OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN
OIFIG AN AIRE DO LEANAÍ

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND CHILDREN
AN ROINN SLÁINTE AGUS LEANAÍ

national childcare strategy 2006-2010

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

The **Office of the Minister for Children (OMC)** is responsible for the National Childcare Strategy 2006 - 2010.

What is the National Childcare Strategy?

The National Childcare Strategy aims to improve the availability and quality of childcare, to meet the needs of children and their parents.

The Government's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000 – 2006, is expected to produce 40,000 new childcare places. **A new National Childcare Investment Programme 2006 – 2010** has been launched by the OMC and is expected to create a further 50,000 childcare places.

In areas of disadvantage, the Childcare Investment Programme also provides staffing grants to community-based childcare services. These grants enable those services to provide childcare at a reduced cost to parents.

The OMC supports a network of 33 local City and County Childcare Committees. These provide a valuable resource for parents seeking information on childcare services and other issues relating to the care of young children.

New entitlements for parents under the Strategy

The Government has introduced a number of new and improved entitlements for parents to help them in giving the best possible care to their children, especially babies and children under 6 years of age.

These include:

- a new **Early Childcare Supplement** payment to parents, amounting to €1,000 in a full year;
- improved **Maternity and Adoptive Leave;**
- increased **Maternity Benefit;**
- a new programme of **educational opportunities** for children and adults in areas of disadvantage.

New Early Childcare Supplement

The new Early Childcare Supplement is intended to help parents of children under 6 years with the cost of caring for young children. It will also help parents to make the best childcare choices for their children.

The Early Childcare Supplement comes into effect on 1st April 2006 and will amount to **€1,000 per calendar year. 3 payments will be due to eligible parents in 2006.** A short delay is expected in the date of the first payment.

The Supplement will be paid in four quarterly amounts of **€250 for each quarter.** Each payment will be received by parents, or will be available for collection by them, **at the end of each quarter.** A child born at any stage during a quarter will qualify for the full payment for that quarter. A full payment will be made for the quarter in which a child reaches her or his 6th birthday.

Parents of children under 6 years who qualify for child benefit will **automatically qualify** for and receive the Early Childcare Supplement, which will be a direct and non-taxable payment. The OMC will be in contact with parents of qualifying children during 2006 with further details.

Improved Maternity and Adoptive Leave

During 2006 and 2007, major increases are being made in paid and unpaid Maternity Leave and Adoptive Leave. The increases are being made because the Government recognises the importance of the first year in a child's life and the costs and pressures involved in caring for infants.

Using a combination of maternity/adoptive leave and unpaid parental leave, many parents will now be able to care for their babies themselves for the first year of life. The care of babies can be shared by parents since unpaid parental leave can be taken by either parent.

The table below outlines leave entitlements and the dates from which the increased entitlements will apply:

	Pre-March 2006	March 2006	March 2007
Paid Maternity Leave	18 weeks	22 weeks	26 weeks
Unpaid Maternity Leave	8 weeks	12 weeks	16 weeks
Parental Leave	14 weeks	14 weeks	14 weeks
Total entitlement	40 weeks	48 weeks	56 weeks

Increased Maternity Benefit

To further support parents, the maximum rate of Maternity Benefit has been increased from €249.00 to €265.60 per week, effective from 2nd January 2006.

New programme of educational opportunities

A new social inclusion programme, called Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS), has been established by the Department of Education and Science. DEIS is intended to help in meeting the educational needs of children

and young people in disadvantaged communities. It includes measures from pre-school to second-level education, as well as education for students with special needs and second-chance education and training for adults. This programme will link in with the National Childcare Strategy. Parents with specific enquiries about DEIS should contact the Department of Education and Science.

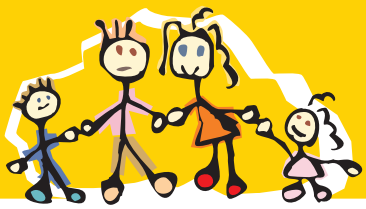
Notification and inspection of pre-school services

Pre-school services (for children under 6 years of age) are subject to notification and inspection requirements under Regulations made under the Child Care Act, 1991. The OMC has responsibility for the Regulations, the purpose of which is to improve childcare standards and ensure the health, safety and welfare of pre-school children, as well as promoting their development while attending pre-school services. The OMC has completed a review of the Regulations and updated Regulations will be introduced during 2006.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) is responsible for the operation of these requirements, which apply to pre-schools, playgroups, day nurseries, crèches, childminders and other similar services looking after more than 3 pre-school children. Parents with specific enquiries about the notification or inspection of a pre-school service should contact their local HSE Pre-School Services office.

Childminders

Childminders are recognised as an important part of childcare provision in Ireland and the preferred choice for many parents. While many childminders are covered by the Regulations governing pre-school services, the OMC is encouraging childminders who are not required to notify their services to the HSE to do so, through a voluntary notification system. New **Guidelines for Childminders** will be published by the OMC and will be available from local Childcare Committees during 2006.



Contact details

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