

Optional Extras

In general, the OMCYA does not recommend charges for optional extras for children attending pre-school in the ECCE scheme, and most participating pre-schools do not seek them. However, it is recognised that some pre-schools have additional and genuinely optional activities, and that in many cases it may not be reasonable to prevent participating services from charging for these, provided they are genuinely optional. For example, trips to the zoo are not key parts of an ECCE curriculum, and therefore a reasonable charge may be made for such an outing, provided there is an alternative set of programme based activities for children who do not participate in the trip.

However, charging extra for items which are part of what would be expected as part of a pre-school service (e.g. arts and craft materials) is not permitted under the scheme. Activities which would be included in the fee for non-ECCE children in the 3-6 age group will not, generally, be seen as optional for children in the ECCE scheme. Similarly, it is not permitted for services to make payment of 'optional' charges a criterion for admission to the service. Nor is it permitted for services to combine a list of additional services into just one optional list. Any extra services must be individually optional, and this requires an individualised charge for each extra. (It is permitted that they also be available as a combined list, provided they are available individually).

Where an optional extra is genuinely optional but happens during class time, children not attending the optional activity must have a full content-based session, and both groups of children must be, at the same time, under the required levels of staff supervision required by the scheme. It is not sufficient to claim, for example that two adults can supervise 16 children involved in an optional activity, and a further 4 who are involved in another ECCE-activity, as the 16 children will require the supervision of 2 adults, and the 4 other children will also require additional adult supervision.

No additional activity should be held in such a way as would leave non-participating children feeling excluded (e.g. colouring, while other children in sight of them have dancing lessons), and if a service is unsure as to whether this would happen, the additional optional events should happen outside the normal times/days of the session.

If a family are no longer in a position to continue to afford an optional extra they agreed to, they should be allowed withdraw from it. While notice may be required for such withdrawal, it may not exceed one month.

The general principle is that an optional extra must be genuinely optional in practice as well as theory, and cannot be 'tagged on' to another optional extra. **Any approach which would leave non-participating children feeling left out is outside the scope of the scheme, and if this would be the upshot of such an option, it should not be proposed by participating services.**

Potential optional extras (NB: Many of these will be provided by services free of charge – this list simply states certain optional extras not excluded by the scheme)

Food over and above that which the service is required to offer children by the Pre-School Regulations, for the type of place provided (page 65 of the Regs & Explanatory Guide). Children must also have the option of bringing their own snack instead.
Swimming classes, and other classes which involve instruction not normally part of a pre-school programme

Transport

School trips which incur a cost (e.g. admission fees etc)

Birthday parties (NB These should be free if simply a cake and a card etc, but it is recognised that in some cases, parents may wish to pay extra for an expensive event, e.g. a trip to have a party at a commercial play centre, and this is not prohibited. If a charge is made, it must not be charged of the other families)

Santa, Halloween parties, Easter Egg hunts etc (NB If there is a charge for such an event – and it is not recommended that there would be - it must be on a non-ECCE day)

Additional hours/weeks

'Gymboree' type events, where outside providers deliver an educational and/or entertainment based activity

Nappies / pull-ups (where applicable)

Class photo / yearbook

Merchandise, such as T-shirts etc

Aprons/smocks etc (option to wear one's own must also be allowed)

Graduation gowns (NB The option not to wear a hired gown at any graduation-type event must be optional)

Cannot be an extra charge

Booking Fees (NB A refundable booking deposit may be taken, but it must be of no more than two weeks capitation, and refunded within two weeks of the OMCYA confirming the child's eligibility for the scheme)

Arts & Crafts materials

Worksheets

School trips which incur no cost (e.g. walking to a nearby park)

Report cards

Graduation diploma

Insurance

Claims to have higher quality, or to have lower staff ratios than other participating services

Different curricula

Unspecified "flexibility" in drop-off and collection times

Dancing (as opposed to programme-based dance instruction)

School plays/concerts which are practised for during the ECCE day (NB such an event may not be held the same day/evening as another event which does require a charge)

Anything which, in practice, is required for effective participation in the class

Enrolments

Participating services are expected to give preference to children who will attend for the full place, as opposed to 3 of the 5 days, for example. Where a parent is adamant that they will only require fewer days, however, a pro-rata capitation will be paid. An exception to this is in full-day/50 week services, where there is an option to spread the provision over 3 sessions of 3 hours 45 minutes if the child is attending for 3 (or 4) days in the week.

A full daycare service may choose to give preference to children who will avail of a full daycare place, over another child who would only attend for a 2¼ hour free session each day, although services are asked to be as accommodating as possible.

Services are not allowed admit one child over another based on the optional extras their parents have indicated they will avail of, as this would make those 'extras' non-optional in practice, and make the service non-compliant with a key feature of the scheme.

Under the Equal Status Acts, services must make reasonable accommodation for children with Special Needs. If a service is presented with such a child, and they are unsure of their capacity to deal with those needs, they should identify what supports are available from the HSE locally. Similarly, it is illegal to refuse enrolment based on the child being a member of an ethnic minority or the Travelling Community.

Services may require evidence of the date of birth of the child, such as a birth certificate or passport, to satisfy themselves that the child was born in the period from 2 February 2007 – 30 June 2008 (inclusive). If a parent does not wish to provide this, the service may charge the normal fee for the place until the OMCYA has confirmed the child's eligibility for the scheme, provided they refund the parent within two weeks of that confirmation. They may also ask for evidence that the PPS number supplied is accurate (all PPS numbers for qualified children should contain 7 numbers followed by a letter, e.g. 1234567A).

Parents of an overage child who requires an exemption from the age criteria under the ECCE scheme, either based on special needs or based on them being unable to start Junior Infants before being aged 5 years and 7 months should be advised to apply for such an exemption from OMCYA now as the decision letter will be required for the service return next September. **Where an exemption is required services should ask for a copy of the OMCYA exemption letter (which should have a reference number) from the parent before delivering an ECCE place.** If the exemption letter has not been assigned a reference number you can e-mail Mary Guiry at mary_guiry@health.gov.ie

There are no grounds for an exemption for children under the age range.

Where a child is born between 2 February 2007 and 30 June 2007, services should ask parents if the ECCE scheme has been availed of previously as they would have been eligible under the ECCE scheme for the previous year.

Services may give preference to children who

- will be participating in the ECCE scheme that year
- have siblings attending the same service
- live locally
- may have difficulties attending alternative pre-schools (e.g. parent has no car and nearest alternative would require transport)
- have particular/additional needs which the service is well placed to meet (e.g. if a staff member has additional training in Special Needs)