

Taking New Steps
Preparing for Junior Infants - a guide for families

Starting Big School

wexford 
local development
Forbairt Áitiúil Loch Garman

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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. 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.

Contents:

- Junior Infants
- What is Aistear?
- How can I help my child get ready for school?
- What about their first day at school?
- School Stuff and Subjects
- School Lingo
- Books and Website ideas

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 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 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.



Play is the best way for your child to learn and they might enjoy playing at being teacher. Physical play such as running, jumping, skipping, climbing, rolling 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.

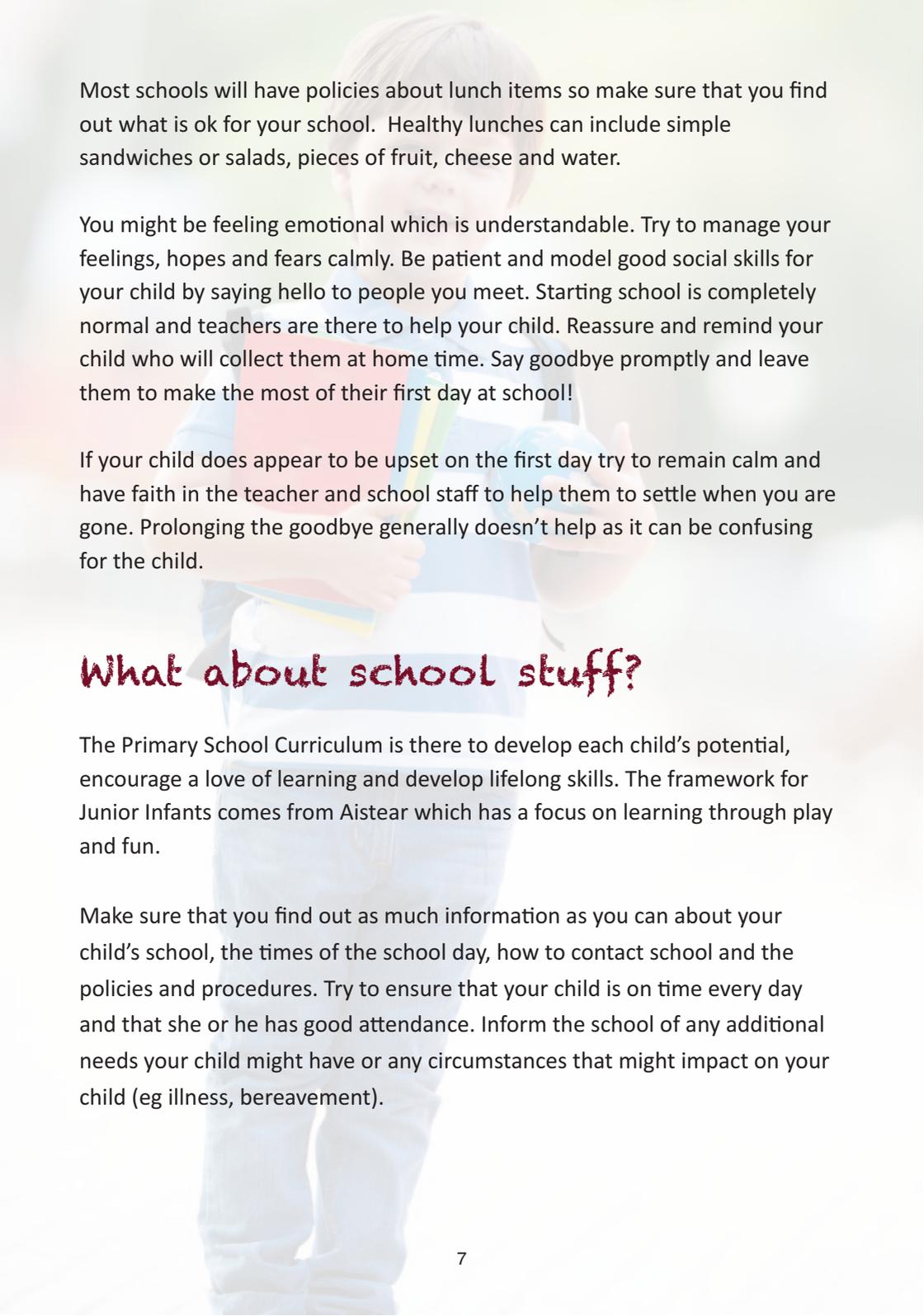
What about their first day at school?

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 routine really do help. In the weeks leading up to and after the first day try and have regular mealtimes and bedtimes. 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). Contact services.mywelfare.ie to find out more.



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 saying hello to 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 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 might have or any circumstances that might 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). This is a format for giving background information about your child to the 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 learning in 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 speak well than know all their letters or spellings. Speech is an essential part of communication and if your child is able to express their thoughts, feelings, needs and curiosity through spoken words it will really help them.

- Make time for natural conversations and chat with your child
- Listen to them and try to avoid interrupting
- Encourage them to ask questions and try to explain things
- Encourage them to identify and express their feelings eg ask 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
- Join and visit 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 encouraging use of language and ideas that are a feature of maths. 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 simple games with 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 smallest
- Gain an understanding of left and right
- 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 ideas by:

- Talking to your child about when they were born and some of the significant changes since then
- Talking about their first words
- Talking about what made them laugh, what made them cry
- Talking about where you live and what's around you
- 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 did

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 with them
- Let them play and make things with old boxes, packets, containers etc
- Let them play with different materials 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 improve co-ordination and also confidence and can be enjoyed indoors and outdoors.

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

Social, Personal and Health Education

SPHE looks at personal development, health and wellness and encourages independence. Helping your child to have some of these skills before they start school gives them great confidence and makes it easier for them to make the transition 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 and how they help you to be strong and healthy
- Encourage your child to make an effort and finish things, even 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.

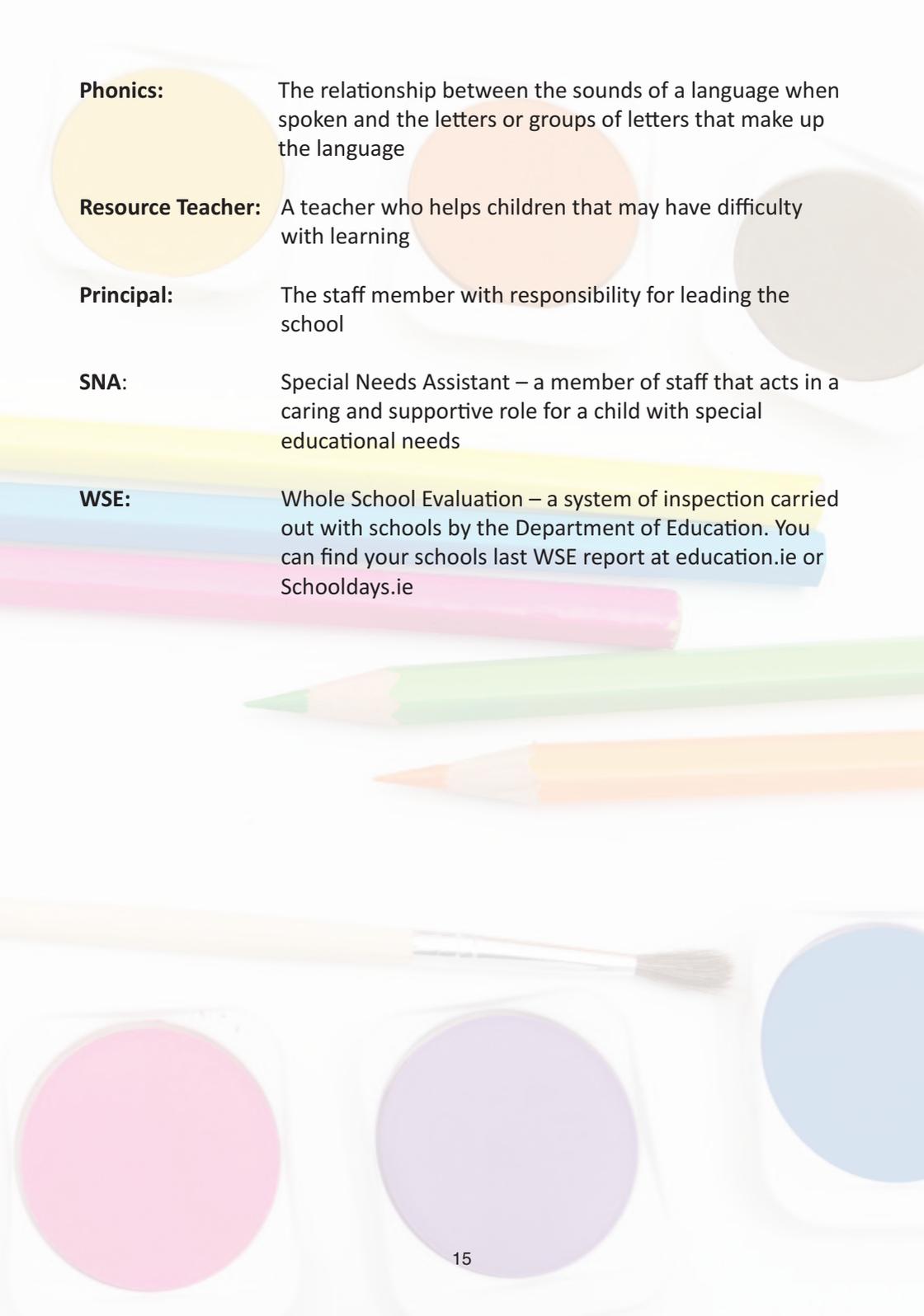
'The best way to help prepare your child for starting school is to make time for playing and talking. Playing, talking, questioning and getting used to other people, that's how they learn.'



School Lingo

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

- BTSCFA:** Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is a scheme of financial assistance for the cost of uniform etc. To find out more contact services.mywelfare.ie
- BOM:** Board of Management, the BOM is responsible for school policies, procedure and governance
- 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
- Fine Motor Skills:** The ability to complete small tasks 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
- EYS:** Early Years Services – pre-schools, creches and childminders provide early years care & education for children
- 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

Resource Teacher:

A teacher who helps children that may have difficulty with learning

Principal:

The staff member with responsibility for leading the school

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

There are so 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 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/>

For healthy lunch suggestions:

<https://www2.hse.ie/file-library/health-eating-active-living/healthy-lunchboxes.pdf>

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/children/healthy-lunch-box-to-grow,-learn-and-play-part-1.pdf>

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