

**ORAL CONCOURS 2013
ANGLAIS - LVII****"Don't hot house your children if you want them to thrive"**

An emerging split between "core" activities for pre-school children and what are now considered "extra" activities is a worrying trend, according to the chief executive of Early Childhood Ireland, Irene Gunning.

There's a new currency developing in extra-curricular activities, she says, with demand from parents, and providers, who operate the ECCE scheme on very tight margins, seeing it as a way of helping ends meet.

"In the long run, is it the best for our children? I am saying most likely not." What parents might regard as a stimulating and varied weekly programme may be too much for small children, she warns.

Routines

"Young children need predictable routines and core activities that they need to repeat quite a lot. They won't develop peak learning and passion unless they repeat things day after day."

The good childcare provider watches closely what really interests the child, what the child's strengths are and introduces variations as the child needs them.

Acknowledging that her comments are likely to upset people, she questions the wisdom of childcare centres using outside experts in sports, cooking, drama, art, music and computer technology for very young children. It goes against individualised child-led learning, which is so vital in the early years, and undermines the staff's abilities.

You don't have to be an expert at singing, dancing, drama, sport or art to convey the joy of such activities to children, who at this stage are learning by playing out the world they see around them, she explains.

"You just have to provide the materials and understand child development and give children the rich kind of predictable routine with flexibility that they need on a day-to-day basis."

That's not saying there is no place for expertise, she stresses, but it needs to be incorporated in a way that is suitable for a pre-school.

Gunning is concerned about the "schoolification" of pre-school learning, arising from parents' anxiety about the need for their child to get on and providers worrying about generating income. The importance of play-based learning is not always understood and sometimes parents favour pre-schools that they think closer resemble "big" school.

It is very hard to stand outside popular culture and no parent wants to feel their child is being left behind, she says. But precocious youngsters "spouting great reams of things" can lose their apparent knowledge as quickly as they gained it.

"Children in the long run who sustain themselves and who have deeper knowledge and deeper learning . . . develop it through intrinsic motivation with their own passion."

Hot housing is literally hot housing, she adds. "When you take the flower out of the greenhouse it doesn't really thrive. You want children who will thrive in ordinary old gardens."

The Irish Times, 15 January 2013