



**Home Education
Network**

Guide to the Registration Process

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If you need legal or other professional advice, you should consult a suitably qualified person.

www.henireland.org

Introduction

Home education is legal in Ireland and is enshrined in the Irish constitution.

ARTICLE 42

1. The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.
2. Parents shall be free to provide this education in their homes or in private schools or in schools recognised or established by the State.
- 3.1 The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.
- 3.2 The State shall, however, as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social.

In 2000, the Irish Government brought in a system of registration for home-educated children aged six to sixteen, with teenagers usually staying on the register until they reach eighteen. Originally, the registration process was administered through the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), but in 2014 it was moved from the Department of Education to the Child and Family Agency, Tusla. The registration process consists of a written application form, followed by a meeting with an Authorised Person (assessor) called a Preliminary Assessment. Most people have no problems and are put on the register after this initial assessment. If the Preliminary Assessment is deemed inconclusive, Tusla may require a more detailed assessment, called a Comprehensive Assessment. Once on the register, Tusla may request occasional ongoing monitoring assessments.

Getting started

Let's look at the process in more detail.

The first step is to ring Tusla on 01 771 8638 and tell them that you wish to register for home education. They will send you an application form and also a set of guidelines. These guidelines are also available to download from the Tusla website:

http://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/guidelines_assessment_education_outside_schools.pdf.

If your child has never been to school you do not have to contact Tusla until near the time they turn six. If you are planning to take your child out of school, you can legally remove your child once you have returned the application form to Tusla. They will notify the school that you have applied to home educate. Your child's name will remain on the school register until the registration process is complete, and can return to the school during this time if you change your mind. Once successfully registered, Tusla notifies the school, at which time the child's name will be officially removed from the school's register. Your child may still go back to school at any time; however he or she may be subject to entrance requirements such as waiting lists and may not get a place in your preferred school.

If you remove the child from school for an extended period of time before you return the forms to Tusla, you should be aware that children with over 20 days of unexplained absence are considered truant, which could have legal implications.

At the same time as you return the form, you may wish to inform the school of your decision. Many schools are unaware of home education, or do not support it as an option and therefore may not have correct information. Your decision to

home educate is entirely up to you. You may meet with them to inform them of your decision, if you wish, but you are not obliged to do this.

Note: If both parents are legal guardians of the child, Tusla's current policy requires that both parents sign the application form. A court order may be required where only one guardian is available to sign the form.

Educational approaches

The guidelines supplied by Tusla are a great source of information and should be read thoroughly. You will see from these guidelines that a wide range of approaches to home education are acceptable. You are not required to recreate school at home, rather you are free to use whatever educational style will best suit your family. Some families follow a set curriculum, whereas others follow an unschooling or child-led approach. Many families in Ireland fall somewhere between the two, using a mixture of resources and approaches to meet their child's educational needs.

The section *Broad Characteristics of a Certain Minimum Education* on pages 18 to 20 of the guidelines attempts to define what is meant by a 'certain minimum education'. It is useful to be familiar with this and to ensure that your planned educational provision covers these basic areas. Most families provide way beyond the basic skills outlined that are required to provide a child with a 'certain minimum education'.

According to the guidelines, your educational provision should reflect the child's personality, interests and general ability, as well as their age and stage of development. Your child is not required to be at the same level in any particular area as their school-going counterparts. In fact there is nothing in the guidelines about when a child should be able to do any given skill. Some commentators have noted that should there be more definition, it would require schools to ensure that every child attained this level also, under the law. The most important thing when it comes to registration is to be confident in your preferred approach, so now is a good time to research home education. There are many books and websites devoted to the topic, and you can check the HEN website (www.henireland.org) for more information and links.

It is also a good idea to chat to other home educators. There may be a meet-up near you where you can get to know families who are already home educating. There are also many Facebook groups devoted to home education where you can ask questions and get helpful information.

Filling in the forms

Having a clear idea about the approach you wish to take will make filling in the form easier.

Take for example the question that refers to the time devoted to the education of the child. If you plan to keep set times, then by all means say so. If not, it is fine to say that you do not follow a timetable, although they will look for some indication of the time spent on educational activities with your child. It is up to you how much information you provide on the form.

The spaces provided on the form are quite small, so you may prefer to type up your answers on a separate sheet, or request an electronic version of the form. If you need help with any of the questions, talk to another experienced home educator. Your HEN regional contact (<http://www.henireland.org/contact-us.html>) will also be happy to help. If your child has been assessed as having special needs, then this should be included on the form. Keep a copy of the form for your own records, as the assessor will refer to your answers during the assessment.

Arranging the assessment

Once you have returned the forms an assessor will phone you to make an appointment for a Preliminary Assessment. Some parents have been contacted within a few weeks of returning the form, whereas others have had months go by before they were contacted.

Occasionally an assessor asks for an appointment at short notice. It is ok to refuse this and to request a time that suits you. You may want to arrange the appointment for a time when your partner or other support person can be with you. If you are a single parent, having a support person with you can help you feel more confident on the day. This person could be a family member, friend or someone more experienced in home education.

The guidelines state that a Preliminary Assessment is not required to be in the home. Most families do choose to meet the assessor at home, but you are also entitled to meet them at a different venue, such as a hotel. If this is your preference, then it might be a good idea to include a note with your application form stating that you would like to have your assessment outside the home and asking them to arrange a suitable venue with you. If you leave arranging the venue until the assessor contacts you, it can sometimes be difficult to get the assessor to agree to meet outside the home, although, again, it is completely within your rights.

Preparing for the assessment

It is important to be aware that the Preliminary Assessment is of the education that is being provided or proposed, not an assessment of your child. There should be no quizzing or ad-hoc testing of your child, and indeed your child does not even have to be present during the assessment.

The guidelines state that “normally, the child or children should not be present during this time”. You may like to have childcare organised in advance. Some assessors do ask to meet the child. If you are happy to do so, then the assessor could meet your child briefly when they arrive. The assessment could then continue without the child present. In preparing for the assessment, it can help to keep a diary or notebook of your child’s learning. So many aspects of a child’s life feed their education. Look at what they are learning through games they play, hobbies, books they read or enjoy having read to them, classes they attend, any curriculum or on-line learning resources they may use, art and craft activities, pets, sports, walks in nature, day trips, helping at home, musical instruments, family discussions, educational television programmes, board games etc.

The assessor will want information on your provision for literacy and numeracy. For some families this will be in the form of curriculum/ workbooks/on-line courses. If you take a more unschooling approach, look at how you are supporting your child’s development of literacy and numeracy, e.g. managing pocket money, using weights and measures in baking, visits to the library, developing verbal and listening skills through family discussions. If your child is not yet reading or writing, think about where they are in the process, e.g. loves being read to, recognises letter sounds, wide vocabulary, developing fine motor skills in drawing.

Have examples of any resources or curriculum you use on hand to show the assessor, such as books about your home education philosophy, reference or text books, fiction or non-fiction books, workbooks, educational toys and games, information about on-line resources and any special equipment. Also gather some examples of your child’s work, such as art and craftwork, formal or informal projects and examples of handwriting. The assessor may not ask to see any of these, but the more prepared you are, the better.

The assessment

A Preliminary Assessment usually lasts about two hours.

Many people feel nervous on the day, but don't worry, it goes very fast. It is important to come across as confident and happy in your decision to home educate. If you have any doubts, talk them out with an experienced home educator beforehand. Remember that most families are successful at the preliminary stage. You know how wonderful your child is so don't hold back, let the assessor know. Don't minimise what you do, rather be proud of the educational journey you are on together, a journey that is tailored to their individual interests and aptitudes.

The guidelines from Tusla include a copy of the interview schedule that the assessor will use. This will give you an idea of the questions you will be asked, many of which are the same as the questions on the application form. There are some questions that are asked that are not actual requirements of a certain minimum education; for example, your child does not have to learn Irish. You do not have to keep formal records of your child's progress. Some assessors are very knowledgeable about various approaches to home education and how they differ from school, but sadly some are less well informed and may have inappropriate expectations. If you feel that your assessor is not keeping to the guidelines, e.g. expecting a school-like approach from an unschooling family, then you can politely say that that is inappropriate and refer back to the guidelines.

If you have taken your child out of school due to difficulties, talk about the positive ways that home education is now meeting your child's needs. For example, if your child was struggling or bored in school, perhaps they now love learning at their own pace. If your child found it difficult large groups, maybe learning in a one-to-one environment really suits them.

At the end of the assessment the assessor should tell you if they are recommending you for registration. If they don't volunteer this information, then ask them about it before they leave. If they express concerns, then ask them why. Find out what further information they require or what they felt was missing. This could be your chance to provide the extra information that supports your case or to correct any misunderstandings.

Preliminary assessment report

After your assessment you will be sent a copy of the assessment report. This can take a month or more. You are entitled to comment on the report. If you wish to comment, you must do so within two weeks. If you are not happy with the report, now is your chance to report any errors or submit more information. If you feel that your assessor was inappropriate during the assessment, such as ad-hoc testing of your child or lacking an understanding of educational approaches, you may like to complain and ask for a second Preliminary Assessment with a different assessor. There have been families who have successfully taken this route. It is preferable to do all you can to avoid a Comprehensive Assessment. Tusla will then make a decision based on the assessor's report.

Usually, if the assessor recommends you for registration, Tusla will agree to add you to the register and you will receive a letter informing you of the decision. Most families are added to the register at this stage.

Comprehensive assessment

If your Preliminary Assessment is deemed inconclusive, i.e. they are unable to determine, on the basis of a Preliminary Assessment Report, whether a child is receiving a certain minimum education, Tusla will request a Comprehensive Assessment.

A comprehensive differs from a preliminary in that it also involves observation of the education being provided, an inspection of the premises, equipment and materials used, as well as an assessment of the child's progress and development. Therefore, it must take place in the place where the child is being educated, i.e. the home. The child must be present so that the assessor can observe and assess the child. This is mostly in the form of an informal conversation, but may include the child demonstrating certain skills or abilities, or the administration of standardised tests.

There is more information in the Tusla guidelines, including a copy of the Comprehensive Assessment Schedule used by the assessor on the day.

On going monitoring assessments

Once you have been added to the register, Tusla may request an assessment for ongoing monitoring to ensure that your child continues to receive a “certain minimum education”. This is currently a grey area with little consistency in how these assessments are requested.

Some families have had ongoing monitoring assessments six months after being added to the register, whereas others have had years without a request for ongoing monitoring. Many families have had ongoing monitoring for older children at the same time as a Preliminary Assessment for a younger child. There is also a lack of clarity on the format that ongoing monitoring assessments should follow. The Educational (Welfare) Act states:

“An authorised person may, in respect of a registered child, carry out assessments at such intervals (if any) as may be specified by the Board, and accordingly subsection (5) shall apply with the necessary modifications.”

Subsection (5) refers to the format of a Preliminary Assessment, therefore ongoing monitoring assessments should generally follow the same format as a Preliminary Assessment, not a Comprehensive Assessment. According to the Tusla guidelines, Tusla will indicate to the family when requesting the visit the nature of any “necessary modifications” that are to be made to the assessment process.

Home educating teenagers

All the above information applies equally to teenagers as it does to younger children.

You are entitled to follow a variety of approaches, including unschooling. Home-educated teenagers are not obliged to follow a curriculum or sit state exams. That said, during an assessment of a teenager you may be asked about how you intend to provide for access to further education and training for your child. It is good to be aware of alternatives to the usual route of attending school to study for the leaving cert.

Some options you may wish to research include; studying for state exams or GCSEs/A levels from home, FETAC courses and their links to college courses, apprenticeships or on the job training options. Home-educated teenagers usually stay on the register until they reach 18 years of age, whereas teenagers attending state schools may legally leave school when they reach 16 years of age and have completed three years of post-primary education. If you wish to remove your teen from school and they do not meet the above criteria, you may be required to register them with Tusla.

If you wish to home educate a 16 year old who has already completed three years of post-primary education in a state school, then you are not required to register. In this case your child is considered to be no longer in full-time education and you are not entitled to claim child benefit.

Summary

We hope that this information will help families to understand some of the legal aspects of home education in Ireland and allow them to go through the registration process with confidence. Tusla are currently reviewing the assessment process. We hope to gain more clarity on some aspects of the registration process following this review, and will update our materials accordingly. HEN aims to provide support to all types of home educating families on their journey into the world of home education.