

# Irish Feminist Network

## Submission to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

*Public Consultation: Improving the lives of children  
and young people*

July 2012

**1. (a) In your opinion, what are the 3 best things about life for children and young people in Ireland?**

- Free access to education – starting with the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme, through primary and secondary and, to a certain extent, extending on into third level (however, there are serious costs attached in terms of school books, uniforms, transport, as well as repeated increases in the student contribution charge at third level).
- Extra-curricular activities – broad range of community-based clubs/groups/organisations providing extracurricular activities in areas such as sport, music, art etc. (although many of these require some level of financial contribution from parents/guardians).
- Appetite for change – increased awareness among adults of the ways in which communities and the State have failed children and young people in the past, recognition that the voices of many children and young people went unheard and a collective desire to learn from these mistakes.

**(b) In your opinion, what are the 3 worst things about life for children and young people in Ireland?**

- Child poverty and youth unemployment – the figures from EU SILC 2010 show that 8.2% of children (aged 0-17) live in consistent poverty, and 19.5% are at risk of poverty. As of April 2012, youth unemployment in Ireland (categorised as those under 25) stood at



27.5%. In this category, women make up a higher percentage of the unemployed than in other age groups.

- Sexualisation of children – the increasing sexualisation of children in the media, particularly in advertising. Over-exposure of children to sexual imagery found in advertising, music videos, television programmes and films which distorts young people's perceptions of themselves and can lead boys to have distorted expectations of girls and girls themselves to engage in damaging self-objectification. The sale of wholly inappropriate clothing for children such as padded swimsuits and the use of slogans or words on items of clothing that have clear sexual connotations.
- Children in crisis – the continued detention of young people in St Patrick's Institution, the treatment of young people in the care of the State, child trafficking and the frightening number of children going missing from care (over 500 have disappeared since 2000, the majority of whom are unaccounted for).

## 2. What can be done so that children and young people are safe and protected?

**By families:** As far as practically possible, protect children from the damaging effects of some aspects of the media and advertising created through, for example, photo-shopping, hyper-sexualisation, and objectification which create unrealistic standards for women and men and encourage young girls in particular to believe their entire self-worth is tied to the way they look which can result in serious body issues such as eating disorders, a lack of self-confidence and self-belief. This can be done, for example, by placing protections on any home computers to restrict internet access or keeping a home computer in the kitchen or living room, rather than a home office or child's bedroom; avoiding television programmes and films which perpetuate gender stereotypes that are damaging for both girls and boys; and by making children aware of the way in which companies use photoshop and other techniques to create unrealistic versions of women and men in order to profit. From the beginning, encourage children to be open and honest and make it clear that they can talk about anything and should not hide something if it makes them scared, confused, hurt, angry etc. Let children know they will be accepted for who they are and allow them to assert themselves as heterosexual, homosexual, transgender etc. if they so wish.

**By communities:** Develop and implement education and awareness programmes for parents/guardians/teachers and children in areas such as media literacy, body image, sexual orientation, and educate parents/guardians/teachers to recognise the early warning signs of things such as eating disorders and depression. Take children seriously if they express anxieties or fears about a particular subject or person. Create a positive environment for children where they feel comfortable, trust those around them and have a sense of belonging in their community.

**By Government:** Direct resources towards frontline child protection services and not towards the introduction of a system of mandatory reporting of suspected child abuse as proposed in the current draft of the Children First Bill; increase funding to domestic violence services (on 3,236 occasions in 2010 services were unable to accommodate women and their children because the refuge was full or there was

no refuge in their area); fund compulsory media literacy training for children and young people in order to avoid the piecemeal and ineffective approach to education on gender and the media; work to expand the new Retail Ireland Childrenswear Guidelines to encompass all retailers of children's clothes and consider putting these guidelines on a statutory footing, if necessary; work with Retail Ireland to extend the Childrenswear Guidelines to include children's toys; be cognisant of gender issues when developing policy; direct greater resources to An Garda Síochána specifically towards the identification and protection of potential victims of trafficking (in 2010, 19 persons under the age of 18 were reported to An Garda Síochána as being victims of trafficking) and young people who have become separated during the asylum process (six of whom are still missing according to information provided to Ciara Conway TD in a recent Parliamentary Question); follow through without delay on commitments to implement the recommendations of the Child Death Review Group and to strengthen children's rights in Bunreacht na hEireann by holding a referendum.

### **3. What can be done so that children and young people can enjoy learning in all aspects of their lives?**

**By families:** Encourage a positive learning environment in the home from birth – this can be done, for example, by promoting reading as an enjoyable pastime, purchasing educational toys, and teaching children the positive use of computers as educational tools. Nurture children's natural curiosity through, for example, membership of a local library and going on nature walks in local parks, beaches etc. Seek advice from friends, family or other members of the community if unsure how to create this environment. Take advantage of State-supported initiatives for early years education such as the ECCE scheme.

**By communities:** Encourage participation in community activities from an early age; operate a Community Mothers Programme in the area to assist first-time mothers; work with parents to provide them with the skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy) and confidence necessary to create a positive learning environment for their children at home (perhaps by organising parental discussion groups or skill-sharing workshops); work collaboratively with other communities to develop Prevention and Early Intervention programmes such as that run by The Childhood Development Initiative (Tallaght), Preparing for Life (Dublin 17) and youngballymun.

**By Government:** Extend the ECCE scheme to include a second, earlier year; ensure the current ECCE scheme is accessible to all families regardless of race, religion, sexual orientation, membership of the Traveller community etc.; develop and promote a more child-friendly version of Culture Night; support the social and emotional development of young people through, for example, the promotion of positive mental health as recommended in several Irish policy documents.

### **4. What can be done so that children and young people are healthy and active?**

**By families:** Limit the number of hours of television and computer games per week, encourage a child's interest in a particular sport or extracurricular activity and support their socialisation with other children and young people; be aware of and participate in initiatives such as the National Spring Clean run by An Taisce; engage with available services such as Public Health Nurses and Family Resource Centres for advice on things such as providing children with a balanced diet; as parents/guardians, ensure you are taking care of yourself and looking after your mental and physical health.

**By communities:** Ensure public spaces such as parks, beaches, and other green areas are child-friendly and that they are well-maintained; operate a policy of active inclusion and non-discrimination and reach out to migrants, Travellers and members of other groups at risk of marginalisation to ensure their participation in local sports club, community events etc.; hold information sessions for parents and guardians on key issues around children's health and personal development such as obesity, youth mental health, and so on.

**By Government:** Introduce mental health programmes in our primary and secondary schools which would provide children and young people with the skills to help them cope better in later life and recognise that mental health, like physical health, needs to be maintained and protected; increase public expenditure on mental health generally to reach the 8.2% target of mental health spending as a proportion of the total health budget, as recommended in *A Vision for Change*; continue to support initiatives such as the National Spring Clean; and support community groups providing extracurricular activities for children and young people; ensure that youth workers, Gardaí, teachers and others who interact with children and young people are educated on the issue of youth mental health and given the skills to assist young people.

## 5. What do children and young people need to feel economically secure?

**From families:** Meet a child's development needs emotionally, socially, and intellectually from birth, thereby laying the foundations for the child to grow into a confident and economically and socially independent adult. Engage with local services and do not hesitate to seek support in times of financial or emotional difficulty.

**From communities:** Run back to education and training programmes for parents and guardians; provide advice on building a skillset, identifying job opportunities, applying for jobs, interview techniques and so on; provide affordable and accessible high quality childcare, recognising that the lack of same constitutes a hugely significant barrier to employment for many families, particularly lone parent families.

**From Government:** Introduce a policy of carrying out equality audits and gender impact assessments as part of the Budgetary process in order to move away from the current situation where public expenditure cuts and tax increases are borne disproportionately by the least well-off in our society; be cognisant of the fact that, according to research by the think-tank TASC previous budgets have had seriously

damaging and disproportionate consequences for the low-paid and lone parents, the majority of whom are women; operate a policy of “do no further harm” as recommended by the Nevin Economic Research Institute and refrain from implementing further cuts to Social Welfare payment, specifically those affecting children and young people such as Child Benefit, the One Parent Family Payment; the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, Family Income Supplement etc.; develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to tackle youth unemployment in particular; follow through without delay on commitments to develop a credible, bankable plan for Scandinavian-style childcare.

## **6. What can be done so that children and young people have a say in decisions that affect their lives?**

**By families:** Build a child’s confidence from the beginning and encourage him or her to speak their mind; foster a discursive environment in the home and (where possible) consult children on family decisions; let them know their views and opinions matter.

**By communities:** In community-based crèches and pre-schools give children the skills to think for themselves and exercise choice; at a later stage (in youth groups for examples) give young people opportunities to discuss, analyse and advocate on issues that affect their lives and issues they feel passionately about; encourage young people to be social activists through, for example, raising awareness about an issue by giving a talk in their school or writing an article for a local newspaper; encourage young people to engage with the decision-making structures of the State early on by contacting local counsellors and TDs about issues that concern them; do not speak for young people – give them the space to be advocates for change.

**By Government:** Listen to youth groups run by young people for young people and value their experiences and input when developing policy which will affect them; take young people seriously as valuable members of society worthy of respect and competent enough to contribute to policy development; through the education system foster an interest in politics, decision-making and social activism in Ireland; educate young people about the importance of exercising their democratic right to vote, with particular focus of disadvantaged areas which often see low voter turnouts at elections or referenda; be conscious of the fact that many young people feel disenfranchised from the State due to lack of opportunities, high levels of emigration in their peer group, and a perceived lack of interest on the part of government to tackle a situation whereby nearly a third of our young people are out of work.

## **7. What can be done to help children and young people behave positively and to be good citizens?**

**By families:** Make children aware that they are part of a community – locally,

nationally, and globally, and that they have a right to be respected by other citizens but also a responsibility to respect others and the environment around them. Put this approach into practice by, for example, taking part in the National Spring Clean as mentioned earlier, visiting elderly or infirmed members of the community, engaging regularly in recycling or reusing materials such as cereal boxes etc for arts and crafts. Teach children about social justice and equality issues such as poverty, homelessness etc. and educate them about human rights on both a domestic and international level, and make use of local libraries for resources to teach them about other countries and cultures and that difference is something to be celebrated.

**By communities:** Facilitate community activism on the part of children and young people in areas such as conservation of local green spaces and amenities, recycling, etc. Promote an ethos of equality, respect, and inclusion which should inform the provision of all community-based services such as crèches, pre-schools, youth groups and so on.

**By Government:** Shift public expenditure towards prevention and early intervention and address the root causes of crime and antisocial behaviour rather than throwing money at the end results of poverty and social exclusion (i.e. the prison system); address the fact that, despite recent changes announced by government, 16 and 17 year old boys still remain detained in St Patrick's Institution, a wholly inappropriate environment, by immediately transferring these young people out of that facility; implement immediately the findings of the Independent Child Death Review Group; release adequate funding for domestic violence services to ensure that children and young people are not growing up in violent homes.

## 8. What can be done to help young people move confidently into adulthood?

**By families:** From the outset, refrain from perpetuating gender stereotypes and accidentally forcing children into prescribed gender roles by, for example, automatically assuming a girl likes dolls and a boy likes cars; allow children and young people to mature at their own pace; create an open environment in the home where issues such as sex and sexuality can be discussed honestly; protect children and young people as far as possible from the damaging effects of some aspects of the media and popular culture.

**By communities:** Encourage young people's participation in youth groups where they can debate issues that concern them with other members of their peer group; encourage young people to speak up and make themselves heard; refrain from perpetuating gender stereotypes; let young people be open about their sexuality if they so wish.

**By Government:** Continue to fund community organisations and youth groups working with young people; open the decision-making structures of the State to facilitate the participation of young people and value their input – consider, for example, holding a free conference on youth unemployment in Ireland such as that recently held in Brussels by the S&D Group in the European Parliament.

