



# Check It Out

a parent's guide to the pre-school regulations



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# Check It Out: A Parent's Guide to the Pre-school Regulations

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## Who is this guide for?

This guide is for parents or guardians who may be considering alternative pre-school childcare for their children. When choosing a pre-school service, parents should know what to look for and what questions to ask before making a decision.

## What regulations?

A new Child Care Act was passed in 1991. This Act is very important because it updates the laws relating to the care and protection of children. Part 7 deals especially with services for pre-school children, and it allows for the first time, regulations to be introduced for their supervision. These regulations came into effect in December 1996 and have been widely welcomed by agencies concerned with the needs and rights of children.

All pre-school services (except certain types of childminding) are required by law to abide by the regulations, and must be notified to their local health board. Minimum standards are set out regarding:

- Premises and Facilities.
- Health and Safety.
- Toys and Equipment.
- Space per child.
- Staffing levels.
- Numbers of children catered for.
- Records.

The health boards have responsibility for enforcing the regulations. Each health board has appointed pre-school officers to inspect the services in the area and to provide advice and support to the providers of those services. Inspections involve assessing the suitability of facilities and identifying areas which require change or improvement. Services are monitored on a continual basis.

**PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE THOSE UNDER THE AGE OF SIX WHO ARE NOT ALREADY ATTENDING SCHOOL.**

## Which pre-school services are covered by the regulations?

- Playgroups.
- Montessori schools.
- Crèches.
- Day Nurseries.
- Drop-in centres.
- Childminders caring for more than three pre-school children who are not from the same family.
- Other day care services for children under six, including those run by the health board.

## Are there any pre-school services not covered?

Yes, the following types of services are exempt from the regulations:

- The care of any pre-school child by a relative or by the spouse of a relative.
- Childminders taking care of pre-school children of the same family and no other children except their own.
- Childminders taking care of not more than three pre-school children of different families (apart from their own pre-school children).

For the purpose of the regulations, services are divided into different categories:

**Sessional Services** – Offer a planned programme for not more than 3.5 hours per session, including pre-schools, playgroups, Montessori groups, naíonraí and others, which cater for children between the ages of 2 and 6 years. Where a service cares for younger children, different staffing levels apply.

**Full Day Care** – Day care services for pre-school children offered for more than 3.5 hours, including day nurseries and crèches.

**Drop-in Centres** – Services provided in shopping centres, leisure centres, hotels, etc. where children can be left for a short period of time while parents avail of a service or attend an event.

**Childminders** – People minding children in the minder's home for all or part of the day.

# Requirements for all services

## Insurance

- All services must have adequate insurance cover in place, including public liability, fire & theft and employer's liability.

## Premises should be:

- Bright, with plenty of natural light
- Airy, and well ventilated
- Structurally sound and in good repair
- Clean and hygienic
- Warm, comfortable and suitable for the age group being cared for

## Other Requirements:

- Furniture and equipment must be well maintained and in a safe condition.
- Work and play surfaces must be of non-toxic material and be kept clean and safe at all times.
- There should be an adequate number of toilets for children and staff, kept in a clean condition.
- There should be an adequate number of wash-hand basins with hot and cold water and drying facilities.
- Appropriate and safe nappy changing area.
- Electrical appliances safely protected, including socket covers.
- Patio doors and low-level windows protected.
- Thermostatically controlled hot water.
- Cupboard locks in place.
- Fully equipped first-aid kit and at least one member of staff qualified in first-aid.

## Food Arrangements

Kitchen area must be clean with proper washing up and sterilising equipment and hand washing facilities. There should be suitable storage space including a fridge. Staff should be familiar with the principles of good food hygiene and take special care to avoid the risk of cross contamination.

## Medical Arrangements

All pre-school facilities must have a first-aid kit on the premises, a staff member who has been trained in first-aid, and appropriate arrangements in place in the event of an emergency.

## Fire Safety

There must be a fire extinguisher and fire blanket in place and smoke detectors installed. Regular fire drills must be carried out and all staff must be familiar with evacuation procedures.

## Records

The service must keep clear, written records about their service including:

- Details regarding everyone working in the service
- Daily attendance of each child
- Staff rosters and staff/child ratios
- Numbers of children catered for
- Details of any medicine administered to a child attending the service
- Details of any accident or injury involving a child attending the service
- The facilities available
- Opening hours and fees
- All fire drills, and details of fire fighting equipment

## Register of all children attending the service

The service is required to keep a register with details of each child. This is good practice and is in the best interest of the child, the parents and staff, so it is important that parents co-operate in giving the information asked. Equally, parents should be concerned if they are not asked for relevant details about their child, e.g.:

- Name, address and contact numbers of parents or guardians, especially where they can be contacted at the time the child is being cared for.

- Authorisation for the collection of the child – this is extremely important and should be taken seriously by parents and carers.
- Details of any illness, disability or allergy suffered by the child and all useful information which may be helpful in caring for and understanding the child.
- The name, address and telephone number of the child’s family doctor, and records of any immunisations received.

This information should be treated with confidence and only available to the staff of the pre-school service and the child’s parents.

## Make the best choice for your child

While pre-school services must meet the regulations, parents have a responsibility to ensure that their child receives the best possible care. This will take time and effort but your child will benefit in the end and you will be happier to know that s/he is in safe hands.

- Decide what type of service will suit your needs best – Full Day Care, Childminder or Sessional Care?
- Think about what you want for your child. What are you going to look for?
- Find out about the services in your area – under the Regulations, health boards are required to provide you with information relevant to pre-school services. Contact the National Children’s Nurseries Association, the Irish Pre-school Playgroup Association or Childminding Ireland for a list of their members in your area.
- Your local Community Organisation, Partnership or Citizen’s Advice Centre may also be able to help.
- Ask other parents for recommendations.
- Visit the services and check them out for yourself. Remember, the most expensive is not necessarily the best.
- Be observant and ask questions!
- You will need to know about opening hours, fees, staff, activities provided, health and hygiene, security and safety, arrangements for emergencies, discipline, insurance, record keeping.

For more on choosing the best for your child, see **Get it Right** (Barnardo’s, 2000)

## Find out as much as possible about the service and the people working there

Before deciding on a particular service, you are entitled to ask for any of the following information:

- The name, position, qualifications and experience of the person in charge and of any other person working in the service.
- Details of the numbers of children being cared for.
- Details of the numbers of staff working at any given time.
- The type of programme provided.
- The facilities available.
- The opening hours and fees.
- What is included in the fees?
- Details of fire drills and fire fighting equipment on the premises.
- Whether there is a copy of Part 7 of the Child Care Act and the Pre-school Regulations available on the premises.

If you are the parent or guardian of a child already attending the service, the following information should also be available to you, relating to your child only:

- Details of staff on duty each day.
- Details of any medicine administered to your child.
- Details of any accident or injury involving your child while attending the service.

## Other points to consider

- Where the service provides food, is the menu nutritious and varied?
- Can special dietary needs be catered for?
- Is there due attention paid to general safety, e.g. is all equipment in good repair, are patio doors and low-level windows protected, stair gates where necessary, electrical appliances protected and socket covers in place?

- Are outside play areas secure and well supervised at all times?
- Is the hot water supply thermostatically controlled?
- Is there an adequately equipped first-aid box on the premises, and accessible to staff at all times?
- Is at least one member of staff trained in first-aid?

## Be observant

The Regulations are mainly concerned with the physical and environmental aspects of a pre-school service, or the aspects that are static and more easily seen. While these are very important, they only account for half the picture. Consider these questions and add your own:

- Is there a warm, caring atmosphere?
- Are the staff friendly and welcoming?
- How are children helped to settle in? Are parents encouraged to stay?
- Do the staff relate well to the children, to other staff members and to parents?
- How do staff deal with the children's behaviour?
- Do the children appear to be happy and enjoying themselves?
- Do they have lots to do, with lots of variety?
- Can the children make choices? Can they reach toys and books easily?
- Do they get enough fresh air, enough free play time and enough rest?

### You should be concerned if:

- There appears to be a lot of aggression among the children.
- There is a sense of chaos and disorder.
- The programme seems very regimented and strict.
- The staff seem more interested in each other than in the children.

- The children are allowed to become bored or disruptive.
- You are not happy with the level of supervision.

## Development of the child

The Regulations require that “every pre-school child attending a service has suitable means of expression and development through the use of books, toys, games and other play materials, having regard to his or her age and development.”

- A pre-school service should have a variety of toys and equipment in good condition, suitable for the age group catered for.
- Is there a wide variety of different activities offered to the children?
- Are the toys and books within reach of the children?
- Does the programme include different kinds of play and have a good supply of materials for them?
- Messy Play (water, sand, paint, playdough, etc.)
- Creative play (make and do, cutting and pasting, artwork, etc.)
- Pretend play (dressing up, role-play, imitation)
- Construction play (building blocks, Duplo, construction straws)
- Do the children have access to a safe outside play area?
- Is there an opportunity for rough and tumble or play involving whole body movement?
- Does the programme include table work and activities using fine motor skills (jigsaws, threading beads, stacking, etc.)
- Is there a quiet corner, and a good selection of children’s books appropriate for the different stages of the pre-school child?
- Is the space divided into different areas to allow for different activities?

# What else should I know?

## Checklist for Full Day Care

- Remember, your child will be spending a large part of the day and most of his/her waking hours in the service.
- Are you satisfied that there are enough staff to care for and supervise the children?
- Are you satisfied that the staff are capable of caring properly for the number of children in their care? Are they qualified and experienced?
- Will your child receive continuity of care, i.e. the number of staff changes and how the duty rosters are managed?
- Are the facilities for resting and sleeping areas suitable for your child's needs?
- Does the space available meet the requirements?
- Is the food preparation area clean, and are adequate health and safety precautions taken by adults preparing food?
- Do the staff have sufficient information about your child to be able to deal with an emergency?
- Would you feel welcome to discuss your child with the staff?
- Does the atmosphere and environment give you confidence in the service?

## Checklist for Sessional Pre-school, Playgroup, Naíonraí, Montessori

- Has the service been notified to the local health board?
- Is the environment safe, clean, warm, bright and airy?
- Is the atmosphere welcoming and friendly?
- Are there enough staff? Are they qualified and experienced?
- Is there a balanced programme of care and stimulation offered to the children?
- Is there a good selection of toys and play equipment available?

## Checklist for Childminders

- Are the premises suitable for the children being cared for?
- Is it a child-friendly environment or is the childminder very houseproud?
- Have adequate safety measures been taken?
- Are you happy that this person is experienced and capable of taking care of your child?
- Have you asked for references?
- Is there a second person on the premises? Is there a telephone?
- Can you work out a contract which suits you and your child?
- Find out what is included in the fees.
- If your child does not attend, are you charged for that time?
- If the childminder needs time off, how much notice can you expect?

### Adult/Child Ratios

	Age	Adult/Child Ratio
Full Day Care	0-1 year	1:3
	1-3 years	1:6
	3-6 years	1:8
Sessional Services	0-6 years	1:10
Drop-in Centres	1-6 years	1:8
	Under 12 months	1:3
Childminders	Max. 6 children under 6 years, includes max. 3 children under 1 year and includes childminder's own children.	

### Floor Area per Child

	Age	Floor area per child
Full Day Care	0-1 year	3.70 sq metres
	1-2 years	2.80 sq metres
	2-6 years	2.32 sq metres
Sessional Services	0-6 years	2.00 sq metres
Drop-in Centres	0-6 years	2.00 sq metres
Childminders	For the judgement of Inspectors in line with the Code of Practice	

### Sanitary Facilities

No. of Persons	Water Closets	Wash-hand Basins
For every 10 children	1	1
For every 8 adults	1	1

**MANY PROBLEMS ARISE BECAUSE OF POOR OR UNCLEAR COMMUNICATION AT THE START. IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR EVERYONE CONCERNED, BUT ESPECIALLY YOUR CHILD, THAT YOU HAVE A GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR CHILD'S CARER.**

## What can I do if a pre-school service does not meet the criteria in the regulations?

If you have any concerns regarding the operation of a pre-school service, you should contact the Pre-school Officer in your local health board (see useful addresses).

## Useful Addresses

### **National Children's Resource Centres**

#### **Barnardos**

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8  
Tel: 01 4549699 Fax: 01 4530300  
e-mail: info@barnardos.ie

#### **Barnardos**

18 St. Patricks Hill, Cork  
Tel: 021 552100 Fax: 021 552120  
e-mail: info@cork.barnardos.ie

#### **Barnardos**

10 Sarsfield St, Limerick  
Tel: 061 411313 Fax: 061 440214  
e-mail: info@limerick.barnardos.ie

#### **Barnardos**

6 St. Brendan's Road  
Woodquay, Galway  
Tel: 091 565058 Fax: 091 565060

### **Irish Pre-school Play Groups Association (I.P.P.A.)**

SPADE Enterprise Centre  
North King St., Dublin 7  
Tel: 01 6719245 Fax: 01 6711356

### **I.S.P.C.C.**

20 Molesworth Street, Dublin 2  
Tel: 01 6794944 Fax: 01 6791746

### **National Children's Nurseries Association (N.C.N.A.)**

Carmichael House  
North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7  
Tel: 01 8722053 Fax: 01 8735737

### **Childminding Ireland**

49, Applewood  
Greystones, Co. Wicklow  
Tel: 01 2871111 Fax: 01 2871710

### **An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaíochta Teo,**

7, Merrion Square, Dublin 2  
Tel: 01 6398441

### **Association of Montessori Teachers of Ireland,**

20 Vernon Gardens, Clontarf, Dublin 3  
Tel: 01 8331537

### **Eastern Regional Health Authority**

Pre-school Service  
Unit 1  
St. Davids House, Main Street  
Naas, Co. Kildare  
Tel: 045 866195/866372

### **South Eastern Health Board**

Pre-school Services Officer  
Community Care Centre  
James Green, Kilkenny  
Tel: 056 52208

### **Community Care Centre**

Cork Road, Waterford  
Tel: 051 842800

### **Community Care Centre**

Western Road, Clonmel  
Tel: 056 77000

### **Community Care Centre,**

Grogans Road, Wexford  
Tel: 053 23522

### **Midland Health Board**

The Pre-school Services Officer  
Childcare Unit, General Hospital  
Tullamore, Co. Offaly





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