Early-Years Education-focused Inspection Report

Carebears Playgroup

09MH0139

Oberstown
Tara
County Meath

Date of Inspection: 17 May 2017
CONTEXT OF SETTING

Carebears Playgroup is a private early-years’ service which was established in 2000. It is located in a room in a private residence in Oberstown, Co. Meath. The service provides a morning sessional preschool programme for children enrolled on the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme. On the day of inspection, the owner/practitioner, one early-years practitioner and fifteen children were present. The setting was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and actions advised in this report, and the response submitted on behalf of the setting can be found in the appendix of this report.

AREA 1
QUALITY OF CONTEXT TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

• The quality of the context to support the children’s learning and development is fair.
• The children, their parents and their family members are greeted warmly at arrival and departure times.
• On the day of inspection, the practitioners demonstrated respectful, warm, supportive and sensitive interactions with the children. However, this was not consistent in every situation. It was observed that the children are sometimes not afforded autonomy and choice to respond to the practitioners’ requests to move to different spaces in the room or to remain seated for particular activities. On occasion, the practitioners physically moved children without giving them adequate direction or time to comply with requests.
• When disagreement arises in the group, the practitioners tend to address this without involving the children in arriving at a resolution. Such situations provide valuable opportunities which the practitioners can exploit to support the children’s developing self-regulation as they learn to comply with limits and boundaries and follow the verbal direction and requests of the practitioners.
• The daily routine consists mainly of adult-selected and directed activities such as a play period where the practitioners place resources on tables and direct the children where to play. Other examples of adult-led activities include the large-group circle time where the children answer the practitioners’ questions about the calendar and the weather; book time after lunch where the practitioners select the books for the children; and small-group activities where the children are expected to use materials in particular ways. On the day of the inspection, there was no time allocated for outdoor play. A more balanced approach to the planning of the daily routine where children are given greater autonomy to engage with materials and learning opportunities would promote their independence and self-regulation.
• There are some displays to support the children’s developing sense of identity and belonging. These include photographs on a birthday display, images of local landmarks and a picture collage titled ‘Our favourite things’ created by the children themselves.
• Openness and positive communication with parents are promoted by inviting them into the service for an open day in June, at Christmas and for the end-of-year celebrations.

Actions advised
• It is advised that the practitioners be consistent in their use of respectful and supportive interaction strategies with the children. These include maintaining good eye-contact, positive facial expression, sensitive tone and frequent acknowledgment of the children’s own ideas, thoughts and feelings.
• It is advised that the practitioners begin to focus on ways to carefully and sensitively support the children’s growing sense of agency and autonomy. The practitioners should begin to support and engage children in making decisions and choices about where they will play and what they will play with. The children should also be given a say in when they will change activities and how they will move around the room.
• To support the children’s positive behaviour, it is advised that the practitioners explain clearly and respectfully what the desired behaviours are and why the children’s cooperation is helpful. The children should be allowed time to internalise these positive messages and supported to understand what is required through talk and discussion. It is also suggested that the practitioners adopt problem-solving approaches with the children focussed on encouraging their cooperation and compliance.
It is advised that the practitioners establish a consistent daily routine that includes a substantial period of time for child-initiated play and learning. A range of engaging resources and materials should be freely accessible and available to the children each day. Promoting child-initiated exploration and play, in this way, supports the children’s learning and development, builds their capacity to be active agents in their own learning, fosters the children’s social skills and appropriately encourages independence and autonomy.

AREA 2
QUALITY OF PROCESSES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN’S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

• The quality of the processes to support the children’s learning and development is fair.
• The service implements a curriculum which appropriately acknowledges play as the primary mode of learning for young children but which also places a strong emphasis on adult direction and instruction within learning activities. The service is just beginning to engage with and become familiar with *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and is working towards fully incorporating the underlying principles of *Aistear* into the curriculum programme of the service. The curriculum is documented as a monthly narrative identifying themes and specific learning outcomes such as colour, number and shape recognition. In that regard, a broader approach to curriculum planning, based on the development of the children’s dispositions, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge and understanding through learning experiences, would support early learning and growth more effectively.
• Short-term planning for the curriculum consists of an adult-selected theme and a listing of adult-selected activities and materials that will be made available to the children on different days of the week. This planning approach does not take sufficient account of the children’s current interests or developmental needs and, in its current format, does not enable the provision of a connected, holistic learning experience for the children.
• The practitioners maintain a notebook for each child in which they record the child’s attainment of specific learning outcomes such as the identification of colours, 2D shapes and numbers. Many comments recorded in the notebooks do not reflect the breadth of children’s individual strengths, achievements and learning. The practitioners record some narrative observations on aspects of the children’s learning and these are sometimes usefully supported by a photograph.
• The spacious, bright and well-maintained learning environment provides an appropriate educational setting for young children. There are materials and resources for many types of play. Some types of play are only available on particular days of the week and the practitioners choose which materials the children will use during the different play periods. The environment and resources could be used more flexibly and more effectively to support and extend the children’s learning and development.
• During most of the session observed, the practitioners supervised, engaged with the children to direct their play activities and behaviour, resolved conflict and cleaned the room. In addition, the practitioners demonstrated some effective pedagogical interaction strategies such as playing alongside the children and suggesting how the children might use the materials.

Actions advised
- In order to develop an emergent curriculum, it is advised that the practitioners engage with the learning goals in *Aistear* and begin to incorporate the children’s current interests and development needs into the short-term planning process.
- To support the children to develop agency and become active in their own learning and development, it is advised that a greater range of resources, materials and types of play be made available to the children each day during a free play period. This will allow the children to follow their own play and learning interests, make choices and decisions and take responsibility.
- It is advised that the practitioners reduce the amount of time spent on adult-selected and directed activities.
- Building on what is working well, it is advised that the practitioners support and extend the children’s learning and development by sitting and playing with the children; following the children’s play leads and engaging in conversations using a balance of listening and contributing. It is also suggested that greater use be made of open-ended questions and opportunities to positively acknowledge children’s ideas, activities and achievements.
AREA 3
QUALITY OF CHILDREN’S LEARNING EXPERIENCES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- The quality of the children’s learning experiences and achievements is good.
- The children settle easily into the session at arrival and demonstrate eagerness to begin playing and learning.
- Relationships between the children are generally positive and some strong friendships are evident. Some instances of disagreement were also observed during the session. Most of the children have not yet developed the capacity to use problem-solving strategies to resolve their differences and this is an area where practitioners could very usefully guide the children to develop appropriate social skills and foster harmonious relationships.
- The children demonstrate enjoyment and engagement in some of the activities selected by the practitioners for them. Children became frustrated during the long seated period that occurred after lunch. They were unable to sustain interest or engagement in the prolonged adult-directed activity and they disengaged from the activity.
- Some children demonstrated a good capacity to comply with adult direction.
- The children are developing the ability and confidence to play alone, in pairs and in small groups.
- The children did not have opportunities to engage in art or mark-making activities during the session observed. The children’s art work is displayed in the learning environment and it tends be based on art or craft work which the children complete according to a template. Examples of individual, creative, artistic expression or mark-making were not evident.
- Many children are creative in their ideas and use of play materials. A small group of children made ‘magic wands’ with connector straws and were keen to move around the room casting spells.
- The children ask questions and seek to investigate and understand their world. One child wondered why he could see the head of a nail at the bottom of the sand tray and looked underneath to see how it was holding the tray onto the base. This incidental learning opportunity was responded to and could have been extended further by the practitioner.
- The children conversed freely and competently with each other demonstrating good conversational skills. There were limited opportunities for the children to engage in conversations with peers, facilitated by the practitioners, during the session observed.
- Many children display confidence in discussing their play ideas and sharing information about their families, expressing positive understanding of their own individual identity as family members.

Actions advised
- It is advised that the practitioners support the children’s social and emotional development by using a problem solving approach to support the children to understand their own and others’ feelings. The practitioners also have a valuable role to play in supporting the children to negotiate and resolve problems encountered during their interactions and play.
- It is advised that the children be provided with daily opportunities to use a range of art and mark-making materials, particularly during free play. This will support the children’s individual, creative and expressive development and their fine motor and pre-writing skills.
- To further support the children to communicate their experiences, ideas, thoughts and feelings, it is advised that the practitioners facilitate talk and discussion between the children at snack time, circle time and during play and learning activities.
- To support the children’s developing understanding of the world, it is advised that the practitioners provide increased opportunities for the children to investigate and explore resources and activities that capture the children’s interests and imagination and to which they are attracted.

AREA 4
QUALITY OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP FOR LEARNING

- The quality of management and leadership for learning is good.
- The service is linked with local agencies for support and advice and the practitioners have recently engaged in an introductory course on Aistear and Síolta.
Effective team working was observed on the day of inspection. The practitioners engage in informal reflection at the end of each session. They review the day’s events and agree the activities to be facilitated on the following day.

Information about the service is shared with parents through a handbook and at an open day in June. The practitioners issue a questionnaire to parents annually to gather feedback on the service provided.

Information about individual children’s progression in learning and development is shared informally in conversation with parents. Written observations are shared with parents as they are completed. The practitioners arrange a formal meeting with parents in the spring term if they have concerns about a child’s progress and development. They meet formally with all parents in June.

The owner/practitioner has established a good professional relationship with the principal of the local primary school and she shares information about the children to support their transition. Parents are provided with an information leaflet with advice on how best to ensure their children’s successful transition to primary school.

**Actions advised**

- The practitioners are advised to access the Better Start mentoring service and to participate in the National Aistear Síolta Training Initiative. This professional engagement will enable the practitioners to build a shared understanding of the two national frameworks Síolta and Aistear and to further develop their own practice and pre-school programme within an enabling quality framework.

- It is advised that practitioners adopt a more formal structure for their meetings and use this time to reflect and plan for the next steps in the children’s learning and development and for quality improvement in the service.

- It is advised that priority be given in quality improvement to reviewing the strategies and language used to effectively lead the children’s learning and manage their involvement and cooperation in the planned learning routines and activities.

- It is advised that the formal meeting with parents to share information on their child’s progress in development and learning be held earlier in the year to allow for the two-way sharing of information which can inform curriculum planning.

**CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT THE ACTIONS ADVISED ABOVE**

Based on the professional and open dialogue with the owner/manager and early-years practitioner at the post-inspection feedback meeting, the capacity of the service to implement the actions advised above is good.
### Summary of Overall Inspection Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Quality Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quality of context to support children’s learning and development</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of processes to support children’s learning and development</td>
<td>Fair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of children’s learning experiences and achievements</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of management and leadership for learning</td>
<td>Good</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Language used in Early-Years Education-focused Inspection reports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality Level</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>Provision that is excellent is exemplary in meeting the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>Provision that is very good is highly effective in meeting the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Provision that is good is effective in meeting the needs of children but with some aspects to be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>Provision that is fair requires practice to be improved to meet the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Provision that is poor is inadequate and requires significant improvement to meet the needs of children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX

SETTING RESPONSE TO THE REPORT

SUBMITTED ON BEHALF OF THE SETTING

Area 1  Observations on the content of the inspection report.

Our service has always implemented a curriculum which appropriately acknowledges play as the primary mode of learning for young children.

Area 2  Follow-up actions planned or undertaken since the completion of the inspection activity to implement the findings and recommendations of the inspection.

- Building on what is working well, we have introduced a visual time table into our daily routine, which allows the children more autonomy and choice. This encourages them to move more independently and freely to their play activities. This also enables them to develop more responsibility for their learning.

- It has been acknowledged that the relationships between the children are generally positive and strong, and there are strong friendships evident. We are continuing to actively support the children to promote positive behaviour. We are consciously involving the children with the problem-solving strategies, which encourages their co-operation towards improved behaviour, leading to more harmonious relationships. The children are becoming more competent at arriving at solutions when disagreements arise for example in turn taking and sharing during their interactions and play.

- We have a wide variety of resources and play materials which are now more accessible and available to the children for child-initiated exploration and play. This encourages their independence during free play, supports their learning and development on a daily basis, and improves social skills.

- We are using the Aistear/Siolta Practice Guide templates more frequently for planning and documenting our curriculum. We are increasingly including the children’s current interests and developmental needs into our short-term plans. We realise that we are doing a lot of good work and we will document it more effectively so that our future plans will support next step learning for the children. We have moved from using the Early Childhood Ireland Observation Sheets to using the Aistear Learning Record to document the children’s achievements and learning outcomes.

- It has been acknowledged that the children conversed freely and competently with each other demonstrating good conversational skills. We are using more open-ended questions during activities to stimulate and extend the children’s thinking, exploring, and learning opportunities.
• We use a large range of art and craft materials to create mark-making activities throughout the year for the children, of which some are based on template. We are now encouraging and supporting the children to use their imaginative skills to create individual mark-making activities, and it is greatly improving their expressive development.

We appreciate all feedback from the inspectors. We will continue build on providing a safe, fun, and stimulating environment for children, so that all their individual needs are met.