

Improving childminding services in the Seychelles

How do you regulate informal childcare on a collection of over a 100 islands spread out in the Indian Ocean? Clair Watson takes a look at how one government is taking its first steps to full regulation.

The Seychelles is a collection of 115 small islands in the Indian Ocean, with a population of 92,000. The majority of the people live and work on the three main islands – Mahe, the largest island; Praslin; and La Digue. This small country has big ideas and is starting to pave the way for Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) in Africa.

It was highlighted a number of years ago that there was an urgent and drastic need for changes to be made in the early years sector, with a key focus on childminders. The government of the Seychelles runs free non-compulsory pre-schools, called crèches, for children 3.3 to 5.3-years-old. Compulsory schooling starts in Primary 1, aged 5.3 plus. This leaves children younger than three years, three months to be cared for at home, with childminders, or in daycare facilities.

Childminding is the preferred and most popular community service, one of core importance in the Seychelles, especially among the many single working mothers who rely heavily on childminders to care for their children. This has largely been an unregulated market with many children being cared for by untrained and unqualified practitioners.

The childminding service has evolved as a means of self-employment with informal agreements being made between carers and parents. This has resulted in more than 6,000 children, aged from three-months to four-years-old being cared for in a diverse range of home environments.

The beginning

The Institute of Early Childhood Development (IECD) was set up in January 2013 to regulate the childminding service in the Seychelles. A nation-wide study was carried out later in the year to establish a comprehensive picture of the quality of the childminding services.

A trained fieldworker spent a day with each childminder observing what happens from the time of arrival to the time of departure. The fieldworker focused on four key areas:

- Space and furnishings – this included looking at availability, accessibility and suitability of outdoor and indoor space, along with appropriate furniture and furnishings.
- Health and safety – fieldworkers made observations of food preparation and storage, nutritional quality, personal care facilities, hygiene and sanitation, along with practice and provisions.
- Learning programme – the fieldworker assessed the quality of language learning experiences, learning activities, and availability of education materials.
- Interaction – this focused on the quality of supervision, interaction, and social exchange.

A collection of seven policy briefs were drafted in November 2013, summarising the findings and giving recommendations. The policy briefs focused on quality, registration, health and safety, early learning, training, and parental needs. Each policy brief provided background information, summarised the key findings and gave recommendations of action.

The findings concluded the need to have a high quality service ensuring consistency across the sector – this emphasised the need for standardisation through a common framework, along with a monitoring system to ensure standards are adhered to across the country. This inevitably highlighted the need for supporting and training practitioners.

The national childminding survey signified the start of a journey to improve the care and development of young children in the Seychelles.



Clair Watson
educational consultant
and trainer

Photos courtesy of the
author

Establishing a National Early Years Framework

One of the first steps was to develop a Seychelles National Early Years Framework. This was led by the Ministry of Education and involved a number of stakeholders. The Early Learning Framework was launched in 2015 and provides specific guidelines for early childhood practitioners and providers. The framework focuses on the child 'Being, Becoming and Belonging' within his/her family, and aims to create a seamless transition from conception to

The childminding service has evolved as a means of self-employment with informal agreements being made between carers and parents, resulting in more than 6,000 children being cared for.



National standards and a drive for regulation has led to a training boom for childminders in the Seychelles



seven-year-old. It supports the diverse society within the Seychelles and aims to strive towards creating a harmonious state with a strong sense of national pride.

The framework has challenged the traditional approach to curriculum development and has opted for a 'push up' approach. It is believed the specific outcomes will guide practitioners to provide learning opportunities and activities according to the needs and interest of the child. The framework has six areas of learning and development:

- Wellbeing.
- Identity and belonging.
- Communication and language development.
- Early mathematics.
- Arts and creativity.
- Knowledge and understanding of the world.

Each area of learning is split into seven age bands: Conception to three-months; three-months to 18-months; 18-months to 36-months; three to four-years; four to five-years; five to six-years; and six to seven-years-old. The lengthy document now needs to be made more user-friendly, especially for the childminding sector and for those working with children younger than three-years-old.



Having a national curriculum for the early years is a great accomplishment, but much more work was still needed to create change within the childminding service. Given the multi-sectorial nature of the childminding service, the IECD has worked tirelessly to coordinate and work with all relevant sectors, including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Affairs, Community Development and Sports, Seychelles Fire and Rescue Safety, and the National High Level Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Committee, to establish policy briefs and national action plans.

In June 2015, the various sectors were brought together to discuss and validate the National Action plans for 2015-2017, stressing the need for holistic development.

Launching National Standards for Childminding Services

During 2015-2016, the IECD focused on developing national standards for childminders to ensure consistency across the sector and to improve the quality of the service. This was a huge undertaking and the IECD had the ominous task of coordinating all the relevant sectors. The IECD received support and guidance from

the World Bank to develop the National Standards for Childminding Services.

In 2016, 10 quality standards were released, these were: Early Learning; Interaction; Health; Nutrition; Safety; Child Rights and Protection; Staffing; Physical Environment; Family and Community Engagement; Administration. Naturally, some of standards have an overlap with the Early Learning Framework. In May 2016, the IECD put together a user-friendly information guide for childminders, explaining the key elements of each standard.

The release of the national standards earlier in the year prompted a series of training sessions to take place, the first cohort involved 70 childminders. A series of seven sessions took place focusing on key elements, such as the standards, child development, early learning, interaction, safety, nutrition, and child rights and protection. Attendance certificates were presented upon completion and described by the Minister of Education as 'a milestone achievement'.

Regulating childminding services

Another survey was carried out, this time focusing on the understanding of ECCE nationally. The aim was to gauge the current knowledge of early childhood (at the time) and the way it influenced behaviours in terms of health and safety, education, policy, social and child protection, parental and community links. This provided shocking results as childminders and daycare operators were highlighted as having the lowest results in the survey, especially in health and safety, and education of children.

The survey also pinpointed professionals as scoring the lowest results in child and social protection, and parental and community links. These results sparked interesting discussions among the various stakeholders, which went on to focus on key areas of intervention.

These results highlighted the urgency to control and regulate the number of childminders operating along with elevating the basic requirements needed to run a childminding service. The IECD, World Bank, and representatives from various sectors, all worked tirelessly to put together Regulation Standards. These standards have just been passed through parliament and Phase 1 is underway, signifying a huge step forward in making a safe, healthy, caring environment for young children in the Seychelles.

As of September this year, all childminders caring for three or more children have to register their services. This involves each practitioner having a medical test and a criminal record check, along with an up-to-date first aid training qualification. Once registered, a home visit will be carried out by a team from the various services to ensure the environment, health and safety, and child protection regulations are in place. This will be a rigorous assessment and will involve the fire and safety department checking for fire bells and smoke detectors along with ensuring the building has two designated evacuation exits and an appropriate assembly point.

For many childminders this will mean making many changes to their existing environment, which inevitably

will incur extra costs. To support the childminders, a one-off Sr10,000 (£580) grant will be given. Once the childminder has passed the inspection, only then will they be issued their licence and certificate. A follow-up visit every six months will check that the regulations and national standards are being adhered to, and the childminders will be required to re-register every two years.

All of this hard work has been recognised by Dr Maropi, director of UNESCO's International Bureau of Education. She has spoken very highly of the progress made in the Seychelles, so much so she wants to make the Seychelles a centre of excellence as an example to other countries. The first opportunity for sharing the Seychelles process internationally was in July (2016), when Ms Choppy CEO of IECD was invited to Cameroon.

Next steps

So what happens next? In the short-term, more training will be offered for practitioners to ensure they are supported and have the knowledge and skills to provide the best learning opportunities for children in their care. The IECD hopes to raise awareness, and to inform and educate parents of the new standards and regulations through media outlets, such as television adverts and posters.

Meetings will be held with parents on Mahe, Praslin and La Digue, explaining and emphasising the work the IECD has carried out in raising the standards of care and development. It is hoped that this will encourage parents to make educated decisions when choosing a childminder for their child.

In 2017-18, the IECD plans to move onto regulating the daycare centres, bringing in standards, regulations, and monitoring criteria. This will support the IECD's vision to ensure that all young Seychellois children have the opportunity to enjoy quality care and education through a shared commitment by all partners. **eye**

Useful resources

- The Seychelles Early Learning Framework: *Being, Belonging, Becoming* – <http://www.education.gov.sc/Downloads/Seychelles%20Early%20Learning%20Framework%202015.pdf>
- Institute of Early Childhood Development: National gathering of Childminders event details – <http://www.iecd.gov.sc/special-gathering-for-childminders-in-seychelles/>

Key points

- The Seychelles consists of 115 islands
- Childcare, until recently, has been largely unregulated with as many as 6,000 young children being cared for based on informal agreements
- The national government has recognised the need for regulation, training and raising of standards, publishing a national framework and childminder standards
- Childminders are first to be regulated with full daycare centres to follow in 2017-18