



# Early Learning Initiative

## National College of Ireland

BEST EDUCATION OUTREACH AWARD

### PARENTING 365

A family-centred support programme for parents of children with developmental delays and additional needs

### SUMMARY

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) is a community-based organisation, founded by National College of Ireland, that supports families, schools and services in the education of children. Integral to the work of ELI is a core value of inclusivity. The [Parenting365](#) programme was developed by ELI to address the gap in support for children living in Dublin's inner city with developmental delays or additional needs.



### BACKGROUND:

Established in 2008, The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at National College of Ireland was developed to address the problem of educational underachievement in marginalised communities. Building upon tried and tested models of early years' intervention, our mission is to work with communities in areas of greatest need, to provide world-class parent and child learning support programmes.

The Core ELI staff working on the Parenting 365 Programme are as follows:

- **Jennifer O Neill**, ELI Senior Coordinator. Jennifer's professional qualifications include FETAC Level 5 in Early Childhood Education, CACHE Diploma in Early Years Education & BA Honours in Early Childhood Education.
- **ELI Play Facilitators:** The play facilitators' qualifications include a range of professional qualifications from FETAC Level 5 to BA Honours in Early Childhood Education. The facilitators team also have obtained qualifications in Home Visiting, Curriculum and Pedagogy, Play Therapy, Infant Massage, Toddler Yoga, DIR Floortime, Theraplay & Lámh.
- **Sonya Goulding** is ELI's Restorative Parenting & Emotional Literacy Coordinator. Sonya is trained as an integrative psychotherapist. She has further training and education which includes somatic and mindfulness interventions, restorative practice trainer, autism specialist clinical training. MIACP, BA (Hons), Cert., Dip.



**14,835**  
Participants engaged



**1,426**  
Professionals engaged



**7,411**  
Parents engaged



**35**  
Corporate Partners



**15,773**  
Home Visits Conducted



**84**  
Staff Employed



## OUTREACH:

Funded by the Late Late Toy Show Appeal, the Parenting 365 programme was developed for families with young (1-6 years old) children with developmental delays or additional needs. The programme consists of 2 main strands of support, one parent-focused and the other family-centred, delivered over a 6-week period. The parent support strand consists of weekly parent support sessions. The aims of these weekly online parent support sessions are

- To empower parents through providing education about sensory systems; strategies and approaches to supporting emotional and sensory regulation; explore materials/resources to support regulation and support with developing a daily schedule of strategies and activities to use at home to support their children.
- To provide a safe space for parents to connect and share with each other the challenges of parenting a child with a developmental delay or additional need, both with each other and with professionals/specialists who joined each week.
- To support parents to recognise the important role of self-care in parenting.

The child-centred aspect of the programme consists of a developmentally targeted play group during which the child's learning and development are encouraged by a trained ELI facilitator. The play space is designed with the children's needs in mind and includes access to a sensory room. Each family is assigned a key worker at the play group to support the parent and



child in engaging in the play activities, as well as supporting the child's communication and interactions within the group. There is a broad theme each week for the play sessions including physical play, messy play and small world play. The variety of equipment and play opportunities at the group supports children's well-being and development in the following areas:

- Physical development (fine & gross motor)
- Cognitive development
- Sensory Development
- Emotional Regulation
- Communication (verbal/non-verbal)
- Social Integration

The programme is running since November 2021 and is responding to a growing need for disability services and supports. As of 2020/21 more than one-third of children engaging nationally in the [Parent Child+](#) Home Visiting programme presented with developmental delays or additional needs. Many of the



parents from this cohort have reported long waiting lists for assessments and therapies for their children, further impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of access to timely supports results in many families feeling stressed and unsure of how they can help their child.

The need and demand for this programme in the community is very high, with 66 families enrolled in the first year. Parents and services locally are constantly searching for hands on supports for children with additional needs and this programme provides this. Referrals are received from local services, including early years services, Public Health Nurses and early intervention teams, as well as from parents themselves. This programme is providing a vital referral pathway for parents and services seeking support for children. We plan to make Parenting365 a core part of our annual programming and to replicate the project in other areas across the country.

The programme is now running for a second year, with the first cohort of an additional 25 families commencing from November 2022. The programme will run for three terms in 2022-2023, with places available for 75 families. The impact of the programme on the children, parents, families, staff, the ELI and the local area has been very positive. The Parenting 365 programme has benefited 69 children to date. In addition, multiple siblings have benefitted from the programme. The paternal involvement has been significantly higher on the programme compared to other ELI programmes.



The ELI staff working on the Parenting365 programme - researchers, coordinators, facilitators - all have a

professional interest in supporting children with additional needs, along with specific training to support the parents and children. The programme helped staff identify areas for further training which would enhance the support provided to families, including Lámh (ISL), DIR floor time, Theraplay and Clinical Autism Specialist training. Staff have been able to bring their training, learning and experience from Parenting365 into their other roles and programmes within ELI, which has been beneficial to the wider community ELI supports.

## Successes

The response to the first round of the programme has been extremely positive. 69 children have participated to date and have explored their abilities in a safe and secure space where their needs, preferences and triggers have been planned for. Children slowly grew in confidence and increased their social skills. Socialisation is key for many of these children who have spent most of their life living under COVID-19 restrictions. Parents have learned how to better support their child's development, gaining insight from certified professionals in the areas of speech, play therapy and sensory processing.

Research shows that parents of children with developmental disabilities suffer significantly increased levels of stress (Barroso et al., 2018; Hayes & Watson, 2013). This tends to be heightened with longer wait times in the diagnostic process (Keenan et al., 2009). Connolly and Gersch (2011) note parents describing that their experience begins on the first detection of developmental delays, and that identifying ways in which they can support their child, along with connection and support from other parents can help them on their 'journey'.

Community Action research was the primary methodology used in the development and evaluation of the programme in its first year. Data was collected using facilitator observations and parent pre- and post-programme questionnaires. The observations and parent feedback were analysed after each term. This insight allowed for adaptation to the programme to better suit the needs of the parents and children. Results indicated that the children's confidence grew as a result of the programme and parents noted a difference in their child's behaviour at home. Furthermore, parents reported having made progress regarding achieving their goals as a parent and that their child had also made developmental progress. This initiative has now been incorporated into ELI's Community Support Groups as its own programme and will be further developed to continue support more families.

### Method:

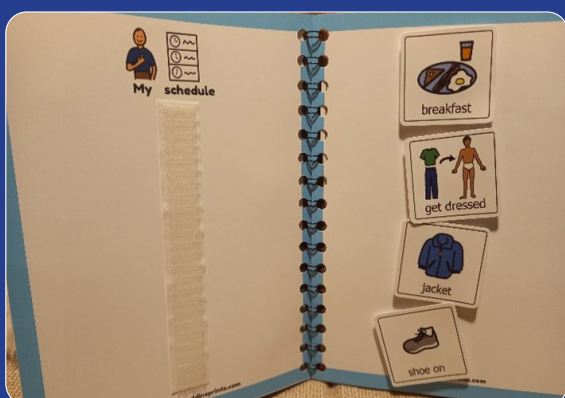
The main function of the programme is to provide parents and caregivers of children with additional needs with parent support, access to specialists, developmentally-targeted play sessions for their children and take-home educational resources and follow up care/contact. We feel this programme deserves recognition because it is filling a gap in a crucial period of child development between the identification of developmental delay/additional need and the provision of Assessment and Professional therapies. The programme is helping to tackle the crippling isolation described by parents who have experienced a lack of understanding and inclusion for their children, particularly those with less visible conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder. The programme also promoted peer-to-peer support and learning, as families develop friendships and support networks with others in their situation. The topics covered at each of the weekly parent support sessions are delivered by specialists in specific areas that the parents have identified as needing support with. The specialists involved in providing support include occupational therapists, AsIAM ambassadors, autism advocates, music therapists and parent support specialists.

#### Parent Support Weekly Sessions example:

- Week 1: Preparing your child for new settings
- Week 2: The role of self-care in parenting
- Week 3: Understanding sensory needs and exploring strategies (OT)
- Week 4: In conversation with Occupational Therapist
- Week 5: In conversation with ASIAM Ambassador, parent, autism advocate
- Week 6: Creating sensory routine for regulation

#### Parent Support Materials:

Materials are provided to support parents with bringing the learning from the parent support sessions to life at home. They include visual daily schedule books, timers and emotion literacy cards.



Visual daily schedule book

### Development:

The programme is now part of ELI's range of community support programmes. A new group of families started, kicking off the second year of the programme. The number of families participating has grown each term, from 15 in November 2021 to an expected 25 families engaged in the current cohort. We have an aspiration to expand the programme to offer to families nationally. Funding is being sought to achieve this aim.

#### Next steps:

- January 2023- Research Project Findings
- Continue to evaluate and adapt the programme to better suit the needs of parents and their children.

#### Results:

### Findings: Impact

All (n=18) parents found that the programme greatly benefitted them

89% (n=16) found that it greatly benefitted their child

The remaining 11% (n=2) found that it somewhat benefitted their child

“ This programme had helped me, first of all to connect and interact with parents with similar difficulties in coping with parenting. This programme also helped me understand my child's behaviour, at a different level, through professional guidance and advices. And not the last, throughout this programme I've learned how to better care for myself in order to be able to care for the others.”

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## Findings: Parents self-rated Confidence, Belief, and Ability

Increase in parents reporting higher levels of self-rated confidence, belief and ability post-programme.

Statement: *I am confident that I understand my child's needs*

- 60% of parents reported an increase

Statement: *I feel I know how to help my child progress*

- 67% of parents reported an increase

Statement: *I have coping mechanisms to help my child*

- 50% of parents reported an increase

*"It helped me realise, I am in fact doing my best and I am on the right track with my child it helped me realise not to be so hard on myself."*



"The programme has been amazing for James, playing with the different toys has helped his gross and fine motor skills. Seeing other children has developed his social skills, he has learnt how to share and take turns. The singing and the interaction with the team has helped his communication. I can't stress enough how important these weeks have been. We can definitely see a change in James. Having both parents able to attend was amazing. I just hope that another programme is run."

**Louise Costello**, pictured right-of-frame, with her son James Garraghan



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Leah's Video: [Early Learning Initiative: Leah's Story - YouTube](#)

Webinar Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSVuq2uBPCY&feature=youtu.be>

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/earlylearninginitiative](https://www.facebook.com/earlylearninginitiative)

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End of Year Report 2021-2022: [End Of Year Report 2021-22.pdf](#)