

KHF: Community Matters No.6

Summary of a Partnership Initiative with the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Parent and Toddler Group Initiative 2006-2008

1 Introduction

This issue of Community Matters provides a summary of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative 2006-2008, developed in partnership between the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) and the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). The Initiative was developed as a special project within the National Childcare Investment Programme (NCIP) 2006-2010. The aims of the project were to design a framework of funding and support for parent and toddler groups in Ireland and also to develop mechanisms for the transfer of the funding and support to parent and toddler groups through the thirty-three City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) in 2009.

The Initiative gave KHF the opportunity to provide strategic small grants while influencing child and family policy. The partnership approach to planning and developing the Initiative with the OMCYA ensures that these grants will be provided into the future and become part of national family support policy.

Through the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative grants totalling €451,118 were provided to 569 groups over the two year funding period. A framework for enhanced and co-ordinated information and support for parent and toddler groups was established through the development of a national database of groups and an information pack for all CCCs to ensure a consistent but flexible approach to grant assistance and support throughout the country.

The summary outlines:

- Background to the Initiative
- Aims and objectives of the Initiative
- Partnership approach between KHF and OMCYA
- **Strand 1:** Planning and implementation
- **Strand 2:** Further development of the Initiative and direct work with six CCCs
- Handover of the Initiative to all CCCs
- Lessons arising from the Initiative

2 Background to the Initiative

Many agencies and organisations have assisted parent and toddler groups over the years including the Health Service Executive (HSE) through various grant schemes and direct support provided through HSE staff, in particular Public Health Nurses and Pre-school Service Officers. National voluntary organisations, such as the IPPA and Ciudiú, have also played an important role in assisting parent and toddler groups by providing training opportunities, assistance and advice on specific issues such as insurance. In more recent years the establishment of the CCCs has provided a new focus, with many CCCs beginning to include parent and toddler groups in their programme of work.

The roles of the key partners in the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative, KHF, the OMCYA and Pobal, are briefly outlined below, along with a general description of parent and toddler groups.

The Katharine Howard Foundation is an independent Irish grant-making foundation with a particular emphasis on supporting community projects and initiatives in areas that are socially disadvantaged. The Foundation undertakes advocacy and development work, provides funding through small grants and commissions and co-funds research. Part of KHF's work over the past 10 years has included the funding of parent and toddler groups through small grants and the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative drew on this experience. Many early year services supported directly or indirectly the establishment of parent and toddler groups as a proactive approach to parental involvement and KHF viewed the project as an opportunity to enhance this work.

The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs is part of the Department of Health and Children and its role is to improve the lives of children under the National Children's Strategy and to bring greater coherence to policy making for children. The OMCYA supported the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative under the NCIP and viewed it as a strategic opportunity to support and promote the development of parent and toddler groups working in collaboration with CCCs.



Thirty-three **City and County Childcare Committees** were established in 2001 to encourage the development of childcare locally. The CCCs offer information and advice on a wide range of services and provide the first point of contact for childcare providers applying for grants under the NCIP. CCCs also offer services to parents including advice and support to new and established parent and toddler groups.

Pobal is an intermediary agency that works on behalf of the government to support communities and local agencies in the development and implementation of a range of programmes. The OMCYA has responsibility for the NCIP and Pobal manages the day to day operations of the Programme in collaboration with the OMYCA. Pobal also had a role to play in the development of the Initiative through its direct role with CCCs.

Parent and Toddler Groups

Parent and toddler groups operate in all counties in Ireland in a range of different settings but with a common approach and overall focus on supporting parents and young children. The groups are organised by parents and are run on a voluntary basis through committees.

Most groups adopt a flexible approach to membership, with toddlers accompanied by a father, mother, grandparent or childminder. Groups take place in various public facilities such as community centres, GAA halls, parish halls, schools and libraries and some operate out of newly built childcare facilities as part of an integrated response to child and family support.

At a national policy level there has been an absence of specific support programmes for parent and toddler groups and a general lack of recognition of the value of these groups and the important contribution they make in supporting children and parents at a local level.

Key features of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative

Discussions began in early 2006 between KHF and the OMCYA about collaboration to fund and support parent and toddler groups. These discussions led to the OMCYA engaging KHF to develop a grant scheme for parent and toddler groups and KHF also agreed to gather data and contact details in relation to existing parent and toddler groups and to identify their support, funding and information needs.

The project was designed and implemented over a two year period and included the following key features:

Year 1

- Establishment of a database of existing parent and toddler groups countrywide
- Design of a small grant scheme
- Provision of support to groups in relation to the grant application process
- Provision of ongoing information and advice to groups
- Provision of information, advice and support to the thirty-three CCCs

Year 2

- As above
- Direct work with six specific CCCs (Strand 2)
- Development of an information pack to assist the transfer of the Initiative to all CCCs

3 Objectives and Approach

The overall aim of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative for KHF was to develop a strategic partnership with the OMCYA and Pobal and to develop a specific programme that would provide information and funding for this sector. KHF has a positive track record of working in partnership with statutory, community and voluntary organisations and other funders. This partnership approach has proved successful over the years.

The OMCYA sought to broaden the delivery of childcare services by linking with strategies that provided other supports to families, particularly those in disadvantaged areas. The Parent and Toddler Group Initiative provided an opportunity to develop a low cost programme that would impact positively on children and families.

It was agreed that the OMCYA would provide funding for grants in 2007 and 2008, with KHF establishing the structure to develop and implement the Initiative, and provide for the direct administration of the grants.

Objectives

The overall objectives of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative included the following:

- To develop a national framework of support and funding for parent and toddler groups in Ireland
- To work with other key stakeholders including the OMCYA, Pobal and the CCCs in the planning and development of this framework
- To develop systems for the roll out of a national grant scheme for parent and toddler groups
- To hand over a well developed and structured Initiative to the CCCs.

Key elements of the Initiative

The main elements of the Initiative included:

- **Provision of small grants** to parent and toddler groups
- **Data collection** on parent and toddler groups including the number of existing groups, their locations, levels of support available to groups locally and the level of involvement of other groups or organisations
- **Working with the thirty-three CCCs** which were ideally placed to interact more directly with parent and toddler groups in providing both funding and support. With the development of a clear framework of funding and support through the Initiative, it was envisaged that CCCs would take on this work directly in 2009
- **Reviewing resource materials.** Part of the Initiative included a review of all resource materials already available through the IPPA and the CCCs, with a view to developing up to date information and guidelines for the groups.

4 Planning and Implementation

The planning and implementation of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative is best described in two sections with the first stage (Strand 1) outlining the process in 2007 and the second stage (Strand 2) outlining the further development of the Initiative in 2008 and in particular the direct engagement with the CCCs.

Strand 1 (2007)

Early in the planning process KHF established an Advisory Group, which drew on a wide range of expertise, to assist it in the development of the Initiative. The primary function of the Advisory Group was to oversee and advise on the development of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative and included the following key functions:

- Reviewing and agreeing the application procedures and selection criteria for grants
- Assessing all applications and making recommendations for funding
- Ensuring that the Initiative stayed focused and operated within the agreed timeframe
- Overseeing the handover to the CCCs.

Membership of the Advisory Group included representatives from the following organisations - OMCYA, Pobal, HSE, Waterford County Childcare Committee (on behalf of CCCs), Barnardos, IPPA, and a parent representative. The group was chaired by KHF Trustee, Noreen Kearney.

The Advisory Group met seven times throughout the duration of the Programme (November 2006-February 2009) and played a very important role in the overall planning and development of the Initiative.

The grants process involved one main round of funding in 2007, with some discretionary funding available later in the year to be allocated on the advice and recommendation of the Advisory Group and appropriate CCCs. Application forms were drawn up and circulated to all parent and toddler groups on both the KHF and the CCC databases and to other

organisations such as the relevant community and voluntary groups.

Criteria for the assessment of grant applications were developed and approved by the Advisory Group and the OMCYA. The grant assessment process involved a four stage approach, which included KHF carrying out an initial review of all applications and the Advisory Group reviewing the applications and making recommendations for funding. A summary document based on this advice was then prepared for the Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) of the OMCYA which in turn made the final recommendations to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs.

Grants Allocated in 2007

445 parent and toddler groups applied for funding

414 groups were recommended for funding

The average grant provided was **€472**

A total of **€195,421** was allocated in grants in 2007

Strand 2 — Direct work with six CCCs

Based on the experience of implementing the grants and providing information, advice and support to groups in 2007, it was decided, through discussions with the OMCYA and Pobal, that the second phase of the Initiative should include direct work with a sample group of the CCCs as part of the learning process. This proved to be a very effective way of engaging more directly with the CCCs on a practical basis.

A number of criteria for selecting the six CCCs were agreed and helped provide a broad representative sample of CCCs including rural/urban and large/small, together with a regional approach including the Border (1), Midlands (1), East (2), South (1) and West (1) regions.

The six CCCs included in Strand 2 were **Carlow, Donegal, Fingal, Limerick City, Offaly and Waterford County.**

The main elements of the work with the six CCCs involved:

- **Tracking the learning** – each of the six CCCs provided baseline information by identifying its involvement with parent and toddler groups and by setting out its workplan for 2008. At the close of the year, each CCC reflected on the progress made and recorded its progression with parent and toddler groups
- **Grant process** – each of the six CCCs undertook to directly assist parent and toddler groups in their city/county to apply for funding and also put in place an assessment process for considering grant applications in their area
- **Sharing the learning** – The six CCCs met regularly with KHF and Pobal throughout 2008 to review progress and developments and played a central role in the planning of a National Seminar in October 2008.

Grants Allocated in 2008

423 parent and toddler groups applied for funding

423 groups were recommended for funding

The average grant provided was **€604**

A total of **€255,697** was allocated in grants in 2008

Learning from Strand 2

Working directly with the Strand 2 CCCs provided useful insights in terms of what was needed to ensure the future efficient and effective development and delivery of the Initiative by all the CCCs in 2009. The following areas were highlighted in particular:

- Grants for parent and toddler groups need to operate as a flexible rolling scheme and one that fits with the natural timeframe of such groups
- Criteria for the grant scheme should be consistent among all CCCs but should also allow for a degree of flexibility
- A standard application form was considered essential which could incorporate each CCCs heading, logo and contact details
- Development of a shared approach by CCCs in their work in supporting and grant aiding parent and toddler groups would be greatly assisted by using a common database
- A suitable model/framework identified for the development of the parent and toddler group grants in 2009 and beyond was the Childminders Development Grant Scheme, familiar to all the CCCs.

These recommendations were taken on board and formed the basis for an information pack that was prepared for all the CCCs, outlining procedures, processes and necessary forms associated with the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative. This was presented in draft form at the National Seminar and then further developed and finalised for circulation at the end of 2008.

5 Impact of the Grants

As part of the application process all funded groups were asked to complete a brief progress report outlining the differences the grant had made. All of the reports were reviewed, with those from the Strand 2 CCCs considered in more detail, to assess the value and impact of the grants. The scope of the Initiative was limited however and recognises that there is potential for a wider review that would capture the qualitative aspect of the activity of parent and toddler groups.

The progress reports provide a useful overview of the practical benefits of small grants for groups and also provide feedback and comments on the wider impacts for parents, children and groups.

Overall, there was a very positive response from parent and toddler groups to the grant scheme, with over 400 groups applying for grants in both 2007 and 2008. This represented a 25% increase in the number of applications made to KHF in 2006. Applications were received from all 26 counties with some counties featuring more strongly than others.

Many new groups were established in late 2006 and 2007 and start up costs for these groups were supported as much as possible. Many of the groups were established in new housing estates, built on the outskirts of towns and small rural villages and their focus was mainly on the integration of families (many new to the area/country) with young children into the neighbourhood.

In reviewing the progress reports it was encouraging to see

the ongoing development of links and support from the CCCs to parent and toddler groups in their area. The HSE also actively supported many groups with funding through its various grant schemes but it was also noted that in some areas the HSE support was reduced in 2008 due to financial constraints on the organisation.

The progress reports in particular highlighted the role that parent and toddler groups play as a self-help community response organised and run by parents to address isolation by providing opportunities for parents to meet and make social contact with other parents. Parent and toddler groups grow and develop depending on local needs and small grant support goes a long way in ensuring the development and sustainability of these groups.

"As a new group starting from scratch the grant has helped us to reach out to more parents in the area."

"The grant provides a great incentive to start up parent and toddler groups particularly in areas where a lot of new people have moved in."

"Funding has enabled the group to meet twice a week."

Funded Activities

The funding has also provided much needed practical support and assistance to groups, enabling them to purchase good quality educational toys, equipment and activities such as arts and crafts. Support was also provided towards core running costs.

In general funding was provided to groups for two main areas:

- 1 Ongoing development of established parent and toddler groups, in particular support with the purchase or replacement of toys and essential equipment and/or assistance with core running costs such as rent and insurance
- 2 Support for new groups towards start up costs.

Equipment, Toys and Storage

The majority of groups sought funding for new equipment or toys to either replace old ones due to wear and tear or to cater for increased numbers. There was also an increased demand for support for the purchase of basic equipment to cater for growing numbers of babies in groups. The range of equipment and toys purchased through the grants included indoor and outdoor play equipment, educational and musical toys, arts and crafts materials, books, jigsaws and soft floor matting.



"We just have enough money to pay the rent so the grant was great for equipment."

"The grant enabled the group to purchase new age appropriate games, books and toys."

"The funding enabled us to buy a large piece of equipment that would have taken us years to save up for."

"New toys and equipment help to keep the children happy and enthusiastic and interested in returning to play each week."

For many of the groups, having suitable storage for their toys and equipment is an ongoing issue due to the variety of venues where groups meet, the lack of dedicated space and often the need to change venue quite regularly. Where possible, groups try to address their storage problems in a variety of creative ways and their grants were sometimes used to purchase lockable storage boxes for toys, to provide cupboards and to purchase portable book cabinets.

"The book trolley is something the group had wanted for ages and it makes 'story time' a lovely experience."

Running costs

The cost of running a parent and toddler group varies from group to group and the core costs often depend on the rent a group has to pay for its meeting space. While many groups are supported by other community organisations and are provided with a suitable meeting room usually at a low weekly rent, many others are paying very high rents and associated heating costs. The other main expense for groups is insurance and the IPPA is an important support to groups in helping them to access affordable group insurance. In general, all parent and toddler groups try to keep their weekly fee for parents at a minimum cost, to cover teas and basic expenses, and to ensure that the group remains affordable and accessible to all parents. Through the grants some groups have been helped with funding towards these core costs.

"The group relies on the grant to exist and it helped remove worries about the ability to continue as a group."

"The grant helps with overhead and running costs such as heating and also provides the security that the money is there to cover supplies for art and crafts or new books."

"Without this funding it would be difficult to keep the group running and it takes the pressure off the group financially in covering quiet weeks."

"The grant ensures equal access to all parents by keeping the weekly subscription fee small."

6 Other Outcomes

As well as the design and development of a small grant scheme for parent and toddler groups a number of other

positive outcomes were achieved. These outcomes included:

- Development of a database of all parent and toddler groups in the country
- Organisation of a National Seminar for all CCCs and national voluntary organisations on the development of the Initiative
- Production of Information Packs for the handover of the initiative to all CCCs
- Support with the publication of the IPPA's "Guidelines for Parent and Toddler Groups".

1) Database

By the end of 2008 there were details available on 828 parent and toddler groups on the KHF database. There was also data available on the number of parent and toddler groups in each CCC and the number of groups funded per CCC in 2007 and 2008.

2) Information Pack

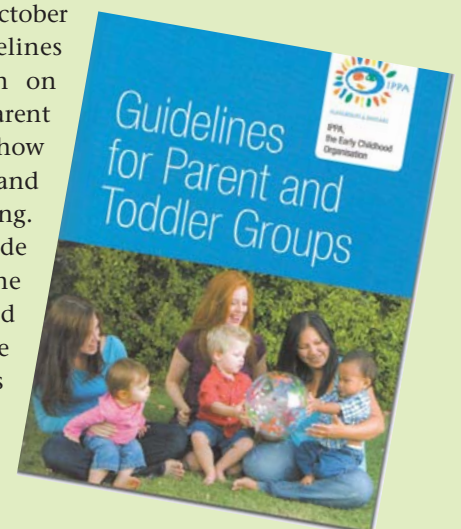
An information pack was prepared for all CCCs providing information on the grants process for 2009, including the application form, selection criteria, assessment process, and the KHF list of parent and toddler groups in each CCC area.

3) National Seminar

It was agreed that the most effective mechanism for informing and preparing all the CCCs for the roll out of the parent and toddler group grants in 2009 was to hold a national seminar. A major focus for the latter part of 2008 was the planning of this important event. The seminar enabled KHF to transfer information and guidelines on the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative to all CCCs.

4) Guidelines for Parent and Toddler Groups

The IPPA, with input from KHF, developed a book of guidelines for parent and toddler groups which was launched at the national seminar by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Barry Andrews TD, in October 2008. The guidelines include information on how to set up a parent and toddler group, how to organise a session and how to access funding. They also provide information on the value of play and provide sample activities for babies and toddlers. The thirty-three CCCs and all the parent and toddler groups on the KHF database received a copy of these guidelines.



7 Conclusion

The Parent and Toddler Group Initiative 2006-2008 gave KHF the opportunity to provide strategic small grants while influencing child and family policy. The partnership with a Government Office, the OMCYA, ensured that these grants would be provided into the future and become part of child and family support policy. The support of grants by the government ensures recognition that parent and toddler groups are providing informal support to parents, grandparents and childminders, as well as to young children. These groups are an important source of social contact and family support especially for parents of young children and families new to an area. They can also create important learning opportunities for the children who attend them and provide 'stepping stones' that help to prepare children for the transition to pre-school education. Some of the lessons learnt through this work may also help to inform other funders and foundations with small grant schemes in planning a strategic response to identified needs. For KHF the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative highlighted the following in relation to its role as a grant making foundation:

- Small grants provide much needed practical support to groups as evidenced in the feedback through the progress reports
- Grants should be planned and administered in a flexible way that responds to the actual needs and timeframe of groups
- Tracking and monitoring the funding to groups is an important part of grant assistance and can be achieved through brief progress reports which provide information on how grants were spent by groups but also provide invaluable information and insights about the work and development of funded groups
- A supportive relationship with applicants is essential in ensuring that groups, particularly new groups, have the capacity to meet the requirements of the grants process
- Working with other organisations and agencies with 'on the ground knowledge' provides real learning opportunities for the development and implementation of new initiatives
- In the case of the Parent and Toddler Group Initiative, establishing the Advisory Group was central to the overall framework for the grants process.

KHF has enjoyed the contact with all the parent and toddler groups under this scheme over the past number of years. The Foundation is very pleased with the growth of parent and toddler groups throughout the country and that the profile of such groups has been raised through the Initiative. We wish all involved continued success in the future.

Acknowledgments

The Trustees of KHF are pleased that this project was so successful, in no small way due to the efforts and commitment of a large number of people. KHF is a small organisation and is consequently reliant on partners to achieve the realisation of many of its objectives. The

experience of this particular partnership and the positive relationships with the staff at the OMCYA, Pobal and the CCCs reinforces the Foundation's belief in the benefits of collaboration and working together. Special thanks go to the parent and toddler groups themselves for being so open and co-operative and to the CCCs for the way they embraced this work and gave us so much assistance throughout the Initiative. Their willingness to welcome this Initiative was rooted in their commitment to improve the support services available for children and families.

The guidance received from the Advisory Group ensured that the Initiative remained on track and true to its objectives. The methodical approach to the Initiative was guided by an independent consultant, Marguerite Hanratty, who ensured that the process was designed thoroughly, thereby aiding the successful implementation of the project. Marguerite was responsible for careful documentation at all stages, culminating in this report. Assistance was also provided by Mary Daly, a former employee of KHF, at the grant assessment stage.

The Foundation would like to thank its wide number of friends and colleagues, including those referred to above, for supporting the work of the staff of KHF: Noelle Spring, Development Director and Maria Fitzgibbon, Office Manager. This support affirms the Foundation's developmental approach to its work in engaging in special projects especially in the areas of early intervention and family support.



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