

Calls for extra €625m to fund early childcare

AN extra €625million must be spent on early childcare, just to bring our spending up to the OECD average, a leading trade union has said.

And the Government should start with an extra €125million next year, Impact argued in a pre-Budget submission which was launched by Barnardos Ireland chief Fergus Finlay.

It called for two months' paid parental leave, for one parent, from next year, at an extra cost of €84million.

The union says Government spending of just 0.1% of GDP on early childhood education puts Ireland at the bottom of the OECD league table, where the average spend is 0.7%. And so

By **Christian McCashin**

Impact believes at least €625million extra should be spent over the next five years to bring us up to the level.

'This lack of significant investment has resulted in high costs to parents and low wages for workers. Irish parents pay some of the highest childcare costs in the world, while most of those working within early education don't even earn a living wage,' it says.

Mr Finlay said: 'Having access to quality early-years services can make a world of difference to a child's life, offering the best start possible. It reaps benefits for the child, society

and the Exchequer, ensuring that every child can reach their potential. It's important that Budget 2018 commits to investing in early-childhood care and education - supporting the improvement of quality and access of services.'

Impact's submission was backed by Early Childhood Ireland, which campaigns for care and education for youngsters.

A spokesman said: 'There is proper training for childcare and there are degree courses.

'I'm sure they're looking for parity between early years education and teaching. That's certainly the way to go because there's a big recruitment and retention crisis in the sector.'

Dr Mark Dooley



MORAL MATTERS

Living with a six-year-old wrecking ball

JUST when I thought I had mastered the art of parenting, our youngest has decided I need to be brought down a peg or two. It is not that he intentionally sets out to thwart his father, but that he can't help himself making life difficult for me. I delight in doing something well, and then, within minutes, I find it undone.

I don't mean that a freshly cleaned surface is suddenly covered in handprints. That is something I have got used to and now take for granted. No, what I mean is wholesale destruction - complete and utter devastation.

The school year started well. Despite our worries, our eldest made a seamless transition from primary to secondary school. The other two scamps returned to school triumphant that their big brother was no longer observing their every move.

I breathed a sigh of relief, believing that this year would be the easiest yet. Parenting, it seemed, had suddenly become much less stressful. The boys were showing signs of independence and, after all the years of fretting and fussing, we could finally relax a little.

How quickly our dreams were dashed. No sooner had we settled into the new school routine than our delightful, gentle, considerate six-year-old discovered a strange new alter ego. Our lovely little boy was still there, but, every now and then, a powerful force would suddenly seize him.

First, it was toys scattered around the house. You're right, there is nothing unusual in that, except that when you can't access a room for the toys on the floor, you have a serious problem. Ah, it must be back-to-school fatigue, but no amount of napping seemed to subdue this force of nature.

Inside and out, there was havoc. One day, I spotted strips of plastic weed barrier strewn around the garden. I figured that some barbarous magpies had desecrated it to access the worms.

It was only when I brought the subject up at dinner that I noticed someone hang their head in shame. He has a lovely habit of parading his guilt in full public view. 'I'm sorry, Dad, I didn't mean to do it. I didn't know what it was for.'

His big intense eyes swollen with

tears made me melt. 'Don't worry,' I said, 'but be careful not to break anything inside or out of the house.'

'Yes, Dad.'

The very next day, I found branches wrenched from the hedges, the heads of our flowers lying shrivelled and lifeless on the lawn. As I observed the garden with horror, I felt like some general surveying the dead on a battlefield.

'Didn't I tell you not to destroy things in the garden?' 'Yes, but I didn't know you meant the flowers. I just thought you meant that plastic stuff under the stones. Sorry, Dad.' This time, I wasn't so forgiving: 'You cannot destroy anything in the garden - especially the shrubs or the flowers!'

For a short time, the devastation ceased. But then, I noticed strange things happening around the house. Objects were mysteriously breaking as though we were haunted by ghosts.

Only last weekend, for example, a chain for controlling a window blind was found on the floor. It had been disconnected by force and the blind was now useless. When I demanded that the culprit reveal himself, our youngest burst into tears and came clean.

'Why on earth did you do that?' He bent his little head low and quietly said: 'I don't know why I did it. I was just playing, Dad, please forgive me.' Behind my angry visage, I couldn't help but smile.

THE next day, I happened to wander into his room only to find him hanging out of the other blind. 'Stop,' I screamed, 'you're going to do the same again!' 'Sorry, Dad, I forgot I wasn't supposed to do that!'

So, no, this will certainly not be the year I thought it was going to be. But then, being a parent is never a predictable occupation. If each day brings its own problems and challenges, it is because we are not caring for machines, but for little beings bursting with personality.

He is leaving behind a trail of devastation which is driving me to distraction. Yet, there is no malice behind it. It is simply one little boy trying his best to make sense of his world.

Whether our world can survive the process is another question. But, even amid the ruins, he won't hesitate to say: 'Sorry, Dad.'

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