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Quality School Age Care

What to Look for in a Service to Care for Your Child Outside of School

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Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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Introduction

This booklet offers guidance to parents or carers who are choosing a quality service to care for their child during the time when they are not available and their child is not in school.

Commonly referred to as 'after school' or 'school age care', these services include any early years service, play group, nursery, crèche or other similar service that caters for children under the age of 14 years who are enrolled in a school, and provides a range of recreation, development and education activities outside of school hours. These services must be registered with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. This means that Tusla can inspect them to ensure they meet certain requirements. Some childminders also cater for children of school age and they may also need to be registered, depending on how many children they are caring for.

Other supervised groups for children of school age that provide particular activities such as in the arts (like drama or dancing), youth work, sport, tuition or religious teaching are not required to be registered or inspected by Tusla. While this guide focuses on school age care services, you may also find some of the information helpful when considering services providing specific activities.

What do Parents and Children Need from School Age Care?

Sometimes when people think about school age care, they just think of it as a safe place for children to be in until their parents or carers are free to care for them. A quality school age care service is much more than this. It will provide children with a well-rounded range of activities and opportunities that will support their wellbeing, learning and development. It will offer a wide variety of structured activities that are fun and interactive, and that help children to develop or enhance leadership and social skills, self-esteem, problem and conflict solving skills, academic skills, interests and hobbies. It will also provide children with free time to play, relax and be with their friends, all under supervision of caring, capable and informed adults who can provide emotional support when required.



What children need

Children need many things from their experience of attending a school age service, including:

- The chance to be with friends.
- The chance to reflect on the school day.
- The chance to take part in activities and learn new skills and knowledge.
- The support of trusted and trustworthy, interested adults.
- An environment where they feel they belong and where they have some control.
- An environment that is physically and emotionally safe and supportive.
- An environment that is comfortable, attractive and interesting.
- Activities that are varied, fun, challenging and not just 'educational'.
- Plenty of opportunities to be outdoors, especially in natural environments.

What parents need

As a parent, you want to be assured that the service:

- Is a safe and supportive environment with good supervision.
- Has regular and consistent opening times.
- Is a place where your child wants to be, with activities they enjoy being involved in.
- Provides opportunities for your child to take part in activities to support their learning and perhaps to do their homework.
- Offers opportunities for physical exercise.
- Keeps you informed about how your child is getting on.

The requirements listed above are the minimum you should look for when considering a school age service for your child. This booklet provides guidance on what you should expect from *high-quality* school age service.

Children's Rights

It is important that all school age services where children spend a lot of time provide opportunities and space for play, recreation and relaxation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that all children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities. The Convention also recognises children's right to be active participants in all matters affecting their lives, including even the youngest children in the service, and it respects children's family, cultural and other identities and languages.

A quality school age service will:

- Promote children's rights.
- Inform children about their rights.
- Ensure children participate in decisions concerning them and the service.
- Listen to and act on the children's views, concerns, ideas, interests and specific needs.
- Tell children what is happening if there are any changes and when responding to issues the children raise.



When children do what we tell them, they are learning how to do what we say.
When we ask them what they want to do and they do it, they are learning how to take initiative.

Larry Schweinhart PhD, HighScope Educational Research Foundation

Right to participate and make choices

Children have a right to have choice and control over their play, their activities and their learning, and to have a voice in what they do in their leisure time. A high-quality service will accommodate many interests and provide a flexible programme with a range of activities from which children can choose what they are interested in and want to do. When children are interested and engaged in activities they are automatically learning. Children should also be involved in decisions relating to the service, helping to plan their environment and actively contributing to the design of the programme of activities.

It is important that children:

- Are offered choices in what they do and where they do it.
- Are asked for their opinions and given an opportunity to share what their likes, dislikes and interests are.
- Can contribute their ideas on activities.
- Have genuine involvement in:
 - ◆ developing appropriate policies, in particular ground rules or expectations (rights and responsibilities)
 - ◆ planning the environment and the routine – planning outings, celebrations and other activities
 - ◆ helping new children to settle in and get to know the place and the people

Staffing in the Service

In school age care, adults' professional judgements are central to their active role in facilitating children's learning and development. It is important that those working in a school age service are well-qualified and knowledgeable about child development, children's needs and rights, and how children learn. They need to know how to identify children's dispositions and strengths, and how to develop children's interests, abilities and talents. They must also provide for appropriate ways of learning life skills.

Mixed age groups

The range of activities in a school age service has to meet the needs of a group whose age generally ranges from as young as four years up to 12 years (and can be up to 14 years). Adults working in the service must ensure that the programme and the environment are flexible and adaptable to children's different and changing needs, abilities and interests.

While mixed age groups offer the opportunity for socialising between children of all ages, where younger children can learn from older children and older children can learn about what younger children need and how to be helpful to them, this can be challenging. Providing experiences and opportunities that meet the differing developmental needs of all of the children takes a lot of careful thought and planning. The programme of activities being offered needs to include suitable activities for all ages of children attending.

The competency of adults in the setting

To have a positive impact on children's lives, adults in school age care need to:

- Have professional knowledge, understanding and skills.
- Be knowledgeable about children, families and communities.
- Know about child development and how children learn so that activities, materials, interactions and experiences will be safe, interesting, achievable and challenging.
- Know what children of different ages need.
- Know about children's rights.
- Be considerate of the strengths, interests and needs of each individual child in the group in order to be able to respond to each as an individual.
- Be aware of the social situation and culture in which each child lives, in order to ensure that their learning experiences are meaningful, relevant and respectful.
- Understand how their beliefs and values impact on children's wellbeing and their learning and development.
- Have creativity, imagination and insight.

Adults in a school age service must show sensitivity to the role they play in relation to families, schools and community activities. They also need to recognise the school setting and the significance of the learning and teaching opportunities it provides for children. It is important though that the school age care service is not just an extension of the activities that the children are undertaking in school.

While most school age care services offer some type of support for homework, for example, they must also offer a wide variety of enriching activities such as physical recreation, arts, music and opportunities to develop leadership and other types of personal and social skills. They also need to consider ways to enhance children's sense of identity and belonging in their local community. The ratio of adults to children should be much higher in school age care than in school, so that the adults can get to know each individual child really well.

It is very important that adults working in the service recognise that families are children's first and most influential teachers. They need to create a welcoming environment where all children and their families are given equal respect and are actively involved in decisions in order to ensure that experiences are meaningful.

If your child has a physical impairment, medical condition or requires additional support, it will be important that the adults in the service have some experience with the condition or, if not, that they will know how they can get the training they might need.



Communication Between the School Age Care Service and Parents

It is essential that the people in the service establish a good relationship with you from the first contact. You should be able to feel comfortable asking questions before you enrol your child and be made aware of the steps the service will take to help your child settle in.

A quality service will generally have a parents' handbook, which provides all of the key information you will need, including:

- The name, position, qualifications and experience of the person in charge and of any other persons working in the service
- The maximum number of children
- Adult/child ratios in the service
- Information about the programme provided
- The service policies and procedures
- The facilities available
- Opening hours and fees

If the service is a community service, there should be at least one parent representative on the management committee. A good private service will have a parents' advisory board or will regularly consult parents formally.

Health, Wellbeing, Safety and Nutrition

School age services must always meet legal requirements when it comes to children's health, safety and wellbeing.

All aspects of health and safety should be covered, including:

- Infection prevention and control
- Hand washing
- Safety of equipment
- Safe food storage and preparation
- Administration of any necessary medications
- Dealing with allergies or medical conditions
- Cleaning and maintenance
- Safety of any transport used and taking children to or from school
- Health and safety on outings

Services must have a Child Safeguarding Statement. This is defined by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency as a 'statement which includes a written assessment of risk of harm to children while availing of the service, and the measures that will be taken to manage any identified risks'.

Services must have good, clear policies and procedures on health and safety and infection control. They must also carry out risk assessments and have a clear safety statement. It is essential also that they

adhere to all current guidance relating to Covid19, including hand washing and distancing. The service should make you aware of the procedures in place when you enrol your child and give you copies of policies when your child starts at the service or any time you ask for them. They should also be open to answering any questions you might have.

A Healthy Eating policy is also essential. A quality service will provide for children's healthy eating and good nutritional choices. They will also provide facilities for children to learn how to prepare their own food enjoyably, safely and hygienically.

The School Age Care Environment

A welcoming space to rest and relax

The environment that children spend their time in is hugely important and influential for their wellbeing, learning and development and, importantly, their happiness. In order to learn well outside of school, children need a smooth transition from school to the school age setting. When they arrive they should be given the option to take time to rest, relax, 'hang out', run around outside and/or have a snack before going on to choose the organised activities – active or quiet, individual or group, indoors or outdoors – that they want to engage in. A warm, welcoming and pleasant atmosphere is important to make the daily greeting and departing routine comfortable and happy for everyone.

Younger children are more vulnerable and they need special consideration as they transition daily from school to the school age setting – in particular for their safety but also to ensure that they

are supported to feel comfortable in the different surroundings. Older school age children are more independent but they too need to feel welcome and comfortable. More sensitive children may need more support than others, which is provided with respect and consideration for their dignity.

A warm and nurturing environment not only helps children to form trusting relationships but also has an impact on all of their learning. When the service's atmosphere is positive and supportive, and children are relaxed and happy, they are more likely to become engaged and motivated learners.



Space and facilities

As well as being welcoming and comfortable, with plenty of space for relaxation, the physical environment of a school age setting should have a number of rooms/areas where individual and group activities can happen. Think about the following when looking at the service environment:

- The building and its facilities should be easily accessed by all, including children and adults who use walking aids or wheelchairs.
- There needs to be a quiet area for reading, homework and table-based activities.
- The space should be designed for easy supervision but with spaces for privacy.
- There should be lots of natural light.
- There must be an outside play area with plenty of space that offers a variety of challenging and stimulating experiences.
- Plenty of storage is needed and areas free of clutter.
- It needs to be easy to keep clean and well maintained.
- The space should be warm and comfortable with soft (but easy to clean) areas such as sofas and cushions for relaxation and a homely feel.
- Each child should have their own personal space for their belongings, for example, their own coat hook and cubby hole.
- A kitchen area with clean and safe storage for food and facilities for children to get involved in cooking is important.

- There should be sufficient and appropriate toilet facilities that are hygienic and well-maintained with provision for sanitary disposal.
- The space should be age-appropriate – as children get older they require more space for their activities.
- The facility must be protected and secure, including the outdoor area.
- It needs to be easily accessible to parents and their children in relation to location and transport.
- It should have a parking area for parents'/school bus pick-up and drop-off so that children can arrive and leave safely.

Where a service is located in a primary school, the space should be different to the school classrooms. It is important that there is a clear commitment and written policy to ensure that the school age space – both indoors and outdoors in a school-based facility – is not just a homework club or an extension of school.



Getting outdoors and the natural environment

The best school age care settings will ensure that children can easily access and engage with natural spaces where they can move and be physically active, play and explore freely.

Facilities for wet gear and wellingtons would be great.

Risk-taking activities

Everyday life always involves a degree of risk. Children need to participate in risk-taking activities, particularly in outdoor spaces, so that they can develop the decision-making skills necessary to make calculated risk judgements for themselves. For this learning to happen, children need opportunities for challenging and adventurous play, opportunities that have become very limited in children's lives in recent years.

A quality school age service will balance their duty to protect children from harm with their duty to provide children with stimulating, adventurous play and learning opportunities. This means that adults will allow for children to take some risks while ensuring they are protecting them from serious harm. Over-protective policies that do not allow children to run, jump or climb in case they might fall can actually do more harm than good.

Enjoying nature

As well as being free to run, jump, climb, swing and touch, children need to experience nature in the environments where they spend so much of their young lives. Many schools have no access to natural

spaces and fail to provide children with opportunities to explore, to experience adventure and to use their imaginations. Such environments present a greater risk to children than the risk of falling, which is the risk of not developing to their fullest potential.

In his acclaimed book *Last Child in the Woods*, child advocacy expert Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's 'wired' generation (he calls it nature deficit) to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as rises in obesity, behaviour difficulties and depression. Not allowing children to play freely and explore their environment carries multiple risks including damage to their development, decreased physical exercise, increased obesity and limited spontaneous play opportunities.

How Children Learn



Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I'll understand.

Chinese Proverb

Children and young people develop their own identities, interests and understandings of the world through relationships in their family and within their particular culture, community and place. Children's learning in school age care settings should complement and enhance their learning at home and at school.

Learning through play and the value of play

The importance of play in contributing to the general health and wellbeing of children is universally acknowledged. It has huge value in childhood and it nourishes every aspect of children's development – physical, social, emotional, intellectual and creative. It develops children's wellbeing, their communication skills, their sense of identity and belonging, and their engagement in exploring and thinking. Such is the importance of play for children that they have an internationally accepted and established right to play.

Children do not play to learn but they do learn while they are playing. Whether playing indoors or outdoors, alone or with others, quietly or boisterously, through play children are finding out about things, trying out and practising ideas and skills, dealing with challenges and taking risks, exploring feelings, learning from mistakes, being in control and thinking imaginatively.

In order for children to learn through play, they need uninterrupted time and knowledgeable adults who pay attention to and support their right to play.

The benefits of play

Play:

- Fosters children's independence and self-esteem.
- Develops children's respect for others, offers opportunities for social interaction and assists children to develop relationships.
- Supports children's wellbeing, healthy growth and development.

- Increases children's knowledge and understanding.
- Promotes children's creativity and capacity to learn, and enhances curiosity.
- Allows for the expression of personality and uniqueness.
- Enables children to make connections between earlier experiences and new learning.
- Helps children to understand concepts, for example, block building and playing with sand and water lays the foundation for logical mathematical thinking, scientific reasoning and problem solving. Rough-and-tumble play develops social and emotional self-regulation.

To be real play, the play must be freely chosen by children and under their control. In real play, the child decides how to play, how long to keep the play going, what the play is about, and who they play with.

Play is also very important for children's social and emotional development. Dr Jenny Gibson, senior lecturer in psychology and education at the University of Cambridge, states:



It's easy to dismiss play as unimportant, but for children, playing with friends and classmates has a very significant impact on their social development. Critically, it is an important way of working through emotions... For that reason it's important that... children are given time and space to play with friends.

School age care services need to offer children time, space and appropriate materials to facilitate as many opportunities as possible for spontaneous pretend play and socio-dramatic play. Pretend play fosters communication, and develops skills in conversation, turn taking, and taking other people's points of view, as well as the skills of social problem solving – persuading, negotiating, compromising and cooperating.

Other ways of learning

While children can learn a considerable amount through their play, they do not learn only through play. They also learn when they are involved in daily routines and are an appreciated helper to adults and others in their group. In the school age setting, as well as in family life, children like to feel a valued participant and can learn vital life skills when the adults make the space for them to be involved.

Children also learn through adult-initiated, structured activities. A quality school age service will support children and young people to learn important life skills through teaching, mentoring and a range of hands-on experiences. Skills such as negotiating and problem-solving, self-care, cooking and nutrition are often picked up through everyday experiences at home but for children who spend long hours in school age care as well as school, it is important that opportunities are planned to enhance these skills.

Children learn through the following:



Being active

Children need to be moving. They learn and remember things by experiencing through their senses as they move. Sitting still for too long can disrupt their learning.

Representing ideas and experiences

Children deepen their understanding as they re-create experiences or communicate their thinking in many different ways – in imaginative play, role-play or small world play, pictures, writing, movements, models, as well as talking.

Talking to themselves

Children think out loud to work out their thoughts and ideas, adjusting their activities, taking on imaginative roles and trying out their new and developing skills.

Communicating

Even before they can talk in words, children love to share their ideas through sounds, gestures and body language. Talking things through helps children to understand what they are experiencing. They need to get across their own ideas, and have conversations to hear other people's ideas, to develop their thinking and language.



Exploring new things and experiences

Because of children's natural curiosity they use all their senses exploring in real hands-on activities, and then putting the information together in their own minds to form ideas and make sense of the world.

Having fun and enjoyment

Laughter, fun and enjoyment are great for learning. Activities can be playful even when they are not play.

Meeting physical and mental challenges

Working out what to do, trying hard, persevering, finding out things and thinking for themselves help to develop real understanding. Challenges might occur in play, in real-life experiences or in purposely planned activities.

Being shown how to do things

Children learn how to do things by watching others or being shown how to do something, being given instructions, modelling, guidance or demonstrations.

Practising skills

Using new skills in similar tasks or new situations helps children to get really good at them, to enjoy their own abilities, and to make their new learning stick.



Learning Supports

When thinking about what you want from a school age service for your child in relation to homework and learning, it is important to consider different ways or styles of learning and different kinds of intelligence. Schools often focus mostly on two areas of intelligence (linguistic [word] and mathematical [number]) but Howard Gardner, a developmental psychologist, found that there are several other areas of intelligence through which people of all ages can learn, for example, through nature, music, pictures, body movement and interpersonal relationships.

Some children can benefit greatly from an approach in the school age care setting that is different from the approach in school and that suits their particular style of learning. A school age care service that takes an individualised approach, taking these different types of intelligence into consideration, will provide a wide range of experiences so that each child has an opportunity to learn in a way that suits them best.

Linguistic/Language	Some children will learn best by listening, reading and putting things into words, enjoy discussion, like word games, books and music, and remember verses, lyrics and trivia.
Logical/Mathematical	Some children think conceptually, use clear reasoning, look for patterns and relationships, like experimenting and testing things, like classifying and categorising.
Musical	Children who are musical think in tones, learn well through rhythm and melody, enjoy playing musical instruments, remember songs and notice sounds in the environment.
Spatial	Children with a strong spatial intelligence like things like mazes and jigsaws, like to draw and design things and to build models, and like video, diagrams, maps and charts.
Bodily kinesthetic	Those who are kinesthetic work out knowledge through bodily sensations, communicate through gestures, tend to move or fidget while sitting, learn by touching and manipulating, like role playing, creative movement and physical activity, enjoy fixing and building things.
Interpersonal	Some particularly understand and care about people, are social, have lots of friends, learn from cooperative learning experiences and like group games.
Intrapersonal	Some children will enjoy working independently, like to be alone, appear to be self-motivated, and need quiet space and time.
Naturalist	Children with this type of intelligence investigate, experiment, question and find out about elements of science, the phenomena of the natural world, weather patterns, growing things, animals, climate change.

As mentioned earlier, children have a right to be involved in decisions about what happens in the setting and should be given opportunities to develop responsibility. This gives them a sense of ownership, of being part of a group and contributing to that group, which increases their self-esteem.

Children need to be able to select activities that reflect their interests and help plan and lead activities. It is important that they can explore skills and interests with chances to develop hobbies, new skills and interests, and get excited about learning. This provides opportunities to develop self-confidence as they find new talents in areas often not covered by the usual school curriculum.

School age services need to approach learning in a way that complements the school curriculum by preparing children with the thinking and emotional skills that foster collaboration and group work, and creative thinking. The approach taken needs to encourage motivation that comes from within the child and provide a wide range of ways to gain knowledge such as access to libraries and the internet.

Homework support

While most school age care services offer some form of homework support or supervision, it is important to remember that it is not a homework club. It is especially important that children are given opportunities to play, move and explore, and to develop their interests while at the setting.

The service should have a policy on homework that is shared and agreed with parents and children, with everyone's expectations about homework completion negotiated at the beginning of the year.

The policy for homework support will take account of the following:

- Maximum time allocated for homework
- Nature of homework supervision
- Parental responsibility
- Provision of a calm and quiet environment

Social and Emotional Development

Children's happiness, optimism and sense of fun are very important to their emotional wellbeing and resilience. Too often, when a group comes together, the first thing adults do is go over the rules. This does not give children a great message in terms of relationship expectations and they may start off by seeing the adults as rule keepers rather than as people who are friendly, helpful and supportive.

When you first enquire with your child about a service, the initial meeting should involve the service representative asking your child about themselves – what they like to do and what gets them really excited. This is a good indication of the quality of the service.

Evidence is growing that when there is an emphasis on social and emotional learning, with a special focus on positive adult-child interactions, children and young people do well. Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to:

- Recognise and manage their emotions.
- Set and achieve positive goals.
- Demonstrate caring and concern for others.
- Establish and maintain positive relationships.
- Make responsible decisions.
- Handle interpersonal situations and conflicts well.

By being supported to develop the critical social-emotional skills listed above, children will be better able to calm themselves when angry, initiate friendships and resolve conflicts respectfully, make ethical and safe choices, and contribute in a positive way to their family and community.

As well as developing emotional security and social skills, being with other people – children and adults – stimulates ideas and involvement that brings further learning.

Supporting behaviour skills

When adults are loving, patient and firm (if needed), this helps children to learn that it makes sense to act in certain ways. Behaviour guidance based on trust, respect, love and consistency helps young people to build self-esteem and self-discipline. The quality of the relationship between the adults and the children in a school age service is key. Adults can support children to avoid inappropriate behaviour through their relationship and interactions with them, and by helping them understand basic guidelines. When children do something inappropriate, adults can help them look at the consequences of their actions and think about what they can do to make things better. Appropriate guidance requires a balance of patience, love, firmness, understanding, mutual respect, mutual trust and consistency.

It is essential that the school age service has a written policy and clear procedures on supporting children with their behaviour skills and makes you aware of their approach. This must include the service's approach to dealing with bullying. It is also essential that the service keeps open lines of communication with you on an ongoing basis in relation to their approach to behaviour guidance and practices.

Friendships and Relationships

Developing social skills is an essential life skill and also really important for doing well in school. Children need time to interact with one another and with adults to develop their communication skills, to share their feelings and learn to work through problems.

The mixed-age experience in school age care allows a child to form friendships with both older and younger children, something that occurs naturally in families and in communities. Lots of good things come from younger and older children spending time together like cooperation, inclusion and sharing and understanding.

Each child needs to be supported to develop and maintain friendships in the group and to spend time with the children they choose to be their friends. Adults need to have the skills to be tuned in and aware of each child's friendships and any difficulties arising that may need support, without getting over-involved.

When a child spends a large part of their week in the school age setting, it is important that they have at least one adult there they feel safe and comfortable to talk with if they are having friendship or relationship difficulties. Children need immediate access to this type of support and, as a parent, you will need to know you can trust the adults in the service to give your child support that is appropriate for their age and ability, and in keeping with your principles and values. You need to ensure that children are encouraged and supported to report any incidents of bullying or inappropriate behaviour and that you will be informed of any such incidents in the service. The service policy on supporting social, emotional and behaviour skills should give you a good indication of their approach.

A Place for the Arts

School age programmes are ideal places for children to learn by doing and by having hands-on experiences. They are particularly ideal for those children who thrive when they are provided with experiences in the arts, in the community and exploration of any kind.



Imagination is the source of every form of human achievement.

Ken Robinson, International Advisor on Education

Many experts believe that creativity is just as important as literacy and numeracy for children and that the arts, humanities and physical education should have equal weight with science, technology, maths, reading and writing. For a school age service to meet all the needs of children, the arts are particularly important as they can help children make sense of the world and find their role in it. The arts include any means of creative expressions such as dance, music, drama, puppetry, storytelling, drawing, painting, photography and sculpting.



The view of the arts in the school age programme shows children and young people what the adults believe is important.

from *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*¹

¹ Eisner, E. (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*. pp. 70-92. US: Yale University Press.

The arts teach children that there is more than one solution to a problem and more than one answer to a question and that there are many ways to see and interpret the world. Through engagement with the arts, children learn how to make good judgements and that small differences can have large effects.

It is important that children are allowed to use their own ideas in their art work and, whenever possible, are free to choose the materials they use and the way they use them. You can look at the displays of art work in the setting for indicators that the children are given freedom and encouraged to be creative.

Arts experiences in the community could include, for example, exhibiting art work at local events. For children who spend long hours in a school age service, this type of community activity is important as they may otherwise have little time to be involved in such valuable learning experiences.



Providing for Environmental Awareness

School age services are an ideal setting for children to learn to love the natural world around them, to develop environmentally friendly values, to carry out environmentally friendly conservation and sustainability projects and activities (such as ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’) and to develop their sense of global citizenship. It is hugely important that any setting where children are learning and developing provides opportunities for them to experience and learn about the natural environment and to help protect it.

Children are naturally curious and open to learning about nature – they have an innate biological tendency to bond with the natural world known as *biophilia*, meaning love of nature. Regular contact with nature and direct positive experiences of it are important to give children a natural opportunity to love their environment and learn to appreciate and care for it. In urban settings especially, it is important that opportunities for children to directly experience nature and enjoy playing in it are provided. A school age setting that has access to its own natural outdoor spaces is the ideal. Positive environmental behaviours, attitudes and values grow naturally out of children’s regular contact with and play in the natural world.

A school age service that provides experiences in nature for the children of all ages and, as children begin to enjoy it, also advocates and encourages a sense of responsibility in relation to dealing with litter and waste and reducing energy consumption; that raises awareness around water conservation and how to effectively manage this important resource; that works to increase awareness of the importance of native plants, animals and habitats, and of marine eco-systems and the work being done to save them; is a service which cares about the future of children and young people. This is a real indication of the quality of a school age service.



Social Media and Technology

Technology is an important part of children's everyday lives to connect with others with common interests and hobbies; to communicate thoughts, ideas and feelings; to find information and investigate the environment; to download music and play games; and for creative projects such as making and editing pictures and videos, and recording stories.

Adults working in school age care who are grounded in child development theory and practice and who are very familiar with digital technology will have the knowledge, skills and experience to select and use technology tools and interactive media that suit the children's ages and developmental levels. They will be aware of the computer games, design programmes and apps that offer open-ended or problem-solving opportunities and will know when and how to integrate technology into the programme in a positive way.

There are, however, risks associated with using technology, especially for children. The lack of exercise associated with excessive technology use and screen time has been linked to both physical health risks such as diabetes and heart disease and an increased risk of mental health issues such as depression and/or anxiety disorder. Adults who know this will understand that the use of technology is an inappropriate replacement for active play and sports and interactions with other children and adults. Furthermore, the more time young people spend online, the more potential there is to be exposed to the many risks of the internet such as violent or sexual content, misuse of their data, harmful online communities and grooming.

One of the more common risks of internet usage, particularly social media, is cyberbullying, which can take many forms such as exclusion, nasty comments on shared photos or videos, or anonymous feedback given through rating apps or sites. Cyberbullying is just one of many forms of bullying, but it differs from more traditional bullying in that it can be 24/7, and also because of the number of people who can be involved, and the potential for anonymity for the perpetrators. It can go on among children who spend time together in any setting and is something adults need to be particularly watchful for.

Adults in the service will need to be engaged and interested in a child's online world, asking the child questions in an inquisitive way and letting them know that they are there to help should they need it. The more open and enthusiastic adults are with children, the more likely it will be that a child will tell them if anything is bothering them online or otherwise.

You will want to ensure that the guidelines and supervision around technology use in the school age care setting are sufficient to protect your child. All school age settings should have parental controls on their Wi-Fi and children must be supervised when using laptops or tablets to monitor what sites children are accessing and what they do on these sites. There will also be rules around children's use of their own devices such as smartphones in the setting and it is important to know what these are.

All quality school age care services will have a comprehensive policy that promotes good practice and safe, responsible use of technology and the internet. This might contain an Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), a document that is signed by the children and their parents/guardians detailing the ways in which the internet, mobile phones and related devices can and cannot be used in the service. A good policy

will detail how children will be enabled to use technology safely and the steps that will be taken if there are any breaches of the policy. Parents and children should be involved in the development of this policy to ensure that it is tailored to the individual needs of everyone in the service. It is essential that the policy takes into account children's online safety as well as privacy and data protection concerns such as the use of children's images on the setting's own social media channels.

The quality of the school age service your child attends is extremely important. Research shows that it can impact on children's behaviour, their feelings and attitudes, their wellbeing, their learning and development, their school performance and their friendships and relationships.

The information above will help you to identify a quality school age service for your child that will enhance their wellbeing and support them to live to their full potential.



Summary of Features to Look For in a Quality School Age Service

Below is a summary of some of the features of quality to look for in a school age service.

- Procedures to ensure physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure with clear roles and responsibilities
- Supportive relationships and interactions
- Opportunities for active play especially outdoors
- Opportunities for quiet play and rest indoors and outdoors
- A healthy eating and healthy lifestyle approach
- Opportunities for meaningful participation
- Focus on learning and development that includes social, emotional, physical, environmental, creative and cultural goals
- Balance between child/young person-led and adult-led activities
- Strong connections and communication with home and family
- Connections with school, community and the wider world
- Appropriate environment with its own outdoor space and access to sports facilities
- Appropriate policies and procedures – in particular child safeguarding; supporting social, emotional and behaviour skills; infection prevention and control, and safe, responsible use of technology and the internet
- Well resourced for a wide range of play, exploration and skills-based activities
- Inclusive and welcoming, supporting identity and belonging
- Well qualified and experienced staff team

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