

## Impact of Covid19 on Early Years Education & Childcare

June 2020

### Introduction

1. Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Special Oireachtas Committee on Covid19 Response on the impact of Covid19 on early years education and childcare. Barnardos has been delivering quality, evidenced based services, providing practical and emotional supports to children, parents and families for almost 60 years. In 2019 we worked with more than 17,000 children and families across our 41 centres, including seven early years services. Our vision is a country where every child can reach their full potential. The children that Barnardos work with experience social and emotional loss, neglect and abuse due to: a lack of parental capacity; social isolation; bullying; acrimonious separation; domestic abuse; mental health issues; and alcohol or drug misuse or addiction. Barnardos also develops evidenced based best practice resources, mentoring and training for the early years sector. This experience as well as our role as a provider of high quality early years services to families gives us a unique perspective.

### Covid19 and Children

2. While not a high-risk group in relation to Covid19, from a physical health perspective, the pandemic has forced emotional, social and/or financial hardship on children everywhere.<sup>1</sup> Childcare and school closures, travel restrictions and being prevented from seeing family and friends have hit many children hard. Recent research carried out by Barnardos found that 84% of children miss their friends, 68% miss school, 53% are having difficulty with bedtime routine and 38% are experiencing more tantrums and outbursts.<sup>2</sup>
3. The effects are far more severe for vulnerable children, for example our research found lone parents reported more negative impact than two parent households. There is mounting evidence children who were already at risk of harm, those

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<sup>1</sup> OECD. (2020). *Combatting COVID-19's effect on children*. Paris: OECD.

<sup>2</sup> Barnardos. (2020). *Impact on family life during Covid19 pandemic*. Available at <https://www.barnardos.ie/policy/the-issues/covid19-impact-survey>

exposed to trauma or experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), are suffering disproportionately from the loss of social and educational supports which the closure of early years services represents. A large proportion of child welfare and protection referrals to Tusla come from schools and early years services. In April it was reported Tusla referrals had fallen by at least a third.<sup>3</sup> Children are still experiencing neglect, abuse and mental health issues. Likewise, poor parental mental health, alcohol and substance misuse and domestic violence have not gone away; they are now behind closed doors. In many cases these issues have been compounded by the restrictions placed on movement and the break in accessing support structures and relationships. Barnardos expects an increase in child welfare and protection concerns post- Covid19.

## Government response

4. The work done to date by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs has demonstrated the benefits of having a Department dedicated to children. The work done and the financial package made available to the sector is very much to be welcomed and Barnardos wishes to acknowledge this. It is vital that the issues facing childcare providers and parents must be examined and addressed if the sector is to be sufficiently supported at this time however, we feel strongly that children's interests must be central throughout any planning stage. We believe this can best be achieved with through a dedicated Department for Children and Youth Affairs.
5. The provision of public health guidance specific to childcare services provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) and approved by the Expert Advisory Group of NPHE 'Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic' published on 29 May is particularly welcome. A key consideration being that measures to reduce risk of infection transmission in childcare services should be child-centred and should avoid harming children's early learning and development is also very much to be welcomed. Resources for early years providers and parents focused on children's emotional needs during transitions, and considerations outlined relating to prioritising allocation of places available in the early stages of reopening, also show a focus on children's needs and interests.

## A child rights approach to early years education post Covid19

6. There is, and has been, rightly and understandably a very strong focus on health and safety in current planning. What has been at times missing, however, is a focus

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<sup>3</sup> The Irish Examiner (2020) 'Fears for vulnerable children as Tusla referrals drop by third', *The Irish Examiner*, 27 April [Online]. Available at <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/fears-for-vulnerable-children-as-tusla-referrals-drop-by-third-996344.html> [Accessed 19 May].

on young children's rights. In 'State of the World's Children' (2001) UNICEF asserts that:

*"... before many adults even realize what is happening, the brain cells of a new infant proliferate, synapses crackle and the patterns of a lifetime are established... Choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses"*<sup>4</sup>

Early childhood is a critical period for realising children's rights. Implementing children's rights in early childhood is an effective way to help prevent personal, social and educational difficulties in middle childhood and adolescence and beyond. Barnardos recommends there should be strong a focus on children's rights across Government and all those involved in reopening services for children.

7. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) requires that all children be respected as persons in their own right, including the very youngest children. Young children, it says, should be recognised as active members of families, communities and societies with their own concerns, interests and points of view. Young children "have been powerless within their families, and often voiceless and invisible within society. As holders of rights, even the youngest children are entitled to express their views, which should be "given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child"<sup>5</sup>
8. Article three of the UNCRC states that the best interests of the child must be of paramount consideration in all actions concerning children. During this pandemic the obligation to consider the child's best interests continues, is as important as ever and it applies to children as individuals and as a group or constituency. All legislative, policy and budgetary measures, as well as measures relating to environmental or service provision, which are likely to impact on the rights of children must take into consideration the best interests of children.
9. We know that equal access to good quality early learning and care is something which can contribute to ameliorating poverty, preventing ill-health and reducing inequities of access to other services, so it is a tool to promote children's rights. There is strong international evidence now too that, especially for children in poverty, experiencing high-quality early learning and care can produce lasting effects on educational and social outcomes.

### **Impact of loss of early years education on vulnerable children**

10. Barnardos welcomes that many of the issues for vulnerable groups are recognised and acknowledged in '*Planning for Reopening Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Services*' DCYA Report for Government 29 May 2020. Coping with separation, disruption, challenges and discontinuities in their lives puts inevitable

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<sup>4</sup> Unicef (2001) *State of the World's Children: Early Childhood*. New York, Oxford University Press

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Geneva: United Nations

stress on young children. The effects of such stress without adequate and appropriate supports, such as those generally provided in early years learning and care settings, can be very significant. Based on their experiences with those who care for them, children construct mental representations of what it is to be in a relationship with another.

11. Allowing for and prioritising attendance from 29 June by vulnerable children who would benefit from return to their early learning and care and school-age childcare service at the earliest opportunity, including children for whom early learning and care and school-age childcare is important on child welfare grounds is very welcome.
12. Anecdotally many early years providers and educators have expressed serious concerns, during the period of closure, about many of the children who normally attend their settings for whom the setting has previously been a respite and support. Some have reported family tragedies during the period of closure. Most children returning to early learning and care settings, having spent the past few months at home with only their immediate families, are likely to present with more significant than usual social and emotional needs which may be reflected in behaviour difficulties or even physical ailments. Children who were dealing with disadvantage in all its forms even before the COVID 19 crisis may return to settings in severe distress.
13. Some children may have regressed to earlier stages of their development and need additional supports to re-learn some of the learning they had previously gained. All children with additional needs should have access to supports similar to those accessed through the AIM Programme. These supports should be provided throughout the full year and available for children of all ages. ELC settings should have access to the National Educational Psychological Service.

### **Supports for early years educators and providers**

14. Many early years educators may themselves be coping with additional personal and family stresses as a result of the crisis. The vast majority of early years educators are women and we know women provide the majority of care work and are more likely to parent alone. Additional supports should be provided to early years educators returning to work in the wake of Covid19. Sufficient sick pay must be available to staff to ensure they are able to take the required time off should they become ill with suspected or confirmed Covid19. Access to training and mentoring to support staff well-being should be prioritised.
15. Early years providers have a myriad of issues to consider alongside health and safety and infection prevention and control. The logistical arrangements are significant. The financial implications are significant. Consideration of the needs of parents and families is significant. Consideration of the needs, rights and interests of children is crucial. Providers also have personal issues and concerns relating to

their families as a result of Covid19 to consider. All of these are with their own fears and concerns and in addition to what was already a highly stressful, demanding and complex role pre-Covid19.

16. Barnardos welcomes the financial support provided to the sector to facilitate them reopening services as in the best interests of vulnerable children. However, having the required time, space and capacity to read, absorb and act on all of the additional information and resources is hugely demanding. All of the demands the overall situation is already making and will make on providers may be overwhelming. It is important that those outside of the early years sector who generally have little awareness of how demanding the task of caring for large numbers of our youngest and most vulnerable citizens is, are made aware that what is being asked of providers in the current context is highly demanding and challenging. Increased financial assistance for additional administrative hours should be considered.

### **Childcare services for front-line workers**

17. Service provision for front-line workers is particularly challenging due to heightened safety concerns for all involved. There are also issues relating to the lack of availability of time for parents to be available to support their children through a major transition to being cared for by someone other than immediate family members. There have been comments in the media that show a lack of understanding on the part of many influencers and decision-makers of the complexity of providing for the needs of young children in any context but most particularly in the context of the pandemic. It seems, at times, as though the needs and rights of young children are not part of the Government response.
18. Balancing the needs of front-line services and front-line workers with the needs and rights of young children is a significant challenge. With plans and decisions being made under pressure of time there is a danger that decisions may lead to some young children experiencing traumatic transitions that could impact significantly on them in both the short and longer term. The relationships, interactions, experience and events in the lives of young children during their first five years provide the foundation of their lifelong ability to adapt to change and to cope with stress. Badly managed stressful or even traumatic separations for children therefore may have lifelong implications. This has to be a major factor in any planning for childcare services for front-line workers.

### **Childcare for children of parents returning to work**

19. In the case of provision for parents returning to work the needs of the children must remain the key priority over and above the needs of the workplace. The transition needs to be considered from the child's perspective. For children returning to the early learning and care environment, while it may be still familiar in some respects, much will have changed in the setting. Children will have spent months seeing only their immediate family members and the sight of other children will be strange. The

new health and safety measures will be strange. The ability of parents and early years educators to facilitate an easier transition for the child will be restricted by distancing measures. It may take weeks for a child to settle and time will need to be provided for parents to be able to be available to support their children through this particularly challenging, significant life change. A child's additional needs, their family context and the experiences they have had during the weeks of closure may be additional factors that impact on the settling in period. At the best of times the transition to childcare is stressful for children and their parents – now this is amplified.

20. Barnardos is aware of conflicting advice for parents who are unable to return to work due to childcare responsibilities. It is unacceptable that the Roadmap to Reopening Ireland facilitated workplaces reopening before childcare would be available. This has placed some working parents in the unfortunate position of having to choose between their job and their responsibilities as a parent. Greater clarity is needed on whether, for example, a parent who is employed but cannot work because of lack of child care is entitled to payments such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. To date we are aware of a lack of clarity on the entitlements available to such parents, many of whom are lone parents.

### **Social distancing and clinical guidelines in childcare settings**

21. Providing for social distancing in early years settings will undoubtedly present challenges and will take some time to adapt to. Children's need for play is acknowledged but it is important to also consider children's established right to play. One essential consideration is to ensure restrictions on the type of play children can engage in, do not get in the way of their opportunities for creativity, exploration and social and emotional development.
22. Memories of childhood play and leisure in nature strengthen resources with which to cope with stress, inspire a sense of spiritual wonder and encourage stewardship for the earth. Play in natural settings also contributes towards agility, balance, creativity, social cooperation and concentration. In an increasingly urbanized and privatized world, children's access to parks, gardens, forests, beaches and other natural areas is being eroded, and children in low-income urban areas are most likely to lack adequate access to green spaces. We welcome the announcement of capital grants which can be used towards the provision of additional or enhanced outdoor play. This funding needs to be increased to reflect significant costs involved in the provision of quality outdoor spaces.
23. Providers have a significant burden of responsibility and their time will be taken up with logistical, practical and financial considerations relating to social distancing and clinical guidelines. Considerations relating to children's emotional needs must be highlighted within guidance and supports provided.

### **Capacity and staffing**

24. Early childhood educators play a hugely important role in contributing to children's learning, development, health and wellbeing. The human brain develops significantly during the first five years and we now know through psychology, neuroscience and epigenetics, that brain growth is affected physically by the experiences young children have – both good and bad – or don't have during their early years. As well as being hugely significant for a child's wellbeing and learning in the 'here-and-now', all of the relationships and experiences that young children have create the foundations for their future.
25. It is particularly important that capacity and staffing difficulties are not allowed to impact on the quality of relationships and interactions that children especially the very youngest children, will experience in early learning and care settings. The early care environment plays a major role in a child's development, and significantly affects their later outcomes and life chances. Extensive research reveals two fundamental facts about how being cared for by persons other than their parents for many hours a week affects young children's development:
- When the quality of such non-parental care is high, children flourish
  - When it is poor, the opposite is true
26. The way in which children are related to is likely to have a powerful impact on their wellbeing, their mental health; and their opportunities to think and learn so it is even more important than ever that educators are of high calibre and well-supported. There is and will be significant additional stresses on early years providers so they will need all of the supports possible to ensure quality is sustained. Reduced numbers of children in group care settings as a result of capacity and staffing issues initially may be in children's best interests.
27. It is essential that any initiative to expand childminding registration does not reduce requirements necessary for quality provision and that no risks are taken that would impact on the level of quality of children's learning and care. Supports for childminders, in particular relating to supporting positive transitions for young children, but also relating to quality more generally need to be considered.

### Proposal for cross-departmental child-specific transition task force

28. It is important that all departmental decision-making impacting on children is informed in relation to the particular rights of children in the current context. Every single person, irrespective of their age, has human rights but children have special rights because being young makes them more vulnerable. The early years are a sensitive and critical period of development. What happens in the early years affects the course of development across the life span. Barnardos is supportive of the establishment of a cross departmental task force, however it must be cognisant of children's needs and rights as well as the needs of parents, providers and the workforce.

## Replacing childcare by grandparents

29. A respondent to Barnardos' survey on the impact of the pandemic on family life, a grandmother, commented:

*"The boys are extremely stressed... they are terrified I will be infected by them or others and will die. The total focus everywhere on the virus is really upsetting children, irrespective of their circumstances. It is adding stress. My grandsons wrote emails to me a week ago begging me not to go out or speak to anyone...children need reassurance at all levels."<sup>6</sup>*

Younger children too are very aware of the conversations around them about the pandemic. Early childhood is the period of life when humans are most dependent on secure, responsive relationships with others, not just to ensure their survival, but also their emotional security, social integration and cognitive and cultural competencies. Young children are especially vulnerable to adverse consequences of separations and stress.

30. The change for young children to out of home care rather than family members, if parents have no other option within the family, is likely to be significantly stressful for children and families. Transitions in these situations where children have no prior experience of care outside of their family will need particularly careful planning and consideration. It is crucial that babies in particular experience security through continuity and consistency in their carers so that they can form attachments. Stable relationships and secure attachments are essential to mental health for babies. Babies have a right and a need to have this crucial need met through careful transitions. These transitions will be made extremely difficult for babies in light of the restrictions on parent's entering services.

## Recommendations

1. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs should be retained to ensure continuity and best meets the needs of children.
2. The Government, Department of Children and Youth Affairs and all other agencies involved in the administration, design and delivery of early years education and childcare should adopt a child rights approach to the delivery and reintroduction of services post Covid19.
3. Put in place additional supports for children with higher levels of need in recognition that they may have suffered distress during pandemic restrictions

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<sup>6</sup> Barnardos. (2020)



and may need extra support to regain progress made prior to Covid19. ELC settings should have access to the National Educational Psychological Service

4. Provision for supports for children with additional needs, such as those accessed through the AIM Programme, with year round help would ensure meaningful access for all children. These supports should be provided throughout the full year and for children of all ages.
5. Provide supports, including provision for sick pay and access to training and mentoring to support staff well-being should be for staff returning to work to ensure children have the best possible care and education when they return.
6. Urgently provide clarity on the social welfare supports available to parents who are employed but cannot work due to childcare responsibilities.
7. Provide increased capital grants for additional or enhanced outdoor play for early years services in both the short and longer term to facilitate social distancing.
8. All guidance to early years educators and providers should highlight the importance of meeting children's emotional needs.
9. Ensure requirements for provision of quality in childminding regulations are not compromised and supports to facilitate childminders returning to work in accordance with guidelines are provided.
10. Consider specific social distancing measures for babies who are entering childcare services for the first time, such as parents with masks being allowed to spend time with their child in the setting.

We would welcome the opportunity to present our thoughts and arguments to the Committee via video.

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