to an independent voice. However others see agency involvement as making the Network overly formal and contrary to what has been achieved to date.

Limerick Childcare Committee (LCC) was mentioned by some managers as an option for anchoring it but there were mixed views. Over the last couple of years LCC has been undergoing restructuring and staff changes. Some Managers feel their relationship with the newly established LCC is not yet fully developed and heavy LCC input would be uncomfortable. Achieving a balance in agency involvement will be an important factor. However, given previous experience with EY Networks, the LCC could play a valuable role in the long-term sustainability of the Network.

A sustainable venue

The venue for meetings was carefully decided. It was important for long term sustainability that the Network did not rely on external factors, such as the cost and availability of a conveniently located venue. It was also essential that a meeting venue would be 'neutral'. While using their own settings for training events is very effective, it is important that managers have opportunities to network and reflect outside their own settings in a separate space.

With these considerations, the Network was provided with the use of a meeting room by Limerick Regeneration (Limerick City and County Council) on a cost-free basis. A commitment has been given to the continued use of the venue for community activities. This is an important factor in the future of the Network.

Challenges for managers

Some managers experience challenges in being present for meetings. While most of the managers feel that the timing of meetings works very well for them, some find it more difficult to leave their settings because of staff shortages and other issues that may arise. Meetings are held every six to eight weeks, normally in the early afternoon. While managers decide how often and what time meetings are held, they agree it is not always possible to accommodate everyone's preference.

Self-sustainability

A number of managers see the Network as sustaining itself in the long term. Suggestions include managers rotating the role of organiser every few months, an arrangement where managers take it in turns to have the responsibility of organising meetings and circulating emails. Managers now emphasise their own professionalism and the strength of the Network as it stands. The necessary ground work is in place:

- Managers have good relationships with one another
- There is a precedent set in how the Network operates in terms of structure, meeting content and familiarity with each other
- Managers are aware of other agencies they can call on for input
- They are committed to the future of the Network
- They are motivated to continue developing professionally.



Outcomes for Children

As highlighted throughout this case study, the Southside Early Years Managers Network is a forum for peer support, professional development and linking services and supports. Through these activities, managers are now better placed to provide high quality services for children and families.

The child's needs should always be considered as the most important factor when developing working and effective partnerships. Managers who work together and who establish links with other statutory and community supports and services are putting the child's safety, welfare, learning and development first.

Since January 2012, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs have been working towards developing an Early Years Strategy which will focus on the lives of children aged from 0-6 years. An Early Years Strategy presents an opportunity to apply learning from projects such as Start Right and connect that learning to outcomes for children. Through Start Right, Southside EY managers and practitioners made a submission to the drafting of the Early Years Strategy.

In the absence of a published Early Years Strategy, outcomes for children will be linked with the Five National Outcomes for Children and Young People as outlined in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020)*. Early Years settings are important environments that impact directly on all five outcomes for children. The following section provides some examples of how outcomes for children are enhanced as a result of the Southside Early Years Managers Network.



Children will be active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing

1

The Network supported children's transitions during a service closure by:

- Working together to make sure it was a smooth transition
- Having open communication between settings
- Sharing important information
- Working with parents.

Children's positive early experiences of transitions between settings can positively influence the success of later transitions. Continuity of experiences is very important to children's health and wellbeing.

Children are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development

2

Through Network professional development activities, managers and practitioners have increased knowledge and skills required to deliver a high quality service based on children's individual needs and interests. These activities have also encouraged reflection on values, attitudes and beliefs.

The Network encourages managers to work with other agencies. It has connected Early Years managers with each other, with school Principals, with Home School Liaison Officers and with other Statutory and community services and supports.

Managers are aware of the referral process for children with additional needs and are informed about the various services available. This supports equality of access to services; it improves waiting times for vital assessment and interventions that children need in order to achieve full potential in all areas of learning and development.

Children are safe and protected from harm

3

The Network is a forum where managers discuss and plan for a broad range of issues relating to their settings, such as:

- Garda vetting procedures
- Early Years inspections
- Training in child protection
- Health, safety, welfare and first aid
- Healthy eating
- Indoor and outdoor play spaces.

High quality, safe EY environments support children's all around development. They also provide opportunities for children to take risks and to think independently.



Children have economic security and opportunity

4

Having a collective voice enables managers to:

- Ask tough questions on behalf of all Early Years practitioners
- Advocate for the Early Years sector, children and parents
- Seek out funding sources for practitioner training and improving services
- Collectively address quality issues more broadly (i.e. engaging management committees)
- Advocate for children with Special Educational Needs and those who experience social disadvantage and social exclusion.

Equality of access to quality, affordable and accessible EY services can play an important role in protecting children from poverty and social exclusion.

Children have economic security and opportunity

4

Having a collective voice enables managers to:

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Equality of access to quality, affordable and accessible EY services can play an important role in protecting children from poverty and social exclusion.

Children are connected, respected and contributing to their world

5

The Network plays an important role in managers and practitioner's ability to work in partnership with parents:

- Managers now know each other which makes it easier to refer parents to each other
- They are aware of services and supports which are available for parents in the community
- They can guide and support parents to access those supports

Better outcomes for children are achieved:

- When information sharing between staff and parents is regular
- When parents are involved in decisions relating to their child's learning, care and education.

Strong and mutually respectful relationships between Early Years settings, parents and the community improves children's engagement and educational achievement.

Lessons for the Future

The development of the Southside Early Years Managers Network provides lessons that can inform the development of future networks. The development of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme (2013-2016) in Limerick City will see projects such as Start Right, which lead to improved child outcomes, rolled out across the city. The Southside Early Years Manager's Network provides a framework for the development of future Early Years manager and practitioner networks and, as such, provides important lessons.

Recommendations for Early Years Networks

- 1 Networks should have a primary focus on children's education, care and welfare to achieve better child outcomes.
- 2 Effective networks must recognise the key role parents play in their child's care and education and partner with them accordingly.
- 3 When bringing Early Years managers together it is important to understand and respect the diversity of provision in the Early Years sector.
- 4 Peer support should facilitate both personal and professional development.
- 5 Networks must support managers to have a collective voice.
- 6 Networks should provide opportunities to learn about and understand other Early Years settings and the challenges they face. Managers can then discuss ways of collectively addressing these challenges.
- 7 Barriers to up-skilling staff such as time, cost, and staffing should be addressed collectively, in order to make the best use of resources.
- 8 Management Committees must engage in quality training so they can support effective managers in providing a high quality service.
- 9 Networks should support professional development activities, such as on-site mentoring, shared training, staff exchange visits, accredited and non-accredited training. Networks therefore will have wider benefits for settings, children and families.
- 10 Managers prefer network meetings to be informal but with the flexibility to be more formal when needed.
- 11 Networks must play a central role in connecting Early Years settings and other statutory and community services and supports.
- 12 Networks should promote professional development activities that both enhance working in partnership with parents and connect parents with other services and supports.



Policy Note

The Southside Early Years Managers Network has important implications for the development of a national Early Years Strategy. Early Years networks are important structures that support professional development, enhance quality, improve outcomes for children and contribute to the development a competent Early Years system.

Children's early childhood care and education include aspects of their health, well-being, learning and development. In order to reflect the broader needs of children and families, Early Years settings need to be linked with each other and with other services in the community. There are a number of existing resources in communities that can be used differently and creatively to enhance outcomes for children and families.

Training and professional development activities are mostly done on managers and practitioner's own time and with little, or no funding. Early Years practitioners are generally only paid for contact time with children. Other non-contact elements of quality practice such as planning, documenting, reflecting, evaluating, meetings and networking are usually carried out on their own time.

Working conditions, pay, and availability of relief staff are key factors in quality services and in the sustainability of Early Years Networks. They also impact on practitioners and manager's motivation and availability to attend meetings.

Policies need to address the level of pay in the sector so as to allow for non-contact professional development opportunities and funding needs to be made available to accommodate this.

A National Early Years Strategy should identify Early Years Networks as 'learning communities' that are essential to the development of high quality settings and of a competent Early Years system. Such learning communities provide a space for managers to discuss, listen, reflect, plan for their services and link with others, so that outcomes for all learners, children, practitioners and managers are improved.

Final Thoughts

The Southside Early Years Managers Network facilitates peer support, access to and sharing of information and it serves to connect Early Years settings with other community and statutory services and supports. It is a forum for reflective practice and professional development. The Network has served to bridge a gap in the exchange of information between professionals and has promoted mutual respect and understanding of each other's roles.

It has empowered managers in their professional capacity and has linked them in with the wider community. It contributes in a number of ways to improved child outcomes.

Managers are more aware of what is happening beyond their individual settings, they are talking more to each other and engagement is becoming the norm.

“I think we’re all developing professionally in one way, but this has helped us to develop professionally and personally, which is far better”

[Maeve-Preschool manager]





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Start Right Limerick aims to improve outcomes for children under 6 years of age living in the Southside of Limerick City. Start Right is governed by 3 core principles:

1 Sustainability:

The programme will leave a strong legacy of improved quality of practice and service capacity, as well as through the introduction of new practice.

2 Service integration

3 The involvement of parents

The Start Right Programme serves children by applying these principles in

- a Building quality and professionalism in early years services
- b Offering an improved range of services accessible through both statutory and voluntary services, such as Art Therapy, Infant Massage, and Home-based supports to parents
- c Improving communication and coordination between agencies to ensure that the children are at the centre of needs led, rather than supply led, service provision.

These case studies aim to highlight what statistics cannot: that for practitioners, parents and carers the quality of relationships and interaction between people is as important as the changes being introduced. Whether in the context of improving quality through a practice manager, building confidence in early years practitioners to engage with parents and other services, and learn from each other, or taking the time to support parents who would not have otherwise engaged with services, the stories contained in the case have two common themes:

- Parental engagement is essential to effective intervention
- Quality services require quality relationships

We hope you find these studies both interesting and practical.



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