

# After-school care is the missing part of childcare jigsaw <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS

A growing number of parents are struggling to fit in school hours with their work schedule. One of their greatest difficulties is working out what to do after lunchtime when classes are over. The time between 2pm and 6pm has been described as the missing part of the childcare jigsaw.

They may be hoping that we eventually follow the Scandinavian model, where children are accommodated in school until late in the afternoon. But that would come at a considerable cost, and it is not necessarily in the children's interest to be incarcerated in classrooms for a longer period.

At school-based afternoon clubs in Helsinki, children spend the afternoon pursuing their interests with friends. It is not just an extension of the school day.

They choose what they want to do and when they do it. They could be playing outside, painting or playing an instrument. Typically parents pay €4 a day for four hours of childcare and a snack.

There are a growing number of after-school clubs operating in Irish schools or in local creches. But the services are piecemeal, and the quality of care varies enormously.

June Tinsley, head of advocacy at Barnardo's says: "This sector is fragmented and unregulated."

Some of the clubs are staffed by volunteers, some are run by qualified staff employed by the school, while others are privately run by childcare providers who rent space from the school.

Children's Minister James Reilly has his work cut in trying to produce a coherent after-school childcare strategy. An after-school programme is already in existence for low-paid and unemployed parents, with the State contributing €40 per week for each child.

This small scheme is likely to be extended to other parents under plans being considered by a government working group.

Cost should not be the only consideration for parents and the government. They will have to ensure that the quality of care is high.

Dublin mother Laura Banks believes subsidies for after-school care are a good idea.

Her five-year-old daughter Anna already attends a breakfast club at St Patrick's National School, Diswellstown in Castleknock from 7.30am, and is also there in the afternoon until 5pm.

The facility at the school is run by Tigers After School Care, which also runs eight other after-school clubs in Dublin schools.

Laura Banks, who pays €500 per month to have Anna in after-school care, says: "There is a definite emphasis on having fun. They could be baking, making pancakes, running around the PE hall or doing arts and crafts. She always enjoys it.

"We are lucky that there is after-school care at the school. I work in a place where there are a lot of parents of young children, and they wish they had access to a similar facility."

One of the advantages of having after-school care on the school premises is that it can be fitted in with other extracurricular activities at the school, such as sport and dance.

Karen Cline, who runs Tigers After School Care, grew up in Australia, where this type of childcare is common.

"I was working as a resource teacher in Dublin and I saw how this type of service is needed. So, I set it up myself."

According to Karen Cline the atmosphere has to be very different to that in a classroom.

"It is much more laid-back and the activities should be led by the children.

"We have planned activities, but the children might decide they don't want to do those, and they are free to do something else. A child might decide that they are going to read a book, go on a computer or play outside."

The staff are qualified in childcare to Level 5 or Level 6. The costs vary from €3.30 to €6 per hour, depending on how long a child is there.

After-school clubs have to be flexible in their structure. Some children might stay for only an hour at lunchtime while an older child finishes classes. Others might be there until 6pm.

In some areas in Britain there are clusters of after-school centres offering different activities. Children may choose a centre, according to their interests.

It will be difficult for James Reilly to come up with a strategy that suits all parents, and the budget for a scheme is likely to be limited.

One option is to give parents of primary school children tax credits for after-school care, but June Tinsley believes this would do nothing to guarantee the quality of services.

"We need to ensure that after-school services are better regulated and less fragmented.

"After-school care can play an important role in social and emotional development of children. It is often a crucial link for children who are struggling at school. It should not be run as an extension of the school day by the teachers who see the children earlier in the day. There should be less focus on the academic."

A working group studying after-school care in Ireland is believed to have looked at how parents are subsidised in New Zealand for up to 20 hours of care per week, for children aged between five and 14.

The childcare providers are certified to ensure centres are safe and well-run. The subsidies paid depend on the incomes of the parents.

'After-school staff must be qualified in childcare'

Fine Gael TD Mary Mitchell O'Connor believes improved after-school care is needed in schools to ease the burden of working parents.

"Childcare is one of the single biggest obstacles facing working families," says the former principal of the Harold School in Glasthule, Co. Dublin.

Ms Mitchell O'Connor helped to set up the after-school club at the school in 2009. Parents can drop their children in the school for an hour before the school starts and for up to four-and-a-half hours in the afternoon

Activities include arts and crafts, board games, team sports, and there is also a supervised homework club for an hour every afternoon. Staff are appointed through the board of management.

She says: "Children must be supervised by experienced and qualified childcare staff to ensure their safety and enjoyment."

White board jungle

Now children, please turn on your smartphones and put away those books right now. A new study by researchers at Miami University (where else?) has found that tweeting and texting in the classroom could help children to concentrate. They also help them to engage with subjects better.

The research suggests using phones in class could actually be beneficial, provided students stay on topic. So, it may not work if kids are sending selfies of themselves to their pals outside, or if they are posting links to YouTube videos of skateboarding cats.

Researchers tested students using mobile devices in class to see how they respond to messages that were relevant to classroom material. The students were then asked to take notes.

The research went against the established consensus that mobile devices disrupt pupils' learning in the classroom even if the subject matter is related to course material.

However, the study still suggests that texting about material that is irrelevant to the lesson, or texting at a very high frequency, can interrupt learning.

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**Region:** Europe <sup>[3]</sup>

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