

COVID-19 update: Please note due to the ongoing situation with the Coronavirus outbreak and a number of different temporary measures implemented at this time, some of the information in this factsheet may be subject to change. If you would like more guidance or further information, please contact our Family Benefits Advice Service on 0800 028 3008, lines are open 10am – 4pm Monday to Friday. Alternatively, email hello@employersforchildcare.org at any time and our team will get back to you as soon as possible between 8am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

Free Pre-school Places: Information for parents

Note that this factsheet applies to Northern Ireland only. 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. 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 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 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 sector providers. 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.

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 2021 the child's third birthday should fall between 2 July 2020 and 1 July 2021.

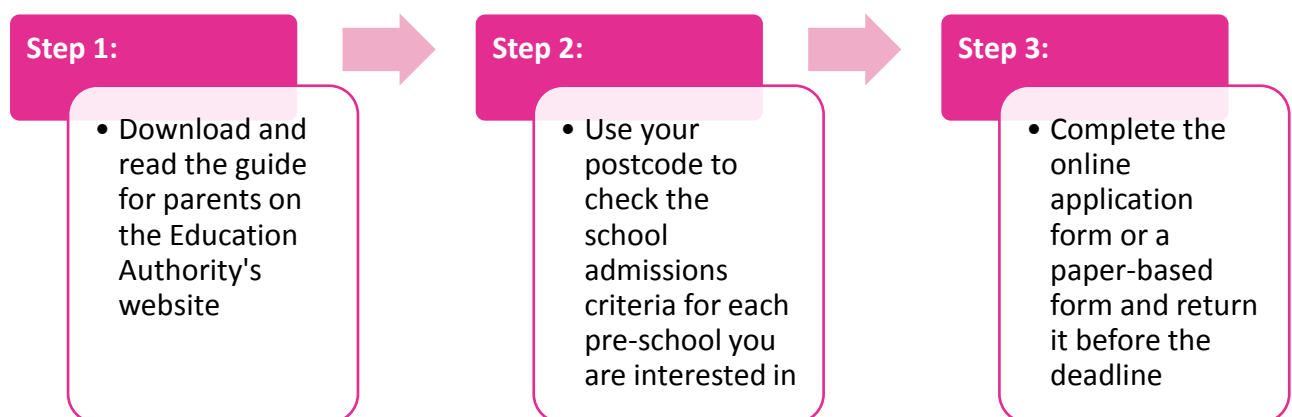
Why should I apply?

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.

How do I apply?

You can apply online for admission to pre-school for the 2021/2022 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 on 028 9598 5595 or by contacting your selected pre-school setting.

We advise parents to 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?

Each year, the Department for Education announces when the Parent Portal will open, and when it will close to applicants. In 2021, the online Portal opening date is 7 January and closing date 29 January.

There will also be a window of opportunity for parents to send or take supporting documentation to their first preference pre-school provider. 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.

Where can I get more information?

If additional information is required or any difficulty is experienced, parents can contact the admissions helpdesk on **028 9598 5595** 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

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.eani.org.uk to find out more.

For further information on pre-school places, or any childcare or work-related issue, call our Family Benefits Advice Service on Freephone 0800 028 3008.