

# Employers For Childcare

Last updated: January 2018

## Free Pre-school Places

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. According to the Department of Education 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 year before the child starts primary school is called the final pre-school year (when the child has turned three). The year before this is called the penultimate pre-school year (when the child has turned two). The scheme is intended to provide high quality care and education for children in their **final pre-school year**. Some providers will accept applications for children in their **penultimate pre-school year**, but strict admissions criteria will be adhered to, giving preference to children in their final pre-school year.

A pre-school place is normally provided across five sessions per week, each lasting at least 2½ hours per day during the school year. Places are provided by nursery schools, primary schools with nursery units and some voluntary and private providers.

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

### Who should apply?

Parents of children who are entering their final pre-school year, i.e. have turned three on or before 1st July of the year they are due to start pre-school, are encouraged to apply for a pre-school place.

For example, for a pre-school place for the academic year beginning September 2018 the child's third birthday should fall between 2nd July 2017 and 1st July 2018.

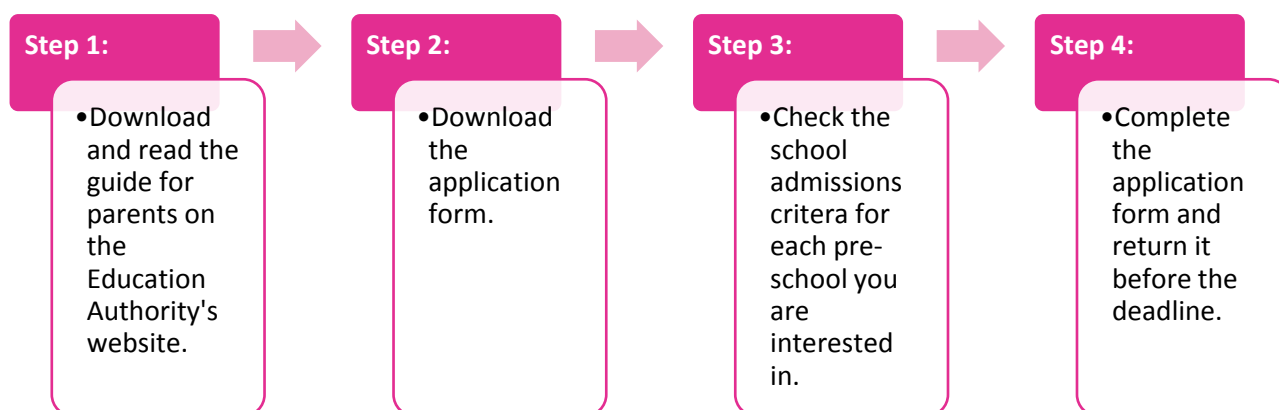
## Why should I apply?

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

## How do I apply?

You need to obtain an application form from your local pre-school setting or you can download a form, and guidance, from the Education Authority's website: [Education Authority Website](#). The application form should be completed giving at least three preferences of pre-school settings and returned to your first choice of provider.

Carefully examine 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?

The application packs are usually available from late November / early December of the year before your child is due to start pre-school, with the closing date for applications being sometime in January of the year your child is due to start pre-school. For example, for entry in September 2018 the application forms will be available from late November / early December 2017 and the closing date for applications will be around mid-January 2018.

The actual closing date for September 2018 entry will be supplied in your application pack and will also be available from your local pre-school setting or Education Authority. You

should return your completed application form to your first choice provider by the closing date.

### **What if I have missed the closing date?**

If your application form has not been 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 who are in their penultimate pre-school year.

### **What are the criteria?**

Contrary to common belief, 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 which are 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.

N.B. 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. This criterion was considered to disadvantage younger children, without there being any educational reason why older children should have priority access to pre-school education.

### **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.

### **Where can I get more information?**

If additional information is required or any difficulty is experienced parents can contact the Pre-School Admissions office within the Education Authority:

#### **EA Omagh Office**

Address: 1 Hospital Road, Omagh, BT79 0AW

Telephone: 028 8225 4536

Email: [preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk](mailto:preschooladmissions@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.

You can also visit [www.education-ni.gov.uk](http://www.education-ni.gov.uk) to find out more.

**For further information on preschool places or any other childcare or work-related issue, call our Family Benefits Advisors today on Freephone 0800 028 3008.**