

Consultations with young children in Co Roscommon on their priorities for the CYPSC Early Years' Health and Wellbeing Strategy for the County

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) are county level strategic interagency structures that bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services for children, young people and families in the county. The central purpose of a CYPSC is to ensure effective interagency co-ordination and collaboration to achieve the best outcomes for all children and young people in its area. Roscommon CYPSC has identified the health and well-being of young children as a crucial element of the overall work towards improving outcomes for children in the county.

Consulting with children and young people on their priorities is a critical feature of the work of the CYPSC. As a result, a series of consultation sessions with very young children in Co Roscommon in relation to their health and well being needs were facilitated by Marie Gibbons in early 2017. The sessions were conducted as part of the broader ongoing consultative process that is seeking to engage key stakeholders concerned with the health and well-being of young children. The consultation processes will inform the development of the Early Years' Health and Wellbeing Plan by Roscommon CYPSC. The process is also being studied as part of a PhD study in conjunction with the U.N.E.S.C.O Child and Family Research Centre, N.U.I.Galway*.

The consultations took place in early 2017 in six Preschools in the county, in Roscommon Town, Ballaghaderreen, Tarmonbarry, Frenchpark and Monksland. In total, 15 consultation sessions took place involving 120 children (aged 3 ½ - 4 years) with support from the staff in the services. The theme of the consultation was *'What do young children in Co. Roscommon think would help them to live healthier, happier and more active lives?'*

The Consultation Process followed a number of steps:

- **Information sharing:** the CYPSC facilitator met with staff teams to explain the purpose and rationale for the consultations and to begin the process of getting parental consent.
- **Capacity Building Sessions;** A capacity building session on participation, listening to and consulting with young children as part of decision making processes was held in each service before the consultations with the children took place.
- **Planning the sessions:** CYPSC facilitator met with each staff team at least once to plan the sessions. Ideas were discussed on how the consultation sessions should proceed. An early idea from one service to use the Food Pyramid as a template was agreed in other services. Other activities were planned such as games, voting, drawing and art work. Language to be used during consultation process with children was discussed and generally agreed. Roles were agreed, materials and resources were organised. Time frames were agreed.
- **Consent and assent:** Services took on the process of gaining parental consent. They also agreed to prepare the children for the facilitators' visits.
- **Getting to know the children:** CYPSC facilitator spent time with children before the session, explained what she was doing and asked for their help with it.

The Consultations

- **The Invitation:** The facilitator explained the purpose of the consultations in a child friendly way. Children were invited to take part and were reassured that they did not have to. There was another activity planned for children who did not want to take part.
- **The involvement of the Happy and Healthy Volcano:** The early idea of the food pyramid was adopted by all services and then adapted and changed with each session. The children were also asked for their ideas for the consultation sessions once they had been introduced to the overall theme and were familiar with the facilitator. The plan was to facilitate children to display their understanding of health and well-being in a visual format. The process that was developed involved a game using health related visual images. The children were asked to either vote or group these images depending on how they rated their importance for health and well-being. The children were then asked to draw their own ideas on what they felt was important for good health and well-being. These drawings were taken away by the facilitator and grouped into themes. Images that represented each theme was sourced and printed. For example, several children drew playing with bubbles so an image of a child blowing bubbles was sourced from Google images and printed.

On the next visit the children were invited to develop their own happy and healthy pyramid. They were given the freedom to make their own decisions within the framework agreed with the Early Years Practitioners (EYP's). The framework was that important or vital health and wellbeing actions or behaviours would form the base of the pyramid, next would be desirable actions or behaviours and on top would be occasional actions or behaviours. Once this was explained to the children, they began working together with the Early Years Practitioners and the facilitator. This involved discussion and debate amongst the children as to where certain images should go. They often looked to the EYPs for support if there was a disagreement or uncertainty but also worked independently. Each service created their own version but there are striking similarities across each project. In the third service, the children were not happy with the idea of a pyramid and instead asked if it could be a volcano. The idea of a volcano was then taken on in the remaining services.

The findings of the consultation process:

Young children recognise that there are some basics that they need to be healthy and feel happy. They told us that they need us adults to make sure that EVERYDAY (and very often during the day):

- They get hugs and cuddles from grownups who care about them
- they spend time with Mammy and/or Daddy having fun
- they have lots of laughter
- they get enough sleep
- they get lots of water to drink and they eat lots of fresh fruit and vegetables
- they are reminded and helped to brush their teeth and to wash their hands after using the toilet/ before meals
- they get lots of fresh air
- that they get story time during the day and especially at night before bed

They also told us that they want and need OFTEN and as much as possible to be happy and healthy:

- playing inside and playing outside
- playing with grandparents
- playing with pets
- blowing bubbles
- jumping in puddles
- rough and tumble
- Spending time in nature- looking for spiders
- running down hills
- having bubble baths
- doing puzzles and games
- going to the park/ playground, going for walks, riding bikes,

The children also told us about other activities that they like to do occasionally, but that they know they shouldn't do too often as they may not be good for them. They called these TREATS and think that adults need to know that they **do not need** them every day to be happy and healthy: drinking fizzy drinks, eating sweets and chocolate, playing on a tablet or phone. They also said that they need to sometimes visit the doctor and dentist to be healthy.

These findings have been represented in a visual format- the Happy and Healthy Volcano which we are launching on March 9th 2018. Some of the children who were involved in the consultation process will be in attendance.

*The PhD study is entitled 'a study of the participation of very young children, early years' practitioners and local policy decision- makers in a collaborative consultation process in the context of Roscommon Children and Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC)'. The PhD researcher is Marie Gibbons and the research is being supervised by Dr. John Canavan and Dr. Allyn Fives.