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# Report on a consultation with young children

Appendix 1 to the publication:

***Growing Up in Ireland***

Research Needs Report for Cohort 24 at 3 years

April 2025

RESEARCH +  
EVALUATION



An Roinn Leanaí, Comhionannais,  
Míchumais, Lánpháirtíochta agus Óige  
Department of Children, Equality,  
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# Report on a consultation with young children

## *Appendix 1 to the publication:* **Growing Up in Ireland**

Research Needs Report for Cohort 24 at 3  
years

Compiled by Dr Alexis Carey, Maria Tibbs & Siofra McCrum  
on behalf of DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg



Fás Aníos in Éirinn  
Growing Up in Ireland

# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	1
<b>Executive Summary</b>	2
<b>1.Rationale for Consultation</b>	2
<b>2. Methodology</b>	3
2.1 Consultation Design and Implementation	3
2.2 Core Question	3
2.3 Methods Used	3
2.3.1 <i>Wall of Wonder (WoW)</i>	4
2.3.2 <i>Photography Tokens and Creative Expression</i>	5
2.3.3 <i>Documentation</i>	5
2.3.4 <i>Collection of Themes and Data</i>	6
2.3.5 <i>Data Submission</i>	6
2.4 Data Analysis	6
2.4.1 <i>Challenges in Data Quality For each submission</i>	6
2.4.2 <i>Data Analysis</i>	7
<b>3. Results</b>	8
3.1 Modes of Expression	8
3.2 Themes Identified	8
3.2.1 <i>Significant Relationships and Social Connections</i>	8
3.2.2 <i>The Natural World</i>	12
3.2.3 <i>The Prominence of Play</i>	13
3.2.4 <i>Celebrations and Special Events</i>	15
3.2.5 <i>Gift giving</i>	15
3.2.6 <i>Special Interests</i>	15
3.2.7 <i>Food</i>	17
3.3 Observations on Expression Modalities	18
<b>4. Next Steps</b>	18
<b>Appendices</b>	19
A. Materials Provided	19
B. Consent and Assent Procedures	19
C. Instructions provided to ELC educators	20

## Foreword

The report that follows was commissioned by the Growing Up in Ireland team in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) to support the development of the publication, *Research Needs Report for Cohort 24 at 3 Years*. It is published here in its original submitted form as an appendix to the main report.

The methodology for the consultation with young children was developed by colleagues in Hub na nÓg and conducted by the educators in two early learning centres. Even though the focus of the main report is on 3-year-olds specifically, it should be noted that the participating groups in the centres included some children who had already turned 4 years of age. The report in this appendix was authored by Dr Alexis Carey, Maria Tibbs, and Siofra McCrum based on an analysis of the materials generated by the children taking part in the consultation.

The Growing Up in Ireland team in DCEDIY would like to express their gratitude to the report authors; the children, parents and staff in the participating centres; as well as associated Departmental colleagues in Hub na nÓg and the Participation, Play and Recreation Unit.

## Executive Summary

This consultation engaged young children to identify what they liked and valued, informing the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) in their recommendations to the Central Statistics Office for the development of the new *Growing Up in Ireland* survey for Cohort 24 at age three. Using participatory methods, early learning centre (ELC) staff introduced the topic through group discussions, supported by a puppet and creative activities like drawing, Play-Doh, and Duplo.

Children's views were documented using Walls of Wonder, photography tokens, and verbatim notes to ensure authenticity. An inductive analysis preserved children's voices while organising their responses into coherent themes.

Key themes included family and social connections, nature, play, special occasions, gift-giving, food, and personal interests.

## 1. Rationale for Consultation

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth Affairs (DCEDIY) is committed to ensuring children's voices are central in policy development, as outlined under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>1</sup> This consultation, a collaboration between DCEDIY and Hub na nÓg,<sup>2</sup> sought to engage three-year-old children in identifying their preferences and priorities to inform themes for the Growing Up in Ireland Survey for Cohort '24 at age three. This consultation intends to ask young children to identify what they like and what is important in their lives in a child-friendly way so that they can influence decisions made by the DCEDIY regarding their recommendations to the Central Statistics Office. By directly involving young children, the initiative aligns with the principles of the National Framework for Children and Young People's

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child. Treaty Series, 1577, 3 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>

<sup>2</sup> Hub na nÓg is the National Centre of Excellence and Coordination in Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making supporting government departments, state agencies, public services, and non-government organisations in fostering opportunities for children and young people, particularly seldom-heard groups, to engage in decision-making.

Participation in Decision-Making 2021,<sup>3</sup> ensuring children's views are heard and valued in shaping future surveys.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Consultation Design and Implementation

The methodology employed in this consultation was designed to align with principles of participatory research and was tailored to capture the views of three-year-old children in a meaningful and developmentally appropriate manner. The process incorporated creative, multi-modal approaches to ensure children could freely express their preferences and priorities. Early Learning and Care (ELC) Educators facilitated the consultation within familiar settings, fostering a secure and supportive environment. Hub na nÓg provided one hour of online training, instructions, and resources required (see Appendix A-C), to ensure the methodology adhered to best practices.

### 2.2 Core Question

To identify what was most important to the participating children, the consultation focused on one key question:

**"I wonder what you like?"**

### 2.3 Methods Used

ELC staff were instructed to introduce the consultation topic through a group discussion or circle time activity. A puppet and an accompanying story provided during the training served as tools to engage the children and explain the process, creating a playful and inviting context aligned with their developmental ages. Staff were guided to present the puppet as a visitor from a magical land, curious to learn about the lives of young children in Ireland. The explanation included the following key messages:

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<sup>3</sup> Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. (2021). National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in decision-making. Dublin: Government Publications.



1. The puppet would ask questions to understand what the children like and their preferences.
2. The children's responses would be shared with a writer to create a book for adults to inform their planning.
3. The puppet would return to update the children on the outcomes of the adults' plan.

### 2.3.1 Wall of Wonder (WoW)



Each ELC service was provided with a "Wall of Wonder" (WoW), a visual and interactive space for gathering and displaying the children's views.

Staff were instructed to ask the children a series of key and sub-questions, including:

Key Question:

- *I wonder what you like?*

Sub Questions:

- *I wonder what you think is important?*
- *I wonder what you like to play?*
- *I wonder where you like to go?*
- *I wonder what you like to do?*
- *I wonder what is your favourite thing?*

Identified themes from the children's responses (e.g., holidays, lunch, pirates) were to be noted and displayed on the WoW.



### 2.3.2 Photography Tokens and Creative Expression

A multi-method approach ensured that children could respond in ways that were most comfortable for them. To accommodate diverse communication styles, staff were encouraged to allow children to respond through creative activities such as Play-Doh, Duplo, or drawing.

- **Duplo:** Building models to represent their ideas.
- **Drawing:** Illustrating what they like.
- **Playdoh:** Sculpting representations of what they like.



Photography tokens were introduced as a way for children to indicate which of their creations or activities they wanted documented. ELC educators were instructed to monitor these tokens throughout the day and use them as prompts to take photographs and document the accompanying descriptions, explaining their significance. Instructions for ELC educators were as follows: it is essential that all information provided by the young children is noted down in their exact words. If a word or point is not understood, educators were instructed to ask the children to elaborate to

ensure their views were accurately captured. This step was critical to preserving the authenticity of the children's voices. Additional video instructions on using the provided instant camera were available via a shared link. For more detailed description of all instructions provided refer to Appendix C. These outputs will be referred to collectively as the data, throughout the report.

### 2.3.3 Documentation

All information provided by the children was documented verbatim to ensure accuracy by the ELC educator. If a child's response was unclear, staff were instructed to ask follow-up questions for clarification. Photographs were to be labelled with notes or written on the reverse detailing the context or the child's explanation and attached to the WoW. No photographs of children or identifying details were permitted, ensuring anonymity.

### 2.3.4 Collection of Themes and Data

Themes emerging from group discussions and creative activities were to be compiled alongside related notes and quotes. Staff were to gather these materials in mesh bags provided for this purpose (30 bags per service). Materials were to be organised by theme to facilitate analysis.

### 2.3.5 Data Submission

Completed collections of photographs, notes, and themes were prepared for delivery to the report writers. A courier service was arranged to collect the materials.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

### 2.4.1 Challenges in Data Quality For each submission:

- **Duplo and Playdoh:** Models were photographed alongside notes documenting children's verbal explanations.
- **Drawings:** The artwork was photographed, with descriptions written directly on the illustration or attached via post-it notes.

A subset of the drawings and their accompanying descriptions presented challenges due to the following factors:

1. **No post-it note used:** By ELC educators writing directly on the drawings rather than adding what the children said on a post-it note or writing on the back of the photograph as instructed, some of the writing within the drawings was hard to decipher.
2. **Photographic quality:** Some images were taken from a distance which made the accompanying text partially or fully illegible. In addition, some images only partially captured the writing.
3. **Legibility of handwriting:** Small or unclear handwriting directly on the artwork made some descriptions indecipherable.

Efforts to recover and interpret these illustrations included:

- **Independent review:** The two report writers and a research assistant independently reviewed the photographs to attempt transcription.
- **Technical assistance:** The CamScanner application and its AI tools were used to enhance photo quality and attempt to extract handwriting but were ultimately unsuccessful.

- **Professional consultation:** Two professional photographers reviewed the images to determine if enhancements could be made, but some of the results were inconclusive.
- **Meeting with educators:** A meeting was requested with ELC Educators to recall specific drawings and their contexts, as the original drawings had been returned to the children. Photographs were shared via email of the particular images that were hard to decipher along with the researchers' partial transcriptions. A meeting was then held between one of the report writers and an ELC educator. The deadline for the report was extended to accommodate this, and to help support these views being included in the report.

All of the above was a constructive process, given that eighteen drawings were illegible initially but after the above steps were taken only four drawings could not be coded and included in the data.

Additionally, while efforts were made to capture the children's views in their exact words, in some cases, points could have been expanded on further to understand the specific context or significance of what was important to the child. Educators were instructed to seek clarification on words or points that were not understood where possible. Further clarification on some points would have been beneficial. For example, if the child drew a 'dog' was it because they 'liked animals', 'liked having a pet', 'liked walking the dog with their family', or 'liked playing with the dog'. This may have given more nuance to the themes and some deeper insights into some of the children's expressed preferences may not have been fully captured.

### 2.4.2 Data Analysis

Verbatim transcription of the children's words was conducted for drawings, Duplo models, Playdoh sculptures, and Walls of Wonder. This was to preserve the authenticity of children's voices. Duplicate photographs were removed.

Using an inductive approach, the report writers and the research assistant reviewed the data to identify recurring themes. The analysis focused on preserving the integrity of the children's original expressions while organising the data into coherent themes and subthemes.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Modes of Expression

Children utilised the provided materials to express their preferences:

- **13 responses** involved Duplo models.
- **74 responses** were created through drawings.
- **15 responses** utilised Playdoh sculptures.

In addition, **9** Walls of Wonder were completed.

### 3.2 Themes Identified

From the consultation, the following themes were identified as significant to the children:

- Significant Relationships and Social Connections
- The Natural World
- The Prominence of Play
- Celebrations and Special Events
- Gift Giving
- Special Interests
- Food

These themes reflect the diverse aspects of children's lives, from the relationships they value with family and friends to their interests in specific topics and the importance of play, celebrations, and food. Each theme is explored in greater detail below, illustrating the key elements children identified as important to them.

#### 3.2.1 Significant Relationships and Social Connections

Children highlighted the importance of relationships with family and friends in their lives. Many referenced specific family members who were significant to them, activities they enjoyed with their families, and aspects of their home environment. Some also discussed the value of their peer relationships and friendships. These elements are further explored in the sub-themes below.



### 3.2.1.1 Important Family Members

When prompted to respond to what was important to them, children frequently identified a family member or several family members. Predominantly, these were core caregivers such as parents and grandparents. Many young people referenced themselves alongside these family members emphasising the centrality of their immediate family in their lives. One child described their creation as "My mammy, my daddy, and me" (See Picture 1), while another depicted "It's my mom".

**Picture 1**



*"It's my mom"*

Some young people extended their references to include siblings and, in some cases, their pets. Notably, some children used colour references to signify positive features of their family members or explicitly referenced the emotional experience of love to demonstrate their affection for their family. For example, one child described their picture: "Purple is my bestest colour like my sister" while another shared, "I love my family. It's my brother and me" (see **Picture 2**). These expressions highlight both emotional connections and the significance children place on their family relationships.

Again, children frequently mentioned themselves alongside these family members, offering insights into their understanding and perceived importance of their core family units. The repeated use of "Me" along with family member names such as "Dog" "Mam" "Brother" "My Mammy" "My Daddy" further reinforces the notion that family was central to their identity.

**Picture 2**



*"I love my family. It's my brother and me"*

### 3.2.1.2 Family Activities and Experiences

Many children referenced specific activities, outings, and experiences they had participated in with their family members. These activities ranged from their observations of family engaged in everyday activities, such as household chores, to simple interactions, like watching television with family members. Children also mentioned more playful or leisurely activities, such as *"going in the park with mum and dad."* For example, one child described, *"I'm drawing the grass, daddy, mammy, and nan, washing in the garden"* (see **Picture 3**) while another shared, *"My mam and watching TV and my dad and sisters"* (See **Picture 4**). These examples demonstrate the variety of experiences children associate with family time and highlight the importance of both everyday moments and more enjoyable activities.

**Picture 3**



*"I'm drawing the grass, daddy, mammy, and nan, washing in the garden"*

**Picture 4**



*"My mam and watching TV and my dad and sisters"*

For some young people, spending time with their family during special experiences, such as going on holiday, was particularly important. For instance, one child described: *"My holidays with my family and we have ice cream"*

### **3.2.1.3 Family in Context**

Beyond specific family members and experiences or activities with family, children also noted their home or family contexts and environments as important to them. This often reflected a simple reference to a specific family member's home or, in many cases, their own family home. For example, one child mentioned, *"My grannies house,"* while another said, *"This is our house and it has a slide and flowers in the garden"*. These references suggest that children not only value their relationships with family members and the shared activities but also the physical or emotional contexts in which these relationships occur.

### **3.2.1.4 Peer Relationships**

Friendships and peer relationships were identified by children as important in their lives. Although mentioned less frequently than family relationships, friendships were still seen as crucial social connections. This was reflected in children's descriptions of these often playful interactions, such as *"Ninja turtles with friends"* and *"making stuff with my friends"*. These quotes highlight the value children place on shared activities with their peers.

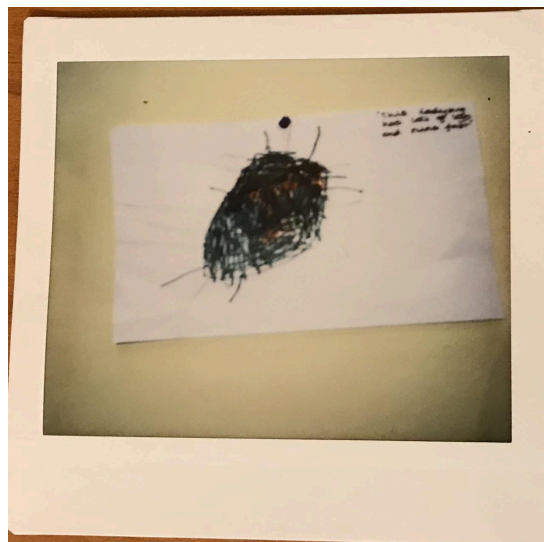
### 3.2.2 The Natural World

Children's references to the natural world were commonly seen in their drawings and creations. Many children depicted animals, natural environments, and landscapes, often reflecting a combination of their direct observations and creative interpretations. This is presented in the following subthemes: Animals and Nature and the Environment.

#### 3.2.2.1 Animals

Many children made simple references to animals in their drawings, Play-Doh, and Duplo creations, such as *"This is a dog"* or depicted animals engaged in activities, like *"A big fat red fish swimming in the sea"*. Children often attributed speed and agility to animals, suggesting they valued these traits. For instance, one child said, *"I'm a new snake that no one can eat. I'm the fastest snake in the world. I'm a snake cheetah"* while another noted, *"This ladybug has lots of legs and runs fast"* (See **Picture 5**). Children also expressed emotions through animals, as seen in statements like, *"A fish swimming and an angry fish,"* or *"This fish is not angry"*

**Picture 5**



*"This ladybug has lots of legs and runs fast"*

#### 3.2.2.2 Nature and the Environment

Children often included representations of natural elements in their drawings and creations. One child depicted *"cloud, rain, sun, and moon,"* while another offered a more imaginative take, describing *"a leaking sun"* with rays spilling out. Some children took a more detailed approach to nature, like the child who said, *"I want sky blue paint"*



to the sky, and green for the ground. It's lime green for the trees. I'm painting the whole world" (See **Picture 6**). Additionally, children expressed positive emotions through their depictions of nature, such as the "happy smiley faces looking at a rainbow".

**Picture 6**



*"I want sky blue paint to the sky, and green for the ground. It's lime green for the trees. I'm painting the whole world"*

### **3.2.3 The Prominence of Play**

Children discussed the prominence of play in their lives. Broken down, this often represented physical activities and outdoor play. In other cases, the importance of play was reflected in their descriptions of imaginative play, such as role-playing and pretend games, where they used their creativity to build and explore different scenarios and ideas.

#### **3.2.3.1 Physical and Outdoor Play**

Many children referenced physical activities and outdoor play, such as gymnastics, chasing, and jumping in puddles, highlighting their enjoyment of movement and outdoor exploration. For example, one child shared, "*jumping up and down in muddy puddles*," while another referenced the more general idea of "*games to play outside*". These examples reflect how outdoor play and physical activity are an important part of children's daily lives, providing opportunities for fun.

#### **3.2.3.2 Imaginative and Creative Play**

In addition to physical play, children also highlighted the importance of creative and imaginative play. This often involved building, making, and using their creativity to

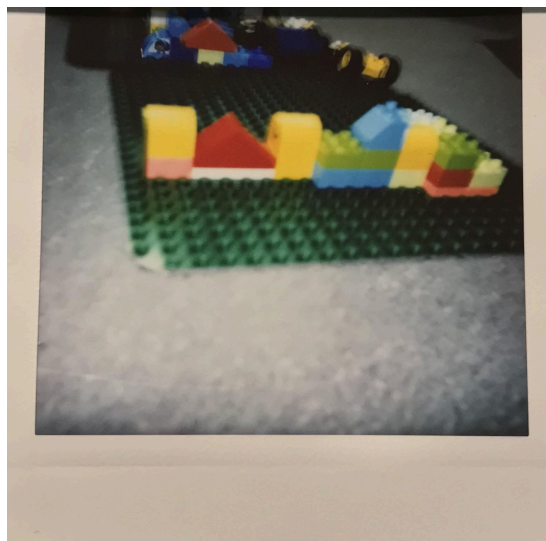
construct and design. For example, children mentioned activities like "Lego," "colouring," and "building towers, really big towers bigger than anyone". One child described the joy of "Playdoh, it's so soft," emphasising the tactile and sensory experience of creative activities. Another child described imaginative play with the statement: "An army man running through the trees. I like playing the army game" (See **Picture 7**). This demonstrates how children use their imagination to create scenarios, take on roles, and build elaborate play structures with materials such as Lego or Playdoh. For example, one child described "building my tower" and creating "Dinobridge" (See **Picture 8**). These examples highlight how children construct imaginative worlds and engage creatively with tactile materials.

**Picture 7**



*"An army man running through the trees.  
I like playing the army game"*

**Picture 8**

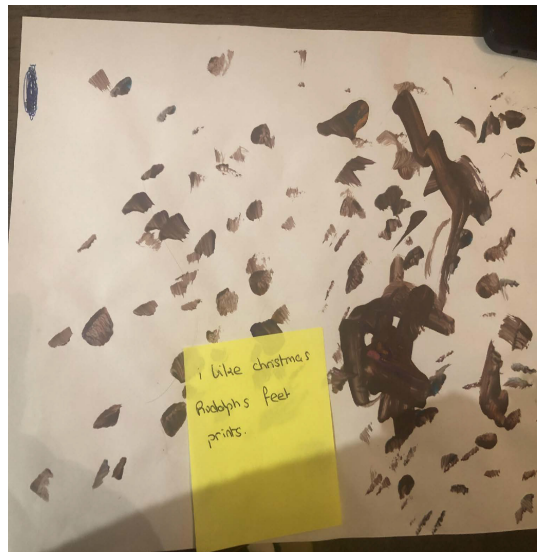


*"Dinobridge"*

### 3.2.4 Celebrations and Special Events

Children shared their excitement about celebrations, particularly Christmas. One child described their picture, saying, *"I like Christmas, Rudolph's feet prints"* (See **Picture 9**), while another explained, *"This is Rudolph flying up high"*. Birthdays were also mentioned, with one child simply noting, *"I made birthday cake"*. These quotes highlight the joy children associate with these special occasions.

**Picture 9**



*"I like Christmas, Rudolph's feet prints"*

### 3.2.5 Gift giving

Often, children expressed a desire to share their creations with family and friends, highlighting the significance of gift-giving and its role in building relationships. One child described their creation, saying, *"Look what I made for Mammy"* while another explained, *"I want red and yellow to make orange for my rainbow. I am making a rainbow for my mom, I need blue for the end"*. Similarly, another child described, *"A picture for my Nana"*. These quotes provide insight into how children use their creativity to connect with loved ones.

### 3.2.6 Special Interests

Children's special interests often included specific topics or themes that captured their attention. These interests were reflected in their play, with some focusing on vehicles, while others were drawn to characters from shows or puppets they interacted with or prehistoric animals like dinosaurs.

### 3.2.6.1 Vehicles

Children's special interest in vehicles was reflected in their descriptions of various types. One child said, "*This is the helicopter and it goes on the trailer*" while another described "*A tractor with wheels*" (See Picture 10) A third child mentioned "*A race car*" highlighting their fascination with different types of vehicles.

**Picture 10**



*"A tractor with wheels"*

### 3.2.6.2 Characters

Children also showed an interest in characters, often naming and describing them. One child identified the puppet "*That is Mrs. Magoo*", while another introduced the puppet, saying, "*My name is Ollie*" Ollie and Mrs. Magoo were the respective names they attributed to the puppets that were provided to the children by DCEDIY as part of the consultation. Additionally, characters from popular shows were mentioned, with one child saying, "*Peppa Pig*" and others mentioning "*Paw Patrol*."

### 3.2.6.3 Dinosaurs

Children also expressed an interest in dinosaurs. One child simply said, "*My T-rex*" while another described, "*That's a dinosaur*" (See Picture 11). These quotes highlight the children's fascination with these prehistoric creatures.



**Picture 11**



*"That's a dinosaur"*

### **3.2.7 Food**

Children often expressed their enjoyment of sweet treats and food, particularly when engaging in activities with Play-Doh. The sensory experience of creating food seemed to be especially significant. *"This is an ice cream"* (See **Picture 12**) was described, along with *"I made pancakes"*, and *"I'm making chippies"*. These quotes highlight the important role that enjoyable food plays in children's lives.

**Picture 12**



*"This is an Ice Cream"*

### 3.3 Observations on Expression Modalities

While the range of methodologies used to collect the data allowed for a diversity of responses, it is important to acknowledge that the medium of expression may have influenced the type of insights gathered. For instance:

- **Drawings** typically highlighted relational and experiential interests, such as activities with others or being outside in nature.
- **Duplo models** emphasised tangible, object-based preferences, such as playing with toys (e.g., cars) or engaging in construction play (e.g., making towers).
- **Play-Doh sculptures** often reflected sensory experiences, such as favourite foods or the enjoyment of sensory play with Play-Doh.

These varying methods provided unique windows into children's interests, demonstrating how the medium might have shaped the types of insights gathered.

## 4. Next Steps

Following the submission of the current report, the following activities will be undertaken:

#### 1. *Feedback to participants:*

A child-friendly summary of the findings will be created and shared with participating children via their ELC educators through the use of the provided puppet, ensuring they understand how their contributions have influenced the process.

#### 2. *Informing the survey design:*

The identified themes will guide the development of questions for parents in the Growing Up in Ireland Survey for Cohort '24 at age 3, ensuring alignment with children's expressed interests and priorities.

## Appendices

### A. Materials Provided:

- Puppet
- Instant Camera & Film
- Duplo
- Playdoh
- Crayola Materials
- A3 & A4 Paper
- Wall of Wonder Poster

### B. Consent and Assent Procedures:

Consent and assent protocols ensured all participation was voluntary and ethically conducted.

#### Consent

Before the consultation, Hub na nÓg required Early Learning and Care (ELC) Educators to inform guardians about the consultation and obtain their consent. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth (DCEDIY) communicated directly regarding consent requirements and associated procedures. If consent had not been provided for a child's views to be shared, the child could still participate in the activities; however, their views, work, or photographs of their work were not included in the materials submitted to the report writers.

#### Assent

Participation in consultations with children was entirely voluntary. Educators were responsible for continuously monitoring and respecting children's assent during the consultation process. Children retained the right to withdraw at any point and were not required to participate if they were unwilling, regardless of whether parental consent had been granted or they had previously assented.

## C. Instructions provided to ELC educators

The instructions are transcribed exactly as they appeared on the PowerPoint slide presented to ELC staff during the one-hour training session. Any additional information provided by the report writer is clearly identified within brackets [ ].

“We would ask you to introduce the topic through a group discussion/circle time with the young children you work with. We would ask that you use the puppet and story provided to introduce the topic, and explain to the young children what will happen to their views”.

[An image of a puppet was presented with this instruction to say to the children]:

“This is ... (Puppet), they have come to visit us for the week. They are from a magical land and know nothing about young children in Ireland. They are very curious and full of wonder. They always have questions about your world. They want to find out all the things that you like. The puppet will send all the things that you like to a writer. The writer will put them all into a book. This book will be shared with adults/grown ups who want to know all about what you like. The adults/grown ups want to know what young children like to help them make a plan. When the adults/grown ups make their plan then the puppet will come back and tell you all about what they put into their plan and what they did”.

[These additional instructions were provided].

“Your service will be provided with a Wall of Wonder (WoW). This is a place to gather and present the views of the young children. We would invite you to ask the following questions of the young children during group discussions.

### **Key Question:**

I wonder what you like?

### **Sub Questions:**

I wonder what you think is important?

I wonder what you like to play?

I wonder where you like to go?



I wonder what you like to do?

I wonder what you is your favourite thing?

If any themes are identified by the young children during group discussions we would ask you to note them on the WoW board. For example if a number of young children say holidays, lunch or pirates, then they could be noted as themes on the WoW.

### **Photography tokens:**

In the understanding that everyone communicates differently and that group discussions may not suit all young children, we ask you to allow them to respond throughout the day using Play doh, Duplo or drawing. To facilitate this we would ask you to introduce the idea of photography tokens, which are easily accessible to the young children. They can then place these beside any work they feel [answers] the questions. These can all be photographed, noted and attached to the WoW.

### **Photography:**

Your service will be provided with an instant camera and film. Throughout the day if the young children are doing an activity. i.e building, modeling, drawing in response to the consultation questions. We would invite you to please take a photograph of it and take notes. This can then be attached to the WoW.

### **Notes:**

It is essential that all information provided by the young children is noted down in their exact words, if a word or point is not understood please ask the children to tell you more so that you can accurately capture their views. The notes must be attached to the photograph for the report writer, this can be done by writing directly on the back or stapling a note to the photo.

### **Themes:**

If any themes are identified by the young children during group discussions and were gathered on the WoW. We would ask you to collect all these themes and the associated notes/quotes from young children together in a mesh bag.

We would appreciate if you could gather all photographs and notes that cover similar themes together and place them in a mesh bag. You will be provided with 30 mesh bags. No names of young children should be contained in any photographs and notes.

No photographs of children should be included in the collection, this includes in the background of the image.

**Sending the young children's views to the report writer:**

All the young children's views will be collected by a courier to be delivered to the report writer. Details will be provided for a date and time”

[A link to a video with instructions on how to use the camera was also provided].





Rialtas na hÉireann  
Government of Ireland