

Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Report

Pre School

TUSLA Identifier:	TU2015KK029
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Name of Service:	Giant Steps Montessori
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Address of Service:	Ballagh, Kilmanagh, Co. Kilkenny
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Eircode:	R95 A2Y0
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Name of Registered Provider:	Marieann Cleere
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Service type:	Sessional
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Date of Inspection:	19/06/2026
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No of pre-school children:	AM	17	PM	N/A
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Address of the Early Years Inspectorate:	Early Years Inspectorate, Tusla Child & Family Agency, Athy Road, Carlow.
Inspection undertaken by:	Norma Thornton
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).

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Description of service

Giant Steps Montessori is a registered sessional early childhood care and education (ECCE) service located in the rural setting of Ballagh, Kilmanagh, in north county Kilkenny. The service operates from a purpose-built premises comprised of a spacious classroom, adjacent bathroom/ changing facilities, and a large spacious natural outdoor play area, all onsite. The service's curriculum is predominately outdoor play based and nature exploring.

Staffing

There are three staff members employed in the service including the registered provider who manages the service. All staff working in the service hold at least a minimum Level 5 ranging to Level 8 qualification in early childhood care and education on the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Framework.

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.

A sampling process was used to assess compliance under the following regulations.

Regulation 21- Equipment and Materials,

Regulation 22- Food and Drink,

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Regulation 23- Safeguarding Health, Safety and Welfare of Child.

As a result, the scope of the inspection included the classroom and outdoor play area.

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 registered provider, staff and children who were present on the day of the inspection.

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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)(a) The registered provider ensured that there was always a designated person in charge available in the service. A second named deputy designated person in charge was available to deputise as required.

(b) The designated person in charge was onsite during the inspection.

(c) A clear management structure was observed in the service. Each staff member had roles and responsibilities which the inspector observed in the staff's interactions with parents /guardians at drop off and collection times.

(2) The staff files of the three staff members employed in the service were reviewed by the inspector.

(a)(b) Two validated references were available on file for each staff member, from either a past employer or reputable source.

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(c) Garda Vetting certificates were available on file, for each staff member, who as part of their role in the service worked directly with the children. The service demonstrated compliance with the Early Years Inspectorate Regulatory Notice requiring services to renew vetting every three years.

(d) A police vetting disclosure was available for one staff member who had lived in a state outside of Ireland for a period of longer than six months.

(4) Each staff member who as part of their role in the service worked directly with the children had certificates of qualifications on file demonstrating that staff members held at least a minimum Level 5 to Level 8 qualification in early childhood care and education on the national Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) framework.

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.

(3) Subject to paragraph (5), a registered provider of a sessional pre-school service shall ensure that at all times the minimum ratio of adults to children specified in column (3) of Part 2 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) therefore at that reference number is satisfied.

Compliance Information

(1) The registered provider ensured that all times there was an adequate number of qualified staff members working with the children in the service.

(3) On the day of inspection there were 17 children aged 3 to 5 years, directly supervised by 3 staff members.

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Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

Regulation 21 – Equipment and materials

A registered provider shall ensure that there is adequate and suitable furniture, play and work equipment and materials available on the premises of the pre-school service.

Compliance Information

The registered provider ensured that adequate and suitable furniture and equipment was provided in the internal physical environment of the classroom and in the large outdoor play area where children spent most of their time while in the service.

The physical environment of the classroom was composed of child height shelving which lined one long wall of the classroom, providing children with access to manipulative and connective materials, an array of Montessori skills encompassing the various aspects of the Montessori pedagogy, a nature table, reading area and art and creativity area. Crescent shaped child sized tables allowed children to comfortably sit together in large groups and connect easily with one another.

A spacious bathroom area containing individual private toilet units and a row of hand wash basins at one wall allowed the children plenty of space for handwashing, not only after toileting but more frequently after messy play and working in the garden in the outdoor area.

A covered veranda which extended from the patio doors at the side of the building provided children with a comfortable sheltered changing space, where they could access their outdoor waterproof clothing and wellingtons neatly organised on a child height suitable clothes rail.

This area also provided a choice of area during inclement weather for the children to participate in an outdoor class setting.

The large outdoor play area provided a variety of naturally enhanced inviting interest areas, from the large amount of plants which the staff and children had been involved in growing, a large insect hotel with a well-developed succulent roof, a construction area with natural gravel, water tubes and transporting vehicles, a willow house structure which had developed and grown over the years providing a quiet area in the outdoor space.

A wooden frame provided children with opportunities to build a shelter from branches and leaves, teaching them life skills. Outdoor water play was provided with a shower base under a functioning tap. A slide offered the children a fun way of transitioning from one interest area, the pollinator friendly zone / nature area with bird feeders, bird baths to another, the vegetable garden where herbs, strawberries, potatoes, cabbages, beetroot and edible flowers flourished. A bath provided a fun growing bed for herbs, chiles and dandelions.

A large polytunnel contained a large, covered sandpit and a large outdoor wooden kitchen which were both well-resourced with open ended play materials such as pots and pans, kitchen utensils and sieving materials.

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While vegetable and flower plots, plants and natural native trees, including oak saplings had been planted and grown throughout the area by the children, the registered provider also ensured they had access to physical challenge such as a climbing wall installed on clear wall space at the side of the shed and wooden blocks and planks to build physically challenging obstacle courses.

Part V - Care of Child in Pre-school Service

Regulation 22 – Food and drink

A registered provider shall ensure that adequate and suitable, nutritious and varied food and drink is available for each pre-school child attending the pre-school service.

Compliance Information

The service had a healthy eating policy in place in the service which was communicated to parents on registration of their child in the service and which encouraged only healthy snacks and foods to be used in daily lunches. A refrigerator stored all the children's perishable lunch items until lunch time when children nominated in turns prepared the tables with delph plates and mugs. Children sat together with one staff member at each table supporting them and encouraging them to eat their snacks while also chatting about daily news and activities. Children informed the inspector about opportunities they had to try the herbs and vegetables from their garden plots. They were well informed as to where they had planted the edible flowers and herbs as well as the bonus of being able to take home vegetables and fruit to their families. The children proudly showed the inspector their pumpkin patch where they were excited imagining picking their own pumpkins in time for Halloween when they returned to school after the summer break.

The opportunities provided in the service for children to participate in growing foods appeared to reinforce healthy attitudes to healthy food and pride in being able to grow their own food produce as well as educating the children on all the vegetables, fruit, herbs, edible flowers and native trees.

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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 service was secured with a call bell system, which on response, only staff could authorise entry to the service. Staff could visualise ant visitors to the service through the glass windows and glass panel on the entrance door. This reduced the risk of any person other than children, parents or staff from entering the premises unauthorised and reduced the risk of a child from exiting the service unsupervised.

The perimeter of the service and outdoor play area was secured by a five-foot wooden fence and a heavy wooden secured gate at the entrance from a designated car park where parents could safely park while transitioning their children into the service.

A daily risk assessment of the outdoor area was carried out by staff with records maintained.

Cleaning schedules were conducted and recorded daily. All cleaning materials and equipment were stored in designated storage areas away inaccessible to the children.

Infection Control:

Suitable bathroom facilities were provided directly adjacent to the classroom, with an appropriate number of toilets and child height handwash basins which were supplied with liquid hand soap and paper towelling.

Children were observed to wash their hands frequently, before lunch time and after messy play , outdoor play and toileting.

Administration of Medication:

There was an administration of medication policy in place in the service. The staff assured the inspector that they were well informed of the procedures to follow in administration of any prescribed, anti -febrile or emergency medication if required for a child in line with service's administration of medication policy.

Outing:

As the service had a large outdoor area, staff informed the inspector that they did not routinely operate outings away from the service. An appropriate outings policy was in place in the service in the evet that the staff decided to operate an outing with the parents' consent.

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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) There were two staff members qualified in first aid responder (FAR) training present on the day of inspection. The registered provider assured the inspector that there was always at least one staff member trained in FAR onsite, while children were in attendance.
- (2)(a)(b) A first aid box was clearly observed on a shelf in the classroom. The first aid box was adequately resourced with records of the contents, maintained. Staff could easily access the first aid box if required.

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.*
- (4) 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 record of any fire drills carried out in the service was maintained. The last fire drill was recorded as having taken place on 14 May 2026.
- (b) Records of the maintenance of fire-fighting equipment and smoke alarms were maintained in the service. The last date of the annual service for the firefighting equipment was recorded as having taken place in April 2026 and for the smoke alarms was recorded as having taken place on the 23 February 2026.
- (4) A notice of the procedure to be followed in the event of a fire was displayed in the entrance hall. A fire assembly point was clearly signposted in a safe area of the carpark.