

Free Pre-school Places: Information for parents

Note that this factsheet applies to Northern Ireland only and is relevant for the academic year September 2025 to June 2026.

For more information on schemes in other parts of the UK, visit: www.gov.uk/find-free-early-education

In Northern Ireland, children are entitled to a 'funded' pre-school place in the year before they start their first year of primary school. These places are funded by the Department of Education and are not compulsory. They are intended to build upon the learning that children experience at home and provide a rich variety of challenging play activities and other experiences in a stimulating environment to help prepare children for primary school.

The scheme is intended to provide high quality care and education for children in their **final pre-school year** (when the child has turned three). Some providers accept applications for children in their **penultimate pre-school year** (when the child has turned two), but strict admissions criteria apply, giving preference to children in their final pre-school year.

A pre-school place is normally provided across five sessions per week, each lasting 2.5 hours per day (part time) or, in some cases, 4.5 hours per day (full time), during the school year. From September 2025 previously announced plans to standardise pre-school provision, offering all children a minimum of 22.5 hours of funded pre-school education per week is starting to be implemented, however it will take some time for the 22.5 hours to be available in all settings.

Places are provided by nursery schools, primary schools with nursery units and some voluntary and private sector providers. Voluntary and private sector providers can only offer part time sessions. The places cannot be provided by childminders.

The Department of Education's guidance stipulates that funded pre-school places are not to be regarded as childcare. This factsheet aims to help clarify who is eligible, how to apply, and where to access more information.

Further information about pre-school admissions is available on the Education Authority website: <https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/admissions/pre-school-admissions-guide>

Who should apply?

Parents of children who are entering their final pre-school year, i.e. have turned three on or before 1 July of the year they are due to start pre-school, are encouraged to apply for a pre-school place. For a pre-school place for the academic year beginning September 2025 the child's third birthday should fall between 2 July 2024 and 1 July 2025, that is, they were born on or between 2 July 2021 and 1 July 2022.

If you apply for your child who is underage, that is they were born on or between 2 July 2022 and 1 July 2023, they may be admitted but only after target age children are admitted and if funded places remain.

Why should I apply?

Pre-school education is not compulsory, however there is strong evidence to suggest that high quality pre-school education has positive outcomes for children and can contribute to their long-term development, as well as facilitate their transition into primary school.

What if my child is young for their year, and I feel they are not ready?

New legislation now allows parents of children who are young for their year to defer the start of pre-school and, in turn, primary school for their child for one year.

Deferral of pre-school means delaying your child starting pre-school for one year from September 2025 to September 2026. Your child would then in turn delay starting primary school until September 2027. This would mean your child would start pre-school aged 4 and primary school aged 5. Your child would then (unless in very unusual circumstances such as serious illness) remain within this year group throughout their time at school.

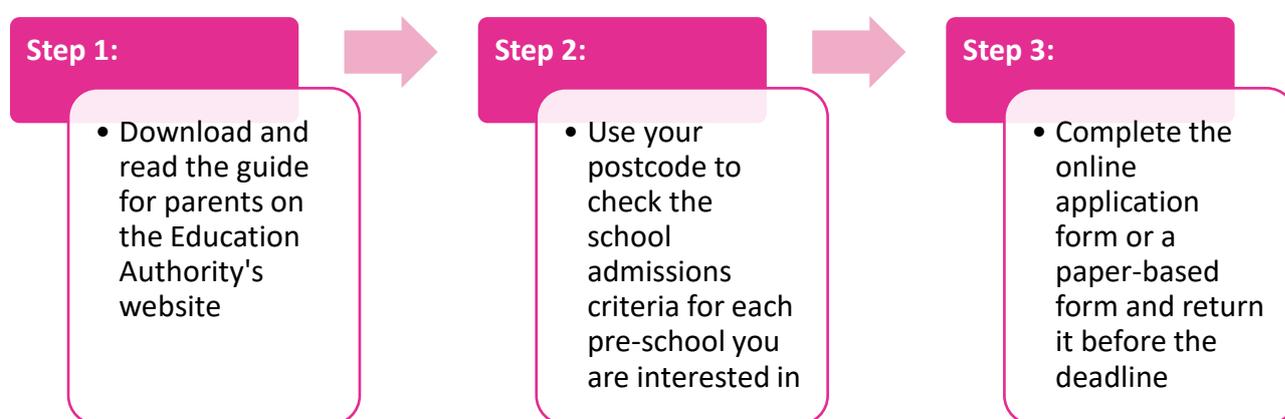
These arrangements apply to children born on or between 1 April 2022 and 1 July 2022 and any child who was born before 1 April 2022 but who was due to be born on or after 1 April 2022 if born at term.

Further information on the deferral of pre-school and school starting age is available at www.eani.org.uk/parents/pupil-applications-and-grants/admissions/deferral-of-school-starting-age

How do I apply?

You can apply online for admission to pre-school for the 2025/206 school year on the Education Authority's [website](#). If you prefer, you can request a hard copy of the application form by calling the Education Authority Pre-School Admissions team on 028 9598 5595, email preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk or by contacting your selected pre-school setting.

We advise parents to carefully examine the [Education Authority's Pre-School Admission Guide](#), and the admissions criteria which apply to pre-school providers in your area offering funded places. Schools hold a small number of reference booklets containing admissions criteria for parents to view and can also provide hard copy application forms if required.



When should I apply?

Each year, the Department for Education announces when the Parent Portal will open, and when it will close to applicants. In 2025, the online Portal opening date is Tuesday 7 January and closing date Friday 24 January at 12 noon. There will also be a window of opportunity for parents to send or take supporting documentation to their first preference pre-school provider by Wednesday 29 January at 4pm.

The required supporting documentation will include your child's birth certificate and any other documents as specified by the provider in the published admissions criteria. If you are unsure what is required, contact your first preference pre-school provider to find out what additional documentation they need to process your application.

What if I have missed the closing date?

If your application form is not received by the closing date, it will be treated as late.

If your chosen pre-school provider is oversubscribed with applications for children in their final pre-school year, then preference will be given to applications which were received by the closing date, regardless of how your child has met the admissions criteria.

If you are applying for a place for your child's final pre-school year, and your chosen provider is not oversubscribed, then your application will take preference over any applications received on time for younger children in their penultimate pre-school year.

What are the criteria?

Having your child's name on a 'waiting list' from birth does not guarantee a pre-school place. Settings must adhere to strict admissions criteria, published in the Education Authority's prospectus. Each provider will have its own set of criteria which may include:

- Children whose parents receive certain means-tested benefits.
- Children whose application lists that particular setting as first preference.
- Children who have siblings who have attended, or have parents employed by the setting (or in the case of nursery units, those who attend or are employed by the adjoining school).
- Children who live nearest to the setting.

For admissions to pre-school settings from September 2013 onwards, the requirement for the pre-school to give priority to children born in July and August has been removed.

The criteria states that places will be allocated on the basis of distance from home to the pre-school. Can I use a friend or family member's address instead?

No. The Education Authority has identified the practice of "grannyng" – supplying incorrect information in relation to the child's home address in order to advantage an application – and now requires that parents provide proof of the information given on the application form, such as the child's address and date of birth. You will be advised on what documentation to supply.

When will I find out what pre-school my child has been allocated?

Parents/carers will be able to log on to EA Connect and accept/reject their child's place, or list other preferences, from 12 noon on Monday 7 April, after which the Pre-School stage 2 applications will open. Notification of the outcome for Stage 2 including Underage applications will be given on Tuesday 10 June 2025, after which the Education Authority will

notify parents of children yet to secure a place. Parents may submit an appeal if they are not content with the outcome of the application process.

Where can I get more information?

If additional information is required or any difficulty is experienced, parents can contact the admissions helpdesk on **028 9047 0177** or email the relevant address listed below:

- Pre-School Admissions: preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk
- Primary School Admissions: primaryadmissions@eani.org.uk
- Post-Primary School Admissions: postprimaryadmissions@eani.org.uk
- Senior High School Admissions (Dickson Plan): seniorhighadmissions@eani.org.uk

Once you have identified some possible settings for your child, you may wish to visit each setting to assess its suitability. Many pre-school settings will hold open days in the weeks leading up to the closing date, giving you an overview of what they offer.

Parents can read further information on the pre-school admission procedure on the Education Authority's [website](#).

For further information on pre-school places, or any childcare or work-related issue, call our Family Benefits Advice Service on 028 9267 8200.