

Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

Pre School

TUSLA Identifier:	TU2015DL051
--------------------------	-------------

Name of Service:	Happy Start Montessori Pre-School
-------------------------	-----------------------------------

Address of Service:	Little Angels, The Rock, Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal
----------------------------	--

Eircode:	F94 KR7P
-----------------	----------

Name of Registered Provider:	Ciara Dolan
-------------------------------------	-------------

Service type:	Sessional
----------------------	-----------

Date of Inspection:	17/02/2026
----------------------------	------------

No of pre-school children:	AM	28	PM	No.
-----------------------------------	----	----	----	-----

Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:	Early Years Inspectorate, TUSLA Child & Family Agency, Markievicz House, Barrack St, Sligo, F91 XC84
Inspection undertaken by:	S Killeen
Title:	Early Years Inspector

Authority to Inspect

The Tusla Early Years Inspectorate carries out inspections of Early Years Services under Section 58(J) of the Child Care Act 1991 (as inserted by Section 92 of the Child and Family Agency Act 2013).

Conditions if applicable	Not Applicable.
---------------------------------	-----------------

Description of service

Happy Start Montessori preschool is a privately owned and operated service in the centre of the town of Ballyshannon, in south Donegal. The service currently operates two sessional services concurrently for children aged 2-6 years. The operating hours of the morning sessions are from 9.00am-12.00pm in room 1 (Red room) and 9:30am-12:30pm in room 2 (Yellow Room). The afternoon session operates from 1.00pm-4.00pm. The service operates from a single-story purpose adapted premises that was previously used as a primary school. The premises consists of two preschool rooms with an interconnecting hallway that has sanitary accommodation for both children and staff. There is a fully enclosed outdoor play area to the rear of the premises.

Staffing

There are six staff members currently employed to work in the service directly with the children. This includes the registered provider who is on the premises on a daily basis and works directly with the pre-school children. One staff member is employed under the Access and Inclusion Model for early childhood services. Each of the six staff members hold a relevant qualification in early childhood care and education.

Methodology

Tusla's Early Years Inspectorate is the independent statutory regulator of early years services in Ireland. The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 define the duty of a registered provider to ensure the safety and well-being of children and to comply with these regulations. This Act also gives Tusla the authority to assess compliance with the regulations. The purpose of regulation in relation to early years services is to ensure that the care, safety, and well-being of children attending such services is upheld. Inspections of early years services are planned based on the following:

- Previous inspection history
- Any information received in relation to the service

The findings on inspection are based on:

- Information obtained through examination of documentation
- Direct observation
- Discussion with relevant staff

This inspection was unannounced and focused on the area of governance/ health, welfare and development of child/ safety/ premises and facilities. The inspection may also focus on other areas as required.

Inspection findings are documented in the inspection report which is first issued in draft format to the service with an opportunity to respond to any findings. Where statutory requirements are identified as not being met, the registered provider must demonstrate how they have rectified the non-compliance and will prevent any non-compliance from re occurring. The Corrective Action and Preventive Action plan (CAPA) will be used to inform decisions about compliance with regulatory requirements. Where the registered provider fails to meet the statutory requirements an escalation process may be commenced.

The inspectorate reserves the right to edit responses received for reasons including clarity, completeness and compliance with administrative and legal processes.

The contents of the report are compiled by the inspectorate body.

Acknowledgments

The inspector wishes to acknowledge the cooperation of the register provider, staff and children who were present on the day of the inspection.

Part III – Management and Staff

Regulation 9 – Management and recruitment

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that-

- (a) the service has a designated person in charge and a named person who is able to deputise as required,
- (b) at all times during the period when the pre-school service is being carried on, the designated person in charge or the named person referred to in subparagraph (a) is on the premises, and
- (c) there is a clear management structure in the service that identifies the lines of authority and accountability in the service and the specific roles and responsibilities of each employee and unpaid worker.

(2) A registered provider shall ensure that each employee, unpaid worker and contractor is suitable and competent taking into consideration the nature of the needs of children, including by-

- (a) consideration of references from the person's past employers, if any, and in particular the most recent employer, if any,
- (b) consideration of references from reputable sources in the case of a person who has no past employers,
- (c) consideration of the vetting disclosure received from the National Vetting Bureau of the Garda Síochána in accordance with the Act of 2012 in respect of the person, and
- (d) ensuring, insofar as is practicable, that where a person has lived in a state other than the State for a period of longer than 6 consecutive months, he or she provides police vetting from the police authorities in that state.

(4) A registered provider shall ensure that, without prejudice to the generality of paragraph (2) and subject to paragraphs (5) and (6), each employee working directly with children attending the service holds at least a major award in Early childhood Care and Education at Level 5 on the National Qualifications Framework or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent.

Compliance Information

(1) The registered provider ensured that.

- (a) There was a designated person in charge and an adult named to deputies in their absence.
- (b) The designated person in charge was available on the premises throughout the period of inspection.
- (c) There was a clear management structure in the service displayed on the noticeboard in main hall that identifies the lines of authority and accountability in the service and the specific roles and responsibilities.

(2) On the day of inspection, six adults were present, the register provider, five adults who were employed to work directly with the children.

The following vetting information was available for six adults:

- (a) Ten written validated references from past employers for six of the adults.
- (b) Two written validated references from reputable sources for two adults.
- (c) Garda vetting disclosures have been obtained for six staff. The service also demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew Garda vetting every three years.
- (d) Police vetting from the police authorities in another state was non- applicable as no adults had lived outside the state for a period of six consecutive months or more.

(4)
Six of the adult files reviewed, evidenced they held a major award at level 5 or above in early childhood care and education on the national qualification framework, or qualifications deemed by the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) to meet the regulatory requirement.

Part III – Management and Staff

Regulation 11 - Staffing levels

- (1) *Subject to this Regulation, a registered provider shall ensure that there is at all times an adequate number of adults working directly with the children attending the pre-school service.*
- (2) *Subject to paragraphs (4) and (5), a registered provider of a full day care service or a part-time day care service shall ensure that at all times the minimum ratio of adults to children specified in column (3) of Part 1 of Schedule 6 opposite a particular reference number specified in column (1) of that Part in respect of the age range of the children specified in column (2) thereof at that reference number is satisfied.*

Compliance Information

- (1) On the day of inspection, there was an adequate number of adults working directly with preschool children attending the service.
- (2) The minimum ratio of adults to children was maintained at all times throughout the inspection.

Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

Regulation 19 - Health, welfare and development of child

(1) A registered provider shall, in providing a pre-school service, ensure that-

(a) each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the pre-school service through the provision of the appropriate activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and stage of development of the child, and

(1) A registered provider shall, in providing a pre-school service, ensure that-

(b) appropriate and suitable care practices are in place in the pre-school service, having regard to the number of children attending the service and the nature of their needs.

Compliance Information

19 (a) (b)

BASIC NEEDS

- Food was provided from home for the pre-school children. The service promoted healthy eating and food, through their healthy eating policy and through communication with parents. As it was pancake Tuesday on the day of inspection the children were seen enjoying pancakes. Children's lunches consisted of ham and cheese sandwiches, grapes, strawberries, raspberries, carrots, peppers and yogurts. Children's drinks were available at hydration stations in each room within their reach throughout the session, should they feel thirsty at any stage.
- Children were supported to use the bathroom in line with their age and stage of development, regular prompts were used by staff to remind the children who were toilet training to use the rest room as needed.
- Aprons were available to the children for messy play activities. Spare clothes were available if the children required a change of clothing during the session.
- The adults working with the children were sensitive and responsive in promoting positive behaviours, telling the children that "we need to take turns" and "let's talk about this and listen to each other." The children were supported to find positive solutions when they experienced challenge in sharing play equipment and materials.

SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

- During snack time the staff members sat at the table and engaged in child appropriate conversations with the children, promoting a relaxed atmosphere. The staff were observed prompting independence by picking one

child out daily to give out lunches, calling each child by name to come and collect their lunch box. Another child was assigned a task of handing out drinks.

- A key-worker system was in place in the service with named staff members assigned the responsibility for creating close relationships with a designated group of children and their parents. Each staff assigned were responsible for completing observations and workbooks for their assigned child.
- The staff members demonstrated warmth and sensitivity in their interactions with the children. Attentively listening when they spoke about what they were going to be doing at the weekend.
- A health promoting ethos was implemented in the service in relation to supporting the children's emotional well-being and emotional literacy. This was evidenced in the service on the day of inspection with the staff members heard encouraging the children to express how they were feeling at different times throughout the session. A regulation station was in each room where the children had pictures of all the different emotions so that they could express to staff how they were feeling without having to use words.
- Transitions from activity's were completed with timers with the children to reduce frustrations over materials or toys, the children were allowed to set the timer with the assistance of staff for a particular activity and when the timer was up, the next child was allowed to use equipment or material.
- Staff and parents work in partnership within the service. The use of child and parents voice forms gave staff members valuable information about the child's likes, dislikes, daily routine, interests, and family. These forms are sent out to parents and children halfway through the school year and again towards the end of the year. The service predominantly communicates with parents at hand-over and pick up. The register provider also informed the inspector that emails and text messages are used to communicate with parents as well.

PHYSICAL AND MATERIAL ENVIRONMENT

- The pre-school rooms had a range of play-based materials and specialist Montessori equipment that offered stimulation, exploration, and imagination. These were positioned at an accessible level on open shelving which nurtured independence, facilitated choice, and encouraged curiosity, spontaneous play, and movement. The rooms were laid out to facilitate sensory experiences through arts and crafts and with sand trays. Fine motor development was supported with the use of jigsaws, shape sorters, crayons, and paper to draw on. Gross motor development was supported with ride on toys and climbing equipment and an area to play ball outside.
- The Red Room was a large bright room with children's art displayed on the walls. The room was divided into defined interest areas to included happy start vets, with dress up materials and a variety of play materials. Montessori materials were arranged on low-level, accessible shelving, covering key curriculum areas such

as Practical Life, Mathematics, Science, and History. A dedicated sensory station provides diverse tactile opportunities through painting, and dry-grain play, while a well-appointed library area, equipped with soft furnishings and developmentally appropriate books. Child size tables and chairs were available for the children to complete tabletop activity and to have their snacks.

- The Yellow Room is a large well decorated room where children were observed leading their own play. It's defined interest areas include, a messy art station, stocked with aprons and brushes, a doctor's surgery for dressing up and imaginary play. Low, open shelves made it easy for the children to access material from the shelves which included, tractors, cars, jigsaws and kinetic sand. There's also a focus on the children's family, with a library for quiet time and a family tree and birthday wall that make the room feel personal and welcoming.
- The outdoor play area offers a great change of pace, featuring a fully enclosed space with two all-weather surfaces that allow for play regardless of the conditions. The layout includes a mix of social and imaginative spaces, such as child-sized picnic tables and a large wooden tent, alongside opportunities for physical development. Children can engage in safe risk-taking and balance on the see-saws and wooden steps, while large chalkboards and tractor tyres provide creative and open-ended play options.

programme of Activities:

- Ongoing observations and assessments were documented which helped create a well-rounded picture of each child and their learnings. Observations were individual to the child and recorded tasks completed and goals for the future. The children's scrap books contained individual images of sensory play, friends, birthdays, self-portraits and all about me.
- Children's language development was observed to be supported through one to one and group discussions, songs and storytelling. Children were observed on the day to count in Irish. Circle time was observed in all rooms on the day where all children's participation was encouraged.
- On the day of inspection, the children were facilitated to make their own choice in selecting play equipment and activities that they wished to engage with. Turn taking and sharing was promoted, this was evidenced by many children working collaboratively together, unprompted.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 23 - Safeguarding health, safety and welfare of child

A registered provider shall ensure that all reasonable measures are taken to safeguard the health, safety and welfare of a pre-school child attending the service and that the environment of the service is safe.

Compliance Information

General Safety:

- The main entrance into the service was found to be secured upon the inspectors unannounced arrival to the service, which prevented persons entering unauthorised and children from leaving the building unsupervised.
- All cleaning products in the care rooms were stored on high level shelving out of the reach of children.
- Materials and resources were maintained in a good state of repair.
- The outdoor perimeter was secure with waste bins stored out of reach of children.

Infection Control:

- The materials and resources throughout the service were visually clean.
- Tables and chairs were observed to be cleaned prior to and after snack time.
- Foot operated pedal bins were available within the service for safe disposal of waste.
- Thermostatically controlled warm water, liquid soap and paper towels were available in each of the children's sanitary accommodation to support good hand-washing practices.
- Children were observed washing their hands at appropriate intervals throughout the day including after using the toilet and before eating.
- Child friendly handwashing posters were placed beside the sinks. Handwashing was supervised by the adults to ensure all hands were cleaned effectively.
- Up to date cleaning schedules outlining appropriate cleaning methods and the various areas to be cleaned within the playrooms and sanitary accommodation was available.
- Ventilation in each of the rooms was provided by openable windows.

Administration of Medication:

- On discussion with staff on the day of inspection, they were aware of their roles and responsibilities for the safe administration of medication. No medication was administered on the day of inspection.

Fire Safety:

- Fire doors were observed to be unobstructed throughout the service.
- Fire evacuation procedures were clearly displayed in the care rooms.
- Fire extinguishers were on the premises and easily accessible.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 25 - First aid

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that a person trained in first aid for children is, at all times, immediately available to the children attending the pre-school service.

(2) A registered provider shall ensure that a suitably equipped first aid box for children-

(a) is safely stored in an easily accessible and conspicuous position on the premises, and

(b) is available to the children attending the pre-school service at all times.

Compliance Information

(1) On the day of inspection six adults working in the service were trained in first aid responder (FAR) and immediately available to the children attending the service.

(2) (a) (b).

The first aid box was fully stocked and was readily available and safely stored in a conspicuous position in the service.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 26 - Fire safety measures

(1) A registered provider shall ensure that a record in writing is kept of-

(a) any fire drill that takes place in the premises, and

(b) the number, type and maintenance record of fire fighting equipment and smoke alarms in the premises.

(2) The record referred to in paragraph (1) shall be open to inspection by-

(a) a parent or guardian of a pre-school child attending or proposing to attend the pre-school service,

(b) an employee, and

(c) an authorised person.

(3) A notice of the procedures to be followed in the event of fire shall be displayed in a conspicuous position in the premises.

Compliance Information

- (1)
- (a) A procedure was in place to practice and record monthly fire drills. The last documented fire drill was dated the 21st of January 2026.
 - (b) A record of the number, type, and maintenance of firefighting equipment and smoke detection system in the service was on file. Records indicated that the last annual maintenance for the firefighting equipment was dated 22nd of January 2026.
- (2) The record referred to in paragraph (1) was available and open to inspection by-
- (c) an authorised person.
- (4) On the day of inspection, a notice of the procedures to be followed in the event of fire were observed to be displayed in a conspicuous place within the premises.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 27 – Supervision

A registered provider shall ensure that pre-school children attending the service are supervised at all times.

Compliance Information

On the day of the inspection, children were observed to be appropriately supervised at all times. Staff were strategically positioned across both indoor and outdoor environments, ensuring that all children remained within sight and sound. Supervision was active and attentive; staff were seen to sit closely with the children during mealtimes and remained directly engaged in their activities. Transition from outdoor to indoor was observed to be managed efficiently with staff communicating at all times what child were present or had been brought inside.

Part VI - Safety

Regulation 28 - Insurance

A registered provider shall ensure that the pre-school service is adequately insured.

Compliance Information

The registered provider ensured adequate insurance was in place for the registered number of preschool children up until 27th March 2026.