Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life

The Need for a Paradigm Shift in Government Policy
Rationale

- Ireland is facing an obesity epidemic. Recent figures from the Growing Up in Ireland study show that 31.8% of Irish 7 year olds are either overweight or obese, that is more than 1 in 4 school aged children.

- 100,000 children who are obese and 300,000 children are overweight in Ireland, with 70% of these children likely to become obese adults.
Rationale

- The healthcare costs as a result of disease related to overweight and obesity is estimated to be 1.6 billion per annum.

- The problem begins in childhood and is beginning earlier and earlier as currently 6% of 3 years olds are obese.

- The rise of childhood obesity will see a significant rise in these costs.
A Healthy Start

To ensure all children have the best start in life it must mean giving them a healthy start.
A Paradigm Shift in Policy

- Ensuring effective action to promote healthier lifestyles, prevent many health problems and achieve the goal of giving every child the best start in life must begin with;

- A paradigm shift in the Government health policy to include the engagement of all stakeholders who impact on children’s lives from birth.

- Integrated working with the various ministers and their departments
A Paradigm Shift in Policy

Other stakeholders include;

- Parents/grandparents/families
- Ante natal clinics
- Maternity units
- Doctors
- Practice nurses
- Public health nurses
- Schools
- Food/catering industry
- Health promotion sector
- Media
Engagement of Early Years

- 95% of children aged 3 yrs and 2mnths attend a pre-school service.
- 4300 pre-school/crèche services notified to the HSE.
- Government focus on quality standards
- Quality standards must include a focus on health, as well as wellbeing, learning and development
Elements of Smart Start

**Current Elements**
- Health promotion
- Nutrition
- Oral health
- Physical activity
- Health and safety

**Future Elements**
- Emotional Wellbeing
- Health and Wellbeing of babies and toddlers
Elements Smart Start

The programme:

- Provides direction and clear guidelines on ensuring best health for children.
- Encourages healthy lifestyle behaviours among staff children and parents.
- Outlines what constitutes positive healthy living among the children, parents and early years staff.
Smart Start Pilot Programme

Previous Smart Start Delivery

Delivered in six counties to

- 587 early years practitioners
- 308 pre-school/crèche services
Children’s feedback

“I will have to tell my mammy she put a ‘bad tooth’ thing in my lunchbox, she can’t let my teeth rot like that!!”

“My mammy took me to the supermarket and I told her all the ‘brain food’ to buy me so I will grow up clever!”

“I am only to have healthy things in my lunchbox now, and I know what a healthy lunchbox is”
Parents feedback

“I have noticed the changes in how we shop and how we eat in the family because we were so shocked about the sugar display in the playgroup”

- 50% of parents had made menu changes in their home
- 33% felt that the oral health element had influenced their children to brush their teeth more regularly and thoroughly
- 21% of parents were influenced to be more physically active as a family

“I learned that rewarding children with something other than food (i.e. a visit to the park) is simple to do”
Inspectors feedback

- Improvement in the development and implementation of written health promotion policies
- Improvement in the content in children’s lunchboxes
- Increased hand-washing
- A greater awareness of toothbrushing
- Increased outdoor play
- Children had increased literacy and knowledge of healthy lifestyle behaviours
- The sugar display in services had a powerful impact on children, parents and staff
Proposal

- We propose that the Smart Start Health Promotion programme will become part of Your Health is Your Wealth: a Policy Framework for a Healthier Ireland 2012 – 2020

- Early years services and young children should be at the heart of government health promotion policy.
Conclusion

Development of government policy and the provision of resources to secure the delivery of and implementation of the Smart Start programme nationwide in all early years services.

Resources are required to:

- Increase the number of Smart Start trainers
- Provide information resources to trainers and all early years practitioners
- Subsidise the delivery of the training programme nationwide
- Provide an assessment and verification process
- Develop an awards system to recognise health promoting early years settings