

# *Cherishing Children*

*Labour's Manifesto for Children*



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**Labour**  
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## INTRODUCTION

The will to create a better future for our children is one of the most powerful drivers of progress. This recession may slow that progress, but it must not be allowed to reverse it. Unlike the Taoiseach, we in the Labour Party do believe that the future will be better for our children. It can and will be better, but not measured only in material terms, but also by the status of children in our society, the quality of the environment we pass on to them, and by the reach of their opportunities.

Childhood is precious, but it is also short. Every year that investment in children is put off, or cut back, erodes a child's opportunity to achieve their full potential. This is particularly true for children from less well-off backgrounds.

Investment in children is a win-win bet on our own future. The right investment in children, particularly in their early years, consistently demonstrates a high return to the individual, to society, and to the economy. For example, investment in high quality pre-school pays for itself seven times over, in the form of reduced spending on education, social welfare and prisons, and higher income tax receipts. Most importantly, investment in education from a child's earliest years unlocks their potential, and with it their ability to contribute fully to our society.

Despite a decade of unprecedented economic growth, there are huge gaps in investment and services for children.

According to the OECD, Ireland is at the bottom of the league for early childhood education, with only 2 per cent of three year olds in state-subsidised pre-school. This compares to 100 per cent in Italy and France.

Early intervention programmes for disadvantaged children, such as Early Start, established by a Labour Minister for Education in the 1990s, have languished as a pilot project for years. Literacy rates have remained largely unchanged since 1980, while early school leaving has remained stubbornly high at around 17 per cent. In some urban areas, this figure can be as high as 60 per cent.

Investing in children is not simply a question of money. It is fundamentally about our priorities, and how we organise our society. One of the most effective ways of reducing Ireland's high levels of child poverty is to help parents to combine paid work and their parenting responsibilities. Yet parents do not have a right to flexible or part-time work; childcare costs can absorb over half a dual income household's disposable income, compared to less than one third in other OECD countries; and the lack of affordable childcare acts as a barrier to lone parents entering the workforce.

Fianna Fáil's close relationship with the construction industry mean that a whole generation of Irish children is growing up in suburbs where safe places to play, childcare facilities, schools and even pathways were deemed less

important than house-building. In the meantime, obesity has become the most common illness among children and young people.

In hard economic times it becomes even more important to protect our smallest citizens. High unemployment means even more children will be forced into poverty, which will affect their life chances long after the economy has recovered.

Fianna Fáil and the Green Party have made no effort to cushion children from the impact of this recession. Instead they have increased class sizes, abolished book grants for disadvantaged children, cut resources for children with special needs, immigrant children, and children at risk of dropping out of school. And they chose not to spend just €10 million a year vaccinating young teenage girls against cervical cancer.

A Labour government would put children, and the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century family, at the heart of our agenda. In good times and bad, investing in children is essential to achieve a better future for all of our citizens, for our country, and, in the longer term, for our economy.

## **SAFE & HEALTHY CHILDREN**

### **Locally**

- Labour councillors will promote the use of local “walking buses” for children to enable them to walk to school safely, and expand the successful safe cycling training in schools.
- Labour councillors will promote the expansion of playgrounds, particularly in or close to young communities.
- Labour-led councils will ensure greater monitoring of playgrounds and parks by park wardens to combat anti-social behaviour.
- Our councillors will promote ‘night basketball’ and ‘night football’, as well as other sports and recreation facilities, to give teenagers other options for socialising.

### **Nationally**

- The Labour Party would introduce an arts, cultural and sports based summer recreation programme for young people, run at local government level. This would be coordinated by a full-time youth recreation coordinator, and staffed in part by third level students employed under a revived Summer Jobs Scheme. Funding for the scheme would be drawn from the interest accrued on the fund created by Labour’s Deposit Retention Scheme for rented properties.
- Labour in Government would introduce the HPV vaccine for young teenage girls.
- Labour would make Physical Education a Junior Certificate and Leaving Cert subject, with points for college entry, to make physical fitness and healthy eating a core element of the curriculum in schools
- We would mandate RTÉ to provide a number of periods of children’s programming during the day when there would be no advertising.
- Labour would prevent schools from becoming vehicles for commercial advertising by introducing a code of practice for schools to restrict this form of activity.
- The Labour Party is committed to putting in place the strongest, child-centred legal framework to protect children from sexual, physical, and mental abuse. We support the 39 recommendations in the second interim report of the Joint Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children. We believe that if these recommendations to strengthen our laws, and totally transform the way children are treated in criminal proceedings, are put in place together with the recommendations of the Joint Committee’s first interim report dealing with “soft information”, that this country would have a robust child protection code and system.

### **In the European Parliament**

- We will propose to develop an EU strategy on children’s rights to help eradicate child poverty and guarantee access to education, including

pre-school child care. In this regard we particularly welcome the enhanced priority afforded to children's rights by the Lisbon Treaty.

- We will also continue to press for the activation in Ireland of a hotline for missing children, as proposed by the European Union in 2007.
- We will work towards a ban on advertising aimed at children.

## **LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

### **Locally**

- Labour councillors will roll out Labour's Right to Read campaign. This includes:
  - Advocating that local authorities provide homework clubs, run by Community Development Workers.
  - Ensuring future social housing takes account of children's need to have a quiet space to do their homework.
  - Encouraging literacy among young parents with the promotion of 'Baby Books Bundle' through the local library service.
  - Maintaining and extending library opening hours and outreach services.
  - Introducing more 'Family Learning Through Football' schemes, which encourage positive parenting and family literacy.
  - A greater roll-out of schemes like Dublin City Council's 'Beano Comic Initiative'.

### **Nationally**

- The Labour Party has proposed the establishment of a universal pre-school year for all 3-4 year olds since 2004. Every child should be guaranteed a high-quality pre-school place with:
  - clear curriculum requirements
  - appropriate staffing by early childhood education professionals
  - and conducted in an appropriate setting

The Fianna Fáil-Green Government has yet to give a clear indication that all of these essential components will be in place throughout the country within the next seven months.

- The Labour Party would reinstate the school book grant for disadvantaged students, at a cost of €7 million.
- Labour in government would also reverse the decision to axe special needs classes.

### **In the European Parliament**

- Labour in Europe will continue to press the European Commission to support programmes for young people, such as Erasmus Apprentice, Erasmus for Secondary Schools and 'Youth in Action', which extend the opportunity to experience life in other member states to a more diverse group of young people.

## **TIME FOR FAMILIES**

### **Locally**

- Labour councillors will facilitate the use of libraries by parent and toddler groups.
- We will promote more family-friendly festivals and community activities through the local authority.

### **Nationally**

- We would introduce a legal right to a career break, subject to reasonable conditions, which would allow parents to take time out of the work place without risking future benefits or their job security. It would have the added benefit of creating mobility in the labour force.
- Labour would introduce a right to part-time work, subject to reasonable conditions.

### **In the European Parliament**

- Labour in Europe will work to introduce improved parental leave rights for men and women up to the highest standards in Europe. Fine Gael's conservative European People's Party group this month voted down proposals to extend minimum maternity leave rights across Europe from 14 to 20 weeks, and to introduce two weeks paternity leave for new fathers.

## **CHILDCARE**

### **Locally**

- Labour councillors will work with schools to explore how local authorities could manage safe supervised community facilities, open before and after school, for parents to drop and collect their children on their way to and from work.
- Labour councillors will ensure that childcare facilities are integrated into plans for residential developments.
- Labour councillors will encourage the development of childcare facilities at or near primary schools, where possible.
- At local government level, we will enable local authorities to act as brokers for parents seeking to set up childcare cooperatives.

### **Nationally**

- Labour in government would plan ahead, and build childcare and early education facilities into plans for new primary schools.
- All care settings would have to include outdoor play areas.

- We would develop standards for childcare which include developmental and educational goals, not just bricks and mortar regulations.
- We would require registration of all childcare facilities and providers, including for over-6s, as the basis on which there can be positive engagement to enhance skills.
- We would promote the registration of childminders, and awareness of the income disregard scheme, to provide a basis for positive engagement to enhance the quality of childminding.
- We would progressively develop an inspectorate of facilities comprised of childcare professionals; develop a quality-mark system for childcare facilities; and ensure Garda clearance for all childcare staff.

### **In the European Parliament**

- We will work to support parents so that they can balance their caring responsibilities with their professional responsibilities. To support this goal, we propose that Member States achieve the existing EU target of 33% child care coverage for 0-3 year olds and 90% coverage for children from 3-school age, and adopt complementary EU qualitative targets for child care.