



Katharine  
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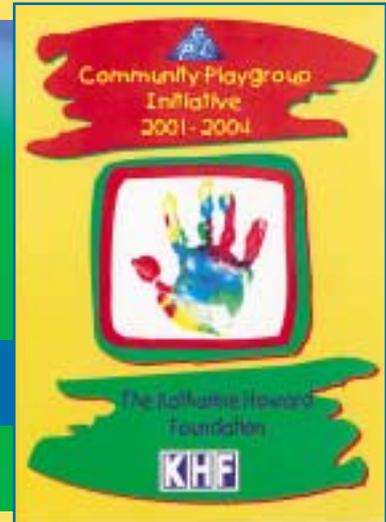
**KHF:**

# Community Matters

No. 2

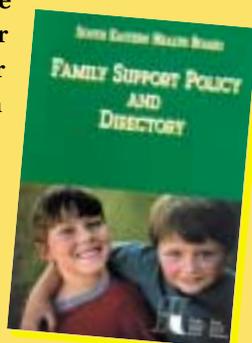
**CPI Interim Report** October 2003

*The Interim Report of the Community Playgroup Initiative*



## Background

The Community Playgroup Initiative (*cpi*) is a three year pilot project which was set up in 2001 by the Katharine Howard Foundation (KHF) in partnership with the South Eastern Health Board (SEHB) as part of its Family Support Policy. The project was established to provide support and extra funding to community playgroups in order to enhance the quality of their provision. A central principle of the initiative is the belief in the value of good community support systems for the child and his/her family. Both the SEHB and KHF value community playgroups as a means of family support, providing early childcare and education at low cost through a community service model. Both organisations also value and support the involvement of parents in community playgroups, and are aware that through such involvement many parents go on to participate in Adult Education, Personal and Community Development. Research such as that of Schweinhart, Barnes and Weikart (1993), O'Flaherty (1995) and the National Research Council USA (2000) shows that high quality early education leads to lasting benefits which persist throughout adolescence and adulthood. **High quality, active learning early years programmes can provide significant life-time benefits for children, especially for children living in disadvantaged circumstances, as they can positively affect educational performance, adult economic status and family stability.** In everyday life quality pre-school experiences can enhance



children's emotional, social and cognitive development as well as helping prepare them for the transition to formal education. Contact with pre-schools can also be a social and educational resource for parents (Daly 2002).

The KHF, the organisation which oversees the running of *cpi*, is an independent grant-making Foundation whose particular emphasis is on the support of community projects in areas of disadvantage. Part of this work has involved providing financial support to community playgroups and parent and toddler groups over the past seven years. Through this experience of providing grant aid the KHF has built up knowledge and expertise in early childcare, education and development in Ireland, and made the decision (based on research such as that cited earlier) that a more strategic approach to supporting community playgroups was needed. At the instigation of the KHF, discussions were held with the SEHB and both organisations agreed to come together to implement a strategic project for community playgroups. *cpi*, as its name suggests, specifically supports community playgroups since the KHF and the SEHB believe that community playgroups can contribute positively to children's lives if they provide high quality, active learning programmes in children's own communities. Once the KHF and the SEHB had agreed a partnership arrangement, an advisory group was established to assist in the setting up and ongoing work of *cpi*. The membership of this group was designed to be broad-ranging and consequently it comprises representatives from the following groups and organisations: Barnardos, Childcare Network Loch Garman, Clonmel Community Partnership, Dublin Institute of Technology, IPPA - the Early

Childhood Organisation, the Kilkenny Early Years Project along with the KHF and the SEHB. They meet three to four times a year to review *cpi*'s progress and to advise on future development.

## Profile

*cpi* started in 2001 and will carry through to 2004. Five community playgroups in the South Eastern Health Board region are involved in the initiative. All community playgroups in the region were invited to apply to be part of the initiative, and following a rigorous process the five groups were selected. An attempt was made to have a degree of geographical representation in the selection of playgroups, so there are playgroups included from each of the community care areas in the SEHB - one each from Waterford, Wexford and South Tipperary, and two from the Carlow/Kilkenny Community Care Area, one from each county.

### The groups involved are

- ✳ **Teach na bPáistí Community Playschool,** Ferns Lower, Co.Wexford
- ✳ **Slieverue Community Playgroup,** Slieverue, Co. Kilkenny (Waterford Community Care Area)
- ✳ **St.Oliver's Community Playgroup,** Clonmel, Co.Tipperary
- ✳ **Askea Community Playgroup,** Carlow
- ✳ **The Rower Inistioge Pre-school,** Co. Kilkenny

*cpi* values and celebrates the uniqueness of each of these five groups and acknowledges the critically important work each of them does within their own community. The groups differ in many ways - as can be seen from the map below they are located in different geographical areas; they also differ in both the number and the socio-economic backgrounds of children who attend. Askea and St.Oliver's, for example are in Rapid designated urban areas (Rapid stands for Revitalising Areas by Planning, Investment and Development, a Government initiative to target the most concentrated areas of disadvantage in the country), whereas The Rower community playgroup is in a rural area. Slieverue is also in a rural location but is within a short distance from Waterford City, while Teach na bPáistí is in the small town of Ferns, in north Co.Wexford. The following table outlines the total number of children in attendance for the last academic year, 2002-2003. The figures for 2003-2004 show the enrollement of children in September 2003 and does not include those who will be enrolled after January and Easter 2004.



GROUP	NO. OF CHILDREN			
	Morning Session		Afternoon	
	2002-03	2003-04	2002-03	2003-04
Askea	34	36	15	16
St.Oliver's	26	19	10	6
The Rower	10	16	0	
Slieverue	35	29	0	
Teach na bPáistí	18	18	0	
<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>22</b>

## How *cpi* operates

The groups involved in *cpi* are supported by a co-ordinator and receive financial assistance of €45,000 each over the three years (approximately €15,000 per year). The co-ordinator visits the playgroups approximately twice a term and has contact with committee members. She also has regular contact with the groups through email and telephone. Each group works from its own short-term plans which are developed by the groups in consultation with the co-ordinator. All five groups are now implementing their third short-term development plan. To date, groups have drawn down quite a substantial amount of the funding available (see tables below for details).

### Total funding accessed by playgroups at 31st December 2002

Slieverue	€7,900
The Rower	€13,550
St.Olivers	€8,500
Teach na bPáistí	€15,000
Askea	€10,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>€54,950</b>

### Total funding accessed by playgroups at 13th October 2003

Slieverue	€35,900
The Rower	€25,550
St.Olivers	€22,500
Teach na bPáistí	€23,000
Askea	€22,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>€128,950</b>

### Total funding to be accessed by playgroups by 31st December 2004

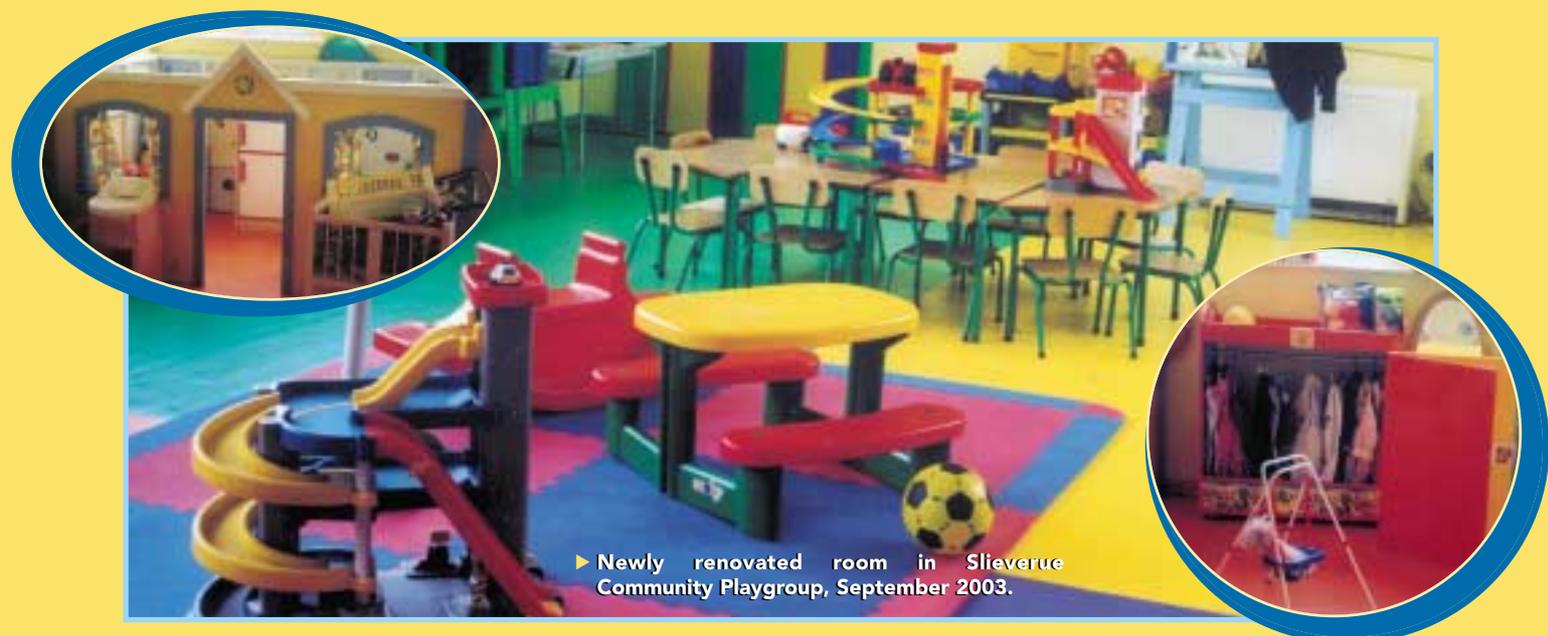
Slieverue	€9,100
The Rower	€19,450
St.Olivers	€22,500
Teach na bPáistí	€22,000
Askea	€23,000
<b>Overall Total Remaining</b>	<b>€96,050</b>



► Presentation of Parents First Aid Certificates in Askea Community Playgroup 2003.

These funds have been spent on implementing planned improvements. A wide variety of such improvements has been made, including updating and upgrading premises for e.g. Slieverue renovated their whole room (see photos below). They installed child-sized toilets and sinks, repainted the walls, ceiling and floor, put in a wheel chair accessible toilet and revamped a small kitchen area. Many of the others have put down new floor covering, installed new windows and doors, repaired heating and provided hot water. Others have taken on new staff - Askea, St.Oliver's, Teach na bPáistí and Slieverue employed new staff members in the past year. Askea and St.Oliver's opened up an afternoon session and Slieverue hope to do so after Christmas. Several of the staff are undertaking F.E.T.A.C. (Further Education and Training Awards Council) Level Two Training in Childcare while other staff members have been able to attend one-day work shops, conferences, training on sign language and special needs. Information and training for parents has been provided by some of the groups - Askea offered a subsidised course on First Aid to parents (see above photo). They also held a session on the value of play and another one on caring for young children. The evaluation also selected 25% of parents to take part in a telephone survey in early 2003, and asked

them for suggestions on how to improve the service. Their suggestions were then fed back to the playgroups. Four of the five groups have also put together a Parent Information Booklet and the remaining playgroup is planning to do so in early 2004. A huge range of toys and equipment has been bought such as multicultural toys, kitchen equipment, playhouses, tape recorders and compact disc players, child-sized sofas, tables and chairs, mirrors and display stands for the dress-up areas, books, train sets, garages, arts and crafts materials, large and small motor equipment, musical instruments as well as a host of other items. In addition many changes were made without any financial cost. Examples of these include: reorganising the set up of the room so that it is more child-centred and so that toys and equipment are at children's level; allowing children to use open-ended art materials and discontinuing the use of photocopied pictures; doing dance and physical exercise with the children; implementing a healthy eating policy; introducing junk and nature tables; allowing children to be more independent by allowing them to hang up their own coats and by helping clean up; improving dress up corners by asking parents for donations of clothes; doing up daily activity sheets so that children know the routine; trying to involve parents more by extending the open door policy, inviting them to be on the committee, asking them if they would like to come on a parent rota or to help out in any other way that they would like; enriching circle time by asking children how they feel, by asking them to reflect on their day and by asking them for suggestions on what they would like to do the following day. Groups draw on the support of the co-ordinator in a number of ways, for example, in the drawing up of policies and procedures, with development plans, in recruitment processes, in locating new



► Newly renovated room in Slieverue Community Playgroup, September 2003.

premises, in accessing information, in administrative processes, running workshops, in work with committees and in developing community and local links. At this stage, mid-way through the initiative, the groups are very familiar with the co-ordinator and call on her for assistance as and when they need it. Due to the wide geographical distances between the five playgroups it is not practical for them to meet on a regular basis. However, they do come together as a cluster group from time to time in a central location, such as Kilkenny city for discussions and for training (see photo right). It is also planned that each group will play host to the other four groups over the next year so that they can network, undertake some training and view each other's playgroup setting. The first such visit was hosted by the Slieverue Community Playgroup on October 8th last, and all of the groups really enjoyed getting together and seeing the changes and enhancements that have been made there.

## Quality

To maximise the benefit of Community Playgroups they have to be of the highest possible quality - but what exactly is quality in relation to community playgroups? Quality is a difficult word to define. It is a value-laden term, a dynamic concept whose meaning evolves over time and one which varies with time, perspective and place. Quality is no longer viewed as one standard of excellence identified for all children in all services as perceptions on quality change. In reality, with regard to community playgroups, quality is related to the provision of services which support what is valued by society and which support the well-being, development, needs and rights of children. Thus, in many ways quality is a socially constructed term dependent on cultural values and beliefs. The National Children's Strategy (2000) is one of the first policy documents in Ireland to attempt to extrapolate what it means to really value children. Unfortunately to date the vision and aspirations of the Strategy have yet to be enacted in any meaningful way and pre-school children are one group of children who remain undervalued and under-supported. For example, one of the distinctive features of Irish pre-school education is the absence of state involvement in the voluntary sector and Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan (1997) confirm that there is a low level of formal provision of early childhood education. *Ready to Learn* (1999) acknowledges that when compared with other European Countries, publicly funded services for young children in Ireland are the least developed. The state's involvement is limited to providing services for children with special needs and for



► Cluster Group Session, 27th August 2003.

those who are seen to be disadvantaged. Even for these children services are sadly lacking and most measures to date have been aimed at primary and post-primary aged children according to the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2002). Thus, trying to ensure that the youngest children in Ireland are valued and supported by the provision of appropriate services is not an easy task.

However, *cpi* does value and support pre-school aged children and all involved in it are committed to enhancing the quality of community based services. Among the key elements of quality within *cpi* are -

- \* the interaction of those involved, both children and adults;
- \* the development of parental involvement;
- \* attention to both staff and committee members
- \* the development of links and networks with others;
- \* the management of the playgroup;
- \* the physical environment, inside and out.

**Those involved in *cpi* acknowledge that while quality can be enhanced in a number of ways, it can be particularly so through training, effective planning, monitoring, reflection and review.** Thus, in the context of *cpi*, quality is seen as an ongoing, dynamic process which incorporates criteria specified by and relevant to the individual playgroups in the initiative with particular emphasis on training, planning, monitoring and the development of reflective practice. Work continues in trying to improve all aspects of the participating playgroups, and particular issues arise at different times for each of the groups. They have fully embraced the initiative and have shown a great openness and willingness to make the most of the opportunities that *cpi* provides. While great strides have been made in areas such as structural improvements, the provision of child-friendly environments and in expanding the variety of activities available, other issues have been identified as needing further development - such as the

structure and functioning of committees, adult-child interaction, parental involvement, outdoor amenities and reflective practice.

## Evaluation

As one of the main aims of the initiative is to measure the impact of increased, targeted funding and support on the quality of the service provided by the participating playgroups, evaluation plays a central role in *cpi*. An external evaluator is undertaking an extensive formative evaluation of the project. A formative evaluation involves evaluation activities which are undertaken during the course of a programme/intervention and the evaluation furnishes information which guides programme improvements/developments (Rossi, Freeman and Lipsey 1999). One of the evaluator's first tasks in collaboration with the co-ordinator, the development officer of the KHF and an evaluation sub-committee of the advisory group was to devise an evaluation plan. This was done to agree on the evaluation criteria. After much discussion and deliberation the following evaluation criteria were chosen:

- \* Profile
- \* Playgroup Management
- \* Human Resources
- \* Child-Centred Environment
- \* Activities/Routine
- \* Interaction
- \* Parent Involvement
- \* Links to Statutory and Voluntary Bodies
- \* Finance
- \* Community Playgroup Initiative  
- model of delivery

Evaluation methods include direct observation, examination of development plans, the perusal of documents, talking with parents and interviewing staff. A site observation instrument was devised and will be published shortly. A final evaluation report on *cpi* will be completed in early 2005 and will be made widely available. It is hoped that the evaluation will plot the on-going development of *cpi*, taking into account the views and opinions of parents, staff and committee members, highlighting the lessons that have been learnt, and positively influencing future policy for community playgroups in Ireland.

## Links

In order to further the aims of *cpi* it was recognised early on that it was important for *cpi* to link in with others who are involved in Early Years Education and Care in Ireland. The *cpi* co-ordinator and KHF Development Officer have made presentations to and have had meetings with statutory and voluntary

organisations and this communication will continue to be made during the term of *cpi*. In addition an information leaflet on *cpi* was produced and distributed throughout the country to Government Departments, County Childcare Committees, National Voluntary Organisations, Health Boards, Pre-school Services Officers, Educational Establishments, Local Networks, Partnerships and other interested parties. Every opportunity is taken to highlight the importance of the early years and to stress the value of community playgroups. **Also *cpi* links and is involved as far as is possible with all existing and emerging structures in the area related to children, for example, the County Childcare Committees, Health Boards, Barnardos, the IPPA, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) and so on.**

## The Future

*cpi* will be completed in 2004, and the question arises as to what will happen to the participating playgroups after that? Those involved in *cpi* will try to ensure that these groups will continue to be supported and funded. Work is ongoing with the groups in linking them in with the support systems available to them in their own areas and also on advising them on the types of funding available at present. **However, on a national level concern is being expressed repeatedly about the demise of sessional care including community playgroups.** That demise could technically include the five groups in *cpi* in 2005 if alternative support and funding is not put in place to help sustain them in the long-term. Relying on a combination of parental contributions, voluntary fundraising and Section 65 grants from health boards will not be a sufficiently robust means of sustaining community playgroups in the longer term if they are to provide an affordable, not for profit, high quality service by well trained and paid staff to support children and families in their own communities. In the Dublin area alone, the number of community playgroups declined by 31 per cent between 1998 and 2002 (Community Playgroups Together 2003). **If community playgroups are to survive and be sustainable and if they are to continue to be quality providers of sessional services they need to receive long-term funding and support.** The NESF (2002) recommends the development of 'a more comprehensive quality early childhood education programme'. Building on services that are already available such as community playgroups could help implement this recommendation.

The potential of community playgroups as a means of early intervention and family support is beginning to be recognised. Government policy over the past number of years has highlighted the need to support families. This is evident in such policy documents as the 1998 Commission on the Family – *Strengthening*

*Families for Life; Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (1999); the *National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives* published in 2000. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, also makes undertakings on behalf of the world's children and again stresses the need to support families particularly those with young children since early intervention is so important. Both the '*Report on the National Forum for Early Childhood Education*' (1998) and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education '*Ready to Learn*' (1999) also stress the vital importance of early intervention and the need to involve parents actively in their children's education and care. The importance of early intervention has also been prioritised in the *National Economic and Social Forum Report No.24 on Early School Leavers* (2002) and most recently in the *Inaugural Report of the Educational Disadvantage Committee* (2003). Community Playgroups can be that vital early intervention and stepping stone that families and in particular vulnerable families need. They involve parents and local communities and thus are crucial to children's

well-being and development.

**A commitment must be made to facilitate community playgroups by providing an extensive, strategic, nationwide system to fund and support them so that they can achieve their real potential.**

The Educational Disadvantage Committee (2003) stresses that 'early intervention needs to be related to the community context, with all relevant partners at local level involved'. Community playgroups meet this criteria and could be a very cost effective and beneficial way of providing early intervention if the settings are of high quality, if they have trained staff with good terms and conditions of employment and if they are resourced well and reviewed frequently. The five community playgroups involved in *cpi* in the South Eastern Health Board region are benefiting positively from being part of *cpi*. It is hoped that the ongoing evaluation of *cpi* will show that the initiative was a worthwhile one which can be used as a model of support and development for community playgroups on a national scale as these community and family resources must not be allowed to disappear.

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