

STEPPING STONES CHILDCARE

Parent Handbook

Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach

Fgura · Marsaskala · Qawra · Smart City · Tarxien

T 2180 3360 · maltasteppingstones@gmail.com · steppingstonesmalta.com

WELCOME

Empower your child with a dynamic learning experience

Imagine your child truly passionate about learning: soaking up their surroundings and taking everything in. Rather than a regimented experience, children at Stepping Stones learn through exploration and discovery in a supportive, enriching environment.

From the day they were born, you will have noticed how keen children are to observe whatever interests them. That is how they learn best. Place them in a fun-filled environment and a dynamic learning experience follows.

Your child's potential stretches as far as their imagination will take them, but only if they are given the confidence to go there. The abilities they develop from an early age shape who they are and who they will become.



PARENT HANDBOOK

Contents

1	About us	4
2	The Reggio Emilia approach	7
3	Information about our centres	12
4	Parent information	21
5	Getting started	29
6	Facilities and provisions	36
7	Fees and subsidies	38
8	Appendices	43
★	A welcome from our Managing Director	42



SECTION 1

About us

IN THIS SECTION

- Our centres
- Our philosophy
- Our mission and values

Our centres

CENTRE	ADDRESS	TELEPHONE
Fgura	38/44 Triq Censu Busuttil, Fgura	2180 3360
Marsaskala	133 Triq il-Qalet, Marsaskala	2163 3743
Qawra	482 Triq it-Turisti, Qawra	2158 4353
Smart City	SCM 03, Smart City, Ricasoli, Kalkara	2180 1434
Tarxien	29 Triq Xandru Farrugia, Tarxien	2122 4991

Our philosophy

At Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre, we strive to create:

- A warm, welcoming, home-like environment that builds secure, respectful relationships and gives children, families and educators a sense of belonging.
- A vibrant, flexible environment, rich in choices, with plenty of opportunities to learn alone and as part of a group.
- Group work and projects that grow from the interests of the children, their families, the community or the educators.
- Opportunities for children to become independent through everyday routines.
- A safe environment that encourages exploration, discovery, challenge and an understanding of the natural and physical world.
- Experiences that build healthy self-esteem and self-worth.
- A curriculum that supports every area of development, with high expectations for each child, through both planned teaching and spontaneous learning.
- Opportunities for children to express what they know through their "hundred languages", such as art, music, stories, dressing up and construction.
- Respect for diversity, valuing the cultures, languages, values and contributions of every family in the centre.
- Opportunities for children, families and educators to learn about other cultures, with positive attitudes and good communication across cultural groups.
- Regular communication, so that children, families and educators can share their ideas, skills, culture, language and experiences with the centre and help shape the programme.
- Partnership with families in every aspect of their child's development, including setting and reviewing goals for their child together.

- Ongoing records of each child's development, through reflective journals, samples of their work, reflections and observations.
- An environment that encourages positive behaviour and good relationships between children and others.
- Regular training and professional development, so that our educators keep growing in knowledge, skill and competence.

Our mission and values

We believe that by staying curious, collaborating and communicating with children, educators, families and the wider community, we achieve the best learning outcomes for each child and the highest quality of education and care.

Our values are **fun, care and learning**.

"We provide an environment in which every child is supported to reach their full potential."



SECTION 2

The Reggio Emilia approach

IN THIS SECTION

- How the Reggio Emilia approach began
- A positive learning environment
- Brainstorming
- The morning circle
- A typical Reggio Emilia project
- The hundred languages of children
- Educators who care
- See us in action
- Staff recruitment
- Staff supervision
- Staff development

"The Reggio Emilia approach co-constructs the curriculum with the children and their families, encouraging a free and open style of learning."

Our programmes grow from the interests of each child. Spontaneous learning happens all the time, and children are encouraged to develop skills in:

- Problem solving
- Forming and testing ideas
- Critical reflection
- Collaboration

They are then invited to record their ideas and understanding in a variety of ways.

How the Reggio Emilia approach began

After the Second World War, in the Reggio Emilia region of Italy, a group of committed parents, teachers and members of the community felt that the destruction of the war called for a new, positive approach to educating their children.

Under the leadership of educator Loris Malaguzzi, they agreed that children have rights. Children had lived through the same hardships of the war as the adults, and so they deserved real opportunities to develop their potential.

Malaguzzi believed that, thanks to their boundless imagination, children have an extraordinary number of ways to express themselves. This is how the Reggio Emilia approach was born. Today it is used around the world, and Malaguzzi is recognised as a pioneer in education.

A positive learning environment

We are a private early learning centre for children aged 2 months to 3 years.

At Stepping Stones, we believe children are born with amazing potential and a wide range of abilities. By involving them in a curriculum we build together, which makes learning enjoyable, we make sure the right building blocks are in place for your child to reach their full potential.

Our educators are not instructors. They are co-learners and collaborators. Here:

- Your child's contributions are valued as much as those of their educators.
- We see your child as a researcher, not a student. Play-based experiences take place in small groups and individually, based on your child's interests. Your child is invited to explore, observe, form ideas, ask questions and discuss what they find.
- We build self-worth and healthy self-esteem alongside social skills. Your child learns to be part of a community that includes their classmates, their family and the wider community.

- We encourage an appreciation of cultural diversity, learning about the cultures of all the families in the centre and the surrounding community.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming does not only happen in meetings; it happens in our rooms too. Which topics capture the children's interest? Which problems can they solve without an adult's help? More than you might think. You can follow your child's development through their monthly observations and the work they produce.

The morning circle

Each morning, educators invite the children to sit together in a circle and share what they would like to do that day. This shows every child that they have the right to be heard. Educators record what the children say in their observation notes and add these ideas to the weekly plan, so that the children help shape the curriculum day by day and week by week.

A typical Reggio Emilia project

The best way to explain our approach is through a real example. Your child's educator opens a discussion where the children share their interests.

Say the children choose to talk about frogs. Together, they ask: what do we already know about frogs? What would we like to find out? What can we do as a group to learn more? This becomes "The Frog Project".

Our projects are led by your child's interests. Children and their friends take part in small-group experiences, where they build on what they know in a meaningful way.

We look at where the interest began, what the children already know and what new knowledge we can introduce. Projects go deeper than the surface topic, making connections with our environment and the wider world.

A frog project might begin with something your child said, drew or talked about. Educators build on that moment and find out what your child and their friends already know. Play-based experiences, factual books or technology then introduce new knowledge. The learning is recorded in several ways, such as Reggio reflections, Reggio Connects and learning stories or observations.

Educators then brainstorm together what new knowledge they can introduce around frogs. This may branch out into habitats, other amphibians, shades of green, life cycles, other pond life and pond plants, and from there into further topics. The brainstorm is a guide, not a fixed plan: it depends on what interests your child.

Projects are displayed in your child's room. There may be more than one at a time, and there is always at least one current project on display.

The Frog Project is documented in several ways, so you can see the learning process:

WHAT DO WE KNOW?	WHAT DO WE WANT TO FIND OUT?	WHAT CAN WE DO?
They live in water and in ponds. They jump. They lay eggs. Tadpoles are baby frogs.	How do they breathe underwater? What food do they eat? What types and sizes are there? What are their names?	Grow tadpoles. Make frog ponds. Read books. Draw and paint frogs.

The hundred languages of children

The "hundred languages of children" are the many ways children express themselves. For a child, language is never limited to speech. Some of these languages are:

- Art
- Music
- Stories
- Drama and dressing up
- Construction
- Movement
- Messy play
- Outdoor play

Your child will be given many ways to think, revise, build, negotiate, develop and express their thoughts and feelings. The abilities they develop from an early age shape who they are and who they will become.

Educators who care

We choose passionate, driven people who are committed to developing the bright minds of tomorrow, and we work together with parents to set suitable goals for each child.

All staff take part in training, mentoring and professional development, so that their skills stay at the highest possible standard. Every member of staff holds a paediatric first aid certificate, a food handling certificate and a clean police conduct certificate, and has POMA clearance from the Maltese courts.

See us in action

Our doors are always open for an orientation visit before your child starts at any of our centres. During the visit, you, your child and any family members spend time with your child's educator, join in activities, see the inside of the centre and watch how we work with the children.

Staff recruitment

When a suitable applicant with relevant childcare experience or qualifications contacts us, we invite them to our office for an interview.

1. We go through the applicant's work experience and qualifications.
2. We discuss the kind of role they are looking for and their goals.
3. The applicant must show us the original certificates for every qualification they list.
4. Applicants must hold an MQF Level 4 childcare diploma, a paediatric first aid certificate, a food handling certificate and a clean police conduct certificate.
5. We take contact details for at least two referees covering at least the past two years, one of whom must be a current or previous employer.
6. We confirm with colleges and past employers that the qualifications and employment history given are correct.

New carers first complete a number of training hours to get to know the premises and the children before they start working at Stepping Stones.

All centre coordinators must hold an MQF Level 5 Diploma in Childcare Management, a clean police conduct certificate, a food handling certificate and a paediatric first aid certificate.

Before starting, every member of staff signs our carer's policy sheet and agrees to work according to the policies in this handbook.

Staff supervision

Good supervision means staff understand each child's stage of development and how it affects the way they use materials and equipment.

The centre coordinator supervises staff throughout the day to make sure these needs are met.

We provide professional development in supervision and behaviour guidance for all staff. Each member of staff has a supervision session with the centre coordinator every two months and an appraisal with the manager every six months. Sessions take place in a quiet area, as free from distractions as possible.

During supervision, carers can discuss their development, any concerns and their suggestions about their work in the centre.

Staff development

We recognise the importance of continuous training. To provide the best possible service, staff are encouraged to attend training programmes and conferences that broaden their skills and knowledge. Further education is highly encouraged and opens up opportunities for promotion within our centres.



SECTION 3

Information about our centres

IN THIS SECTION

- Our holistic programme
- Our groups
- Safety first
- Medication
- Hygiene and cleaning
- Emergency preparedness plan
- Immunisation
- Our buildings
- Our programme
- Working in partnership with parents
- Working in partnership with early years professionals
- Commitment to sustainability
- Our learning programmes
- Assessment practices
- Internal review process

Our holistic programme

Childcare is about the whole child: their social, language, cognitive, emotional and physical development. Our creative curriculum is built on self-discovery. Children are free to be messy, creative and curious, and to try it all.

Activities include messy play, cooking club, crafts, guided creative arts, gardening, puppet shows, exercise and dancing, dressing up, painting with hands and objects, outings, storytelling and outdoor play.

On hot summer days, children play in fresh-water pools under protective canopies in our outdoor areas. With such a varied programme, children learn something new every day through planned, purposeful activities, both indoors and outdoors.

We look after our staff well and encourage teamwork all year round through team-building activities and staff outings. Good relationships between staff, parents and children support each child's happiness and stability, both at home and at the centre.

The daily routine is carefully planned so that every child can develop through play. Children are grouped in separate areas by age, so that babies are not disturbed by our active toddlers and because different age groups need different carer-to-child ratios.

We respect the individuality of every child and adult in our service, and promote positive attitudes towards every culture, race, gender, language, financial circumstance and minority group.

Our groups

We place children in groups by age, while keeping in mind each child's stage of development. This lets us meet your child's individual needs.

- **Babies' area.** Babies follow a daily routine planned by our educators, and routines your baby is used to at home can be built into their day with us. Everything is recorded on your child's Procare page: activities, sleep, breakfast, lunch and snack times, nappy changes, observations, photos and videos.
- **Toddlers' area.** Toddlers are kept busy with many activities throughout the day. These help them settle into a larger group while building their individual abilities, so every child develops at their own pace. Educators record observations throughout the day and use them to plan the next steps in each child's learning.
- **Preschool area.** Play is children's natural language. At Stepping Stones, children learn through play and through our special programmes and sessions.

Safety first

We take children's safety very seriously.

- All our centres have CCTV or a video intercom.

- You will be given a fob tag to sign your child in and out every day.
- Please give us the details of anyone other than yourselves who is allowed to collect your child. Educators may ask for identification.
- We are committed to a healthy and safe environment for staff and children.
- Staff are expected to take responsible care of their own health and safety at all times.
- Staff are responsible for locking cupboards and the store room, and for reporting broken locks or missing keys.
- All management and staff at Stepping Stones are trained in first aid.
- A first aid box is always available and is restocked regularly.
- The premises have fire safety equipment. In a fire, staff follow the fire drill, which is practised twice a year, and evacuate the children. The children come first, and immediate action is taken to protect children and staff. The daily register of children attending is taken out by the carer to do a head count. Rooms are checked again once all the children are safe. Carers call the fire service on 112; the number is displayed near the telephone.

Medication

We can only give children medicine that has been prescribed by a doctor and provided by the parents. Parents complete a medical care plan recording the times and doses to be given. Each time a medicine is given, the time is noted and the record is signed and dated. Medicines are stored in the centre's fridge.

Hygiene and cleaning

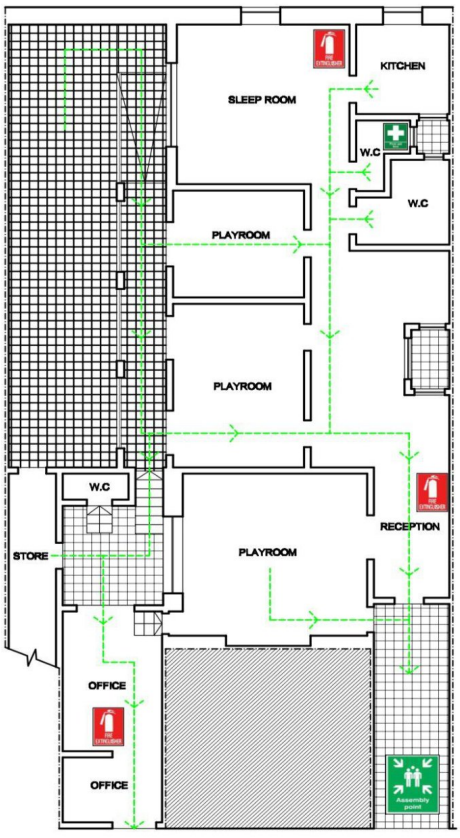
- The premises are well maintained and cleaned daily. Maintenance and health and safety inspections are carried out regularly.
- Floors and toilets are washed and disinfected daily, and everything used by children and staff is wiped down.
- Staff wear disposable gloves when helping with potty training and nappy changes, and when dealing with vomit or blood. Nappies go into nappy bags and then into an airtight container. Rubbish is taken out every evening and nothing is left in the bins.
- Hand washing is strictly observed. Children are encouraged to wash their hands after each activity, especially before eating, and hand-washing charts are displayed around the centre.

Emergency preparedness plan

The emergency and evacuation plans for each of our centres are shown on the following pages. In an emergency, every centre follows its plan.

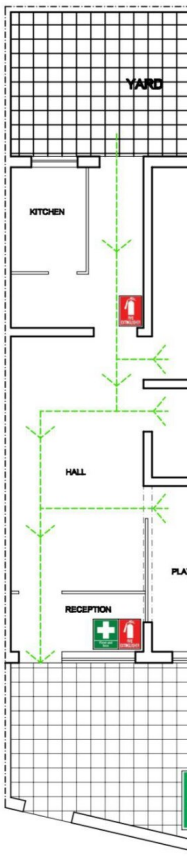
In case of emergency

- If a fire is noticed, sound the alarm.
- Evacuate all the children to the front garden.
- Do not take children out onto the street.
- Call 112.
- If possible, a fire warden should try to control the fire.
- If the fire gets out of control, leave the building.
- Close all doors and windows.
- Do not stop to collect personal belongings.
- Wait for the necessary assistance.
- Do not re-enter the building until cleared by your supervisor or the Civil Protection Department.



Fgura

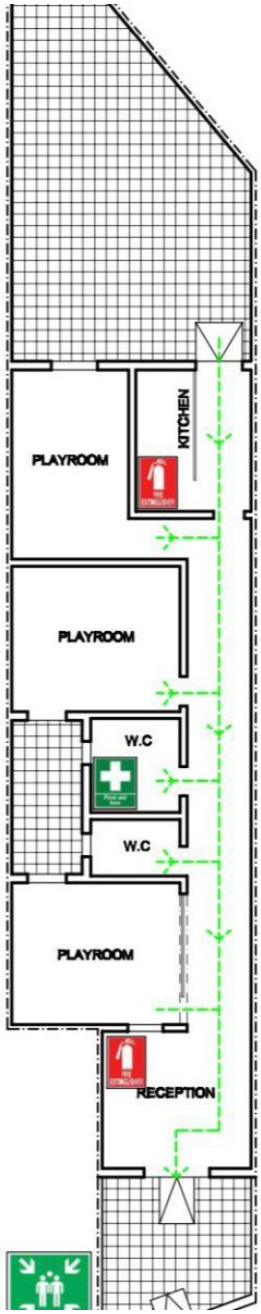
Fgura



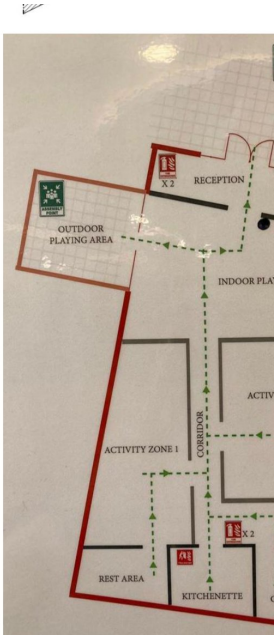
M’scala

Marsaskala

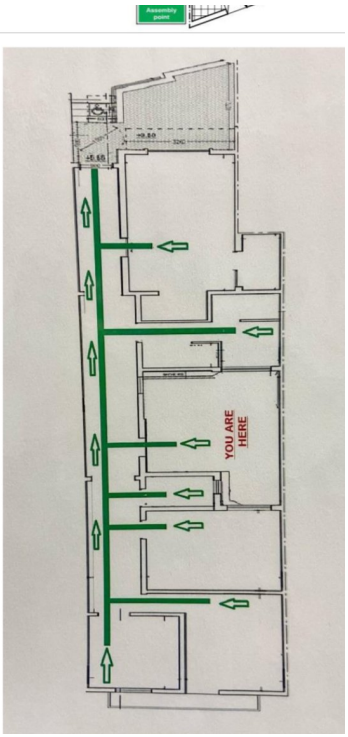
Evacuation plans (continued)



Qawra



Smart City



Tarxien

Immunisation

The table below shows the Maltese vaccination schedule, with the vaccinations currently recommended during the first years of your child's life. Under our immunisation policy, all vaccinations in the table are mandatory.

AGE	VACCINE
From 8 weeks	DTaP-Hib-IPV-HepB (6 in 1) 1 + PCV 1 + Men B 1
3 months	DTaP-Hib-IPV-HepB (6 in 1) 2 + Men ACWY (1)
4 months	DTaP-Hib-IPV-HepB (6 in 1) 3 + PCV 2 + Men B 2
12 months	PCV 3 + Men B (3)
13 months	MMR1 + Men ACWY (2)
18 months	DTaP-Hib-IPV-HepB (4)

Our buildings

All our buildings have:

- Well-equipped activity rooms with a full range of educational resources.
- Outdoor areas with plenty of outdoor play equipment.
- High-quality shading fitted over every outdoor area.
- A vegetable patch in every outdoor area, where children enjoy planting and growing their favourite vegetables. This encourages healthy eating and an appreciation of nature.

- CCTV cameras.
- Air conditioning and fire safety equipment.
- Certification by a health and safety officer.

We also lead by example, helping children understand the importance of recycling and the value of water in our environment.

Our programme

Educators reflect critically every day, and the programme is planned around your child's interests, needs and developmental milestones. Through play-based experiences, educators give your child more opportunities to learn.

The programme is guided by the five learning outcomes of the Learning Outcomes Framework issued by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education:

1. Children develop a strong sense of identity.
2. Children have a positive self-image.
3. Children are socially adept.
4. Children are effective communicators.
5. Children develop positive attitudes towards learning and become engaged and confident learners.

Working in partnership with parents

We want every centre to feel like a home away from home, so we work hand in hand with parents, families and the wider community. Links with your child's home, social and cultural life are an important part of their development.

Communication between parents, children and the centre is always open.

- The coordinator or manager in charge is always available to talk with parents. Meetings can be booked by appointment, and private discussions can be arranged at a time that suits you.
- Information you give us about your child is kept confidential and shared strictly on a need-to-know basis.
- You can follow your child's day through the Procare app, our notice boards, conversations with staff and the newsletter sent to parents every term.
- We work with families to set and review goals for each child.
- Parents are welcome at our outings, induction meetings, orientation sessions and parent clubs.
- If we have any concerns about your child's wellbeing during the day, we will do everything we can to contact you or your emergency contact.

- From time to time, we may ask you to send in things from home, such as photos, old boxes, cereal boxes and egg cartons, to use in our activities.
- Please let us know about any changes that may affect your child, such as a new address, telephone number, doctor or emergency contact.
- Please also tell us about anything that could affect your child's emotional wellbeing, such as a bereavement, a separation or illness in the family.
- Our educators talk with parents about their child's progress every day and keep a friendly, positive relationship with each family.
- Staff make sure every child feels included, secure and valued, and build positive relationships with parents so they can work well with them and their children.
- As part of our quality improvement, we hold parent meetings at least twice a year.
- At every parent meeting you receive an evaluation sheet, which you can also fill in anonymously on our website.

Every parent brings a range of skills and interests, and children love learning about them. We would love you to share these with the children and educators, and be part of the curriculum.

Working in partnership with early years professionals

We observe the children throughout the day and note our observations. If, after a developmental report, we see that a child could benefit from early intervention, we arrange a referral with the parents and give them the details of suitable early years professionals. Professionals working with any of our children are always welcome to observe and hold sessions at our centres.

Commitment to sustainability

We encourage educators, children and families to reduce, reuse and recycle. Each centre has a recycling box where children can bring items from home for crafts.

Our learning programmes

We offer a range of specialist programmes to support your child's creativity and development.

- **Arts.** By exploring a wide range of artworks, styles and techniques, children learn to observe, express their thoughts through their hundred languages, and listen and respond to other points of view.
- **Fitness.** A programme that teaches children to love being active, develops motor and coordination skills and shows the importance of being healthy. It includes dancing, yoga, outdoor games and sports skills.

- **Music.** Music supports every area of development and the skills needed for school: intellectual, social and emotional, fine and gross motor skills, language and literacy. It helps body and mind work together and lets children express themselves.
- **Earth.** Early childhood educators have a powerful opportunity to help young children and families understand sustainability. Children become more aware of their impact on the environment and of ways to reduce it.

Assessment practices

Our educators observe the children throughout the day so they can give parents a detailed developmental report at our parent meetings, held every six months. Educators also send a monthly observation, with photos, so you can see how your child is progressing each month. Our developmental reports and monthly observations follow the five outcomes of the Learning Outcomes Framework issued by the Directorate for Quality and Standards in Education.

Internal review process

At Stepping Stones, we evaluate, monitor and review our work regularly, step by step.

1. **Noticing.** A review starts when an issue is noticed or a question is chosen for review. Reviews take place every six months.
2. **Investigating.** We gather evidence, for example from parent evaluation sheets, staff evaluation forms, staff meetings, student evaluation sheets, observation sheets and feedback from our quality manager, who visits each centre to check its quality. We look closely at what we already do and how well it works, then at what is considered good practice and what we can change.
3. **Making sense together.** We review the information as a team and ask, "What have we found?" and "What does this mean?"
4. **Prioritising action.** We decide which actions to take and how.
5. **Monitoring and evaluating.** We follow up on the actions taken and ask, "What changed?", "Did our plan work?" and "Do we need to change anything else?"



SECTION 4

Parent information

IN THIS SECTION

- The Procare app
- Your child's progress
- Your child's personal records
- Child protection
- Behaviour management
- Illness and accidents
- Food and drink policy
- Uncollected children
- Whistleblowing
- Complaints
- Equal opportunities and children with special needs
- Data protection

The Procare app

Procare is a free app for families. Through it you receive photos, news, reports on developmental milestones, learning stories and observations, the projects your child has taken part in, and centre updates.

We introduced Procare in all our centres to give families closer access to their child's learning and development.

Procare shares information securely, in real time. Posts are shared only with invited family members and educators, and cannot be shared on the web. Parents can approve other family members, such as grandparents who live away, to connect to their child's Procare page and share in their learning.

Your child's progress

We keep you informed about your child's progress in several ways.

- **Monthly observations.** Each month, educators write up highlights of your child's learning and interests on Procare, tagged as an observation. Please read them, and speak to the centre coordinator if anything is unclear.
- **Newsletter.** Our termly newsletter keeps you up to date with what is happening in the centre, including children's health and safety, policy reviews and upcoming events.
- **Daily updates.** You also receive daily notifications about your child's care and day.

Your child's personal records

Your child's personal records include registration and admission forms, signed consent forms, correspondence about your child or family, a record of relevant contact with parents, and staff observations on any confidential matter, such as developmental concerns or child protection matters.

These confidential records are kept in a locked cabinet, in a safe place, by the manager.

Parents can see their own child's files and records, but not information about any other child.

Staff do not discuss personal information given by parents with other staff, except where it affects planning for the child's needs. Staff induction covers the importance of confidentiality in the role of key person.

Child protection

We follow the child protection policies and procedures set out in the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities, and every member of staff must comply with them. Staff are trained to recognise signs of possible abuse and must report any concern to management. Management investigates in confidence and is obliged to report concerns to the appropriate authorities:

- Aġenzija Appoġġ: 2295 9000, or freephone 179
- Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (MEYR): 2589 0000

The Commissioner for Children has also published the poster below, which sets out all children's rights.



Behaviour management

Stepping Stones staff are trained to be positive at all times, towards the children, towards each other and towards the centre. Any issue involving children, staff or parents should be discussed in private with the manager. Negative comments about parents, staff or children are not acceptable anywhere else.

Children sometimes pick up inappropriate words from their surroundings. If this happens, we will contact the parents straight away and explain the difficulty, and ask them to work with their child so the child understands these words are not acceptable at the centre.

All staff are trained to make sure children are never bullied or threatened while in their care. Children are never given physical punishment, nor exposed to intellectual, emotional or verbal abuse.

Staff work in a respectful, courteous partnership with parents and children to encourage positive behaviour.

When a child behaves inappropriately, the carer will:

- Respond in a firm, caring and sensitive way that encourages positive interactions between the carer and the child, and between the child and the other children.
- Explain to the child why what they were doing was wrong.
- Give positive guidance.
- Redirect the child towards positive behaviour.
- Help the child learn self-discipline.
- Praise the child when they behave positively.

The following are never allowed in any of our centres:

- Corporal punishment, such as hitting, smacking or beating
- Threats of corporal punishment
- Negative reinforcement
- Abusive language
- Force-feeding
- Any form of public humiliation
- Emotional, verbal, physical or any other form of abuse

Illness and accidents

Children who are unwell cannot attend and will be sent home. A medical certificate is needed to confirm when your child is fit to return.

If your child becomes ill at the centre, we will do everything possible to contact you. Meanwhile, your child is cared for by a carer in a quiet sick bay until you collect them.

Please do not bring your child to the centre if they have any infectious or contagious illness, such as a fever, cough, runny nose, rash, lice or nits, vomiting, diarrhoea or a sore throat.

Please call the centre before 8am if your child will not be attending, and let the centre coordinator know when they will be returning. Staff are also asked not to come to work in the same circumstances.

If there is an accident:

- First aid is given by a member of staff.
- Gloves are worn when dealing with blood or any other bodily fluid.
- The wound is cleaned with sterile cloths, or a cold compress is applied. No ointments or plasters may be used.
- If hospital care is needed, the centre coordinator or supervisor makes the decision, takes the necessary action and calls 112 for an ambulance. Please note that our staff call 112 first, so that an ambulance can reach the centre quickly.
- If your child needs medical attention, the centre coordinator or supervisor will inform you immediately.
- The accident is recorded on Procare, with the date and time, how it happened and the first aid given, and is signed by the member of staff and the parent or carer.

Food and drink policy

At Stepping Stones, mealtimes are a social time for children and adults, and help children learn about healthy eating.

Before your child starts, we ask about any dietary needs, including allergies, and record them in your child's registration record. We ask you to sign the record to confirm it is correct, and to always keep your centre coordinator updated about your child's allergies. Every centre displays up-to-date information about each child's dietary needs so that all staff and students are fully informed, and we have systems in place so that children receive only food and drink that suits their dietary needs and their parents' wishes.

Children have set mealtimes, but a hungry child will be given food at any time of day. Meals and snacks are social occasions shared by children and staff. They also help children become independent by making choices, serving food and drink and feeding themselves. Children are given utensils suited to their age and stage of development.

At birthday parties and any other parties during the year, we provide nutritious food, drinks and snacks, avoiding large amounts of fat, sugar, salt, artificial additives, preservatives and colourings.

We welcome foods from each child's cultural background, offering children familiar foods and introducing them to new ones. Through talking with parents and through staff research, we learn about the dietary rules of the religious groups children and their parents belong to, about vegetarian and vegan diets, and about food allergies, and we take this into account in the food and drink we provide.

Staff show sensitivity when providing for children's diets and allergies. They never use a child's diet or allergy as a label or make a child feel singled out.

Fresh drinking water is always available. Children know how to get water and that they can ask for it at any time, including during activities.

Parents who provide food for their children are told about the storage facilities available at the centre.

To protect children with food allergies, we have rules about children sharing or swapping food.

Uncollected children

If a child is not collected at the end of the day, staff will stay with the child until they are collected.

Educators must never release a child to an unauthorised person, even if collection is late, unless an authorised person telephones to say that, because of an emergency, someone else will collect. In that case, the authorised person must give the name, address and ID card number of the person collecting, and the carer in charge checks these details before letting the child leave.

Every late collection is recorded in the register, with the date, the time the child was collected, who collected the child and the reason given.

If a child is collected late three times in one year, the centre will write to the parents, explaining the difficulties late collection causes and informing them that the child will not be able to continue attending if it happens again.

If a parent or designated person does not collect a child, the educator will try to contact the authorised people as soon as possible. If all attempts to reach a parent or guardian, designated person or emergency contact fail, the educator will inform the police, who will take charge of tracing the child's parent or guardian.

A late fee of €15 is charged for every hour a child stays at the centre after the final collection time.

Whistleblowing

This policy protects children from any kind of abuse at the centre. Ignoring serious cases of abuse means failing in one's professional duty. Any member of staff who notices any form of abuse by another member of staff or a student has a duty to report it to the manager, to the child protection services (Aġenzija Appoġġ: 2295 9000 or freephone 179) and to MEYR, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (2095 3753 / 2598 2853). Carers must take action whenever abuse is strongly suspected. Management will never take action against a member of staff for reporting such behaviour.

Complaints

We believe children and parents should always receive courtesy and prompt attention to their needs and wishes. We also welcome any suggestions on how we can improve. You can email our office at maltasteppingstones@gmail.com or call 2180 3360.

We expect most concerns to be resolved quickly and informally. If not, we follow this procedure:

1. Parents raise the complaint with the centre coordinator.
2. The complaint is discussed in private at the centre.

3. If this does not resolve it, or the problem happens again, the complaint is put in writing to the Managing Director, Mrs Michelle Spiteri, B.Psy. (Hons), Child Play Therapist.
4. If the complaint is still not resolved, it is recorded on a centre complaint form and a meeting is held with the parent, the manager and the director.
5. The Managing Director takes the final decision, making sure the child's wellbeing comes first.
6. If a parent still feels the complaint has not been resolved, they can use the complaints procedure of MEYR, the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (2095 3753 / 2598 2853), or file a complaint online at dqse.gov.mt/en/complaints.

Equal opportunities and children with special needs

We provide equal opportunities for all children, whatever their race, culture, religion, language or ability. Boys and girls are equally encouraged to take part in every activity. We warmly welcome children and families of all races, languages, beliefs and backgrounds, and help every child develop a positive self-image and feel included.

- Every centre encourages recognition, understanding and celebration of differences.
- Toys and equipment are chosen with the different needs of the children in mind.
- Displays reflect a positive image of the world we live in.
- Books are chosen to suit all the children's ages and abilities and to reflect the many different ways people live.
- Home corners are changed regularly to show different cultures, races and the world around us.

We make sure the opportunities and activities in our learning environment are open to all children and their families. We value and respect every person, whatever their gender, ethnic origin, religion, culture or language.

Children with special needs are given extra help in areas such as communication, physical skills, learning or behaviour. Early identification is essential to support children and help them succeed. We adapt our routine, activities and environment so that every child can take part and reach their full potential.

Through careful planning and organisation of resources, we aim to make every activity available to every child at a level suited to their development. All our centres are also designed to cater for people with physical disabilities and wheelchair users.

Data protection

All our centres keep information about the people we serve confidential, in line with the Data Protection Act. Information and records about children or their families are shown only to the appropriate authorities, namely the Department for Social Welfare Standards, or, in the case of suspected child abuse, the child protection services. Photos of children are never used without the parents' consent on the registration form.

Staff details are also kept confidential, with access limited to management and the staff member themselves. Details of unsuccessful applicants are kept for three months after a post is filled.

Once a staff member is appointed, their details, position and salary are kept by management in the office, as are any changes to salary. Staff records are kept for ten years after a staff member leaves.

Rosters, sick leave and leave records are treated confidentially and kept in the office, with due care taken to follow data protection law.



SECTION 5

Getting started

IN THIS SECTION

- Admission to Stepping Stones
- Preparing your child for their first day
- Induction meeting
- Orientation session
- Settling-in period
- Your child's first day
- Orientation tips for parents
- Separation anxiety in children
- A typical day at Stepping Stones

Admission to Stepping Stones

When you contact one of our centres, we email you all the information you need. Once we confirm there is a place, you have 48 hours to register your child at that centre. Registration is free.

Before your child starts, please complete and sign our centre application form and the Free Childcare Scheme application form, and fill in your child's background information sheet.

These give the centre the following essential information:

- Your child's name, home address and date of birth
- The starting date and the number of hours needed each week
- How fees will be paid
- The names, addresses and telephone numbers of parents or guardians
- Emergency telephone numbers
- Who is authorised to collect your child
- Special diets
- Health history
- Details of any allergies
- Parental consent for emergency procedures

Preparing your child for their first day

- Prepare your child beforehand. Talk about the centre, the activities, new friends and new toys.
- Drive past the centre at the weekend and show family members your child's "new school".
- Let your child pack their bag; it helps them recognise their own bag.
- Label all clothing, shoes, hats, bottles, lunchboxes, jackets, bags, dummies and dummy chains. This helps both us and your child.
- Prepare a set of bedding to cover your child's mattress at the centre. It comes home in your child's bag every day to be washed and returned the next day.
- If your child is over one year old, show them the uniform.
- Bring two sets of spare clothes, a packet of nappies and wipes to leave at the centre.
- Send a pair of comfortable indoor shoes, also labelled. Shoes with laces and flip-flops are not allowed.

Induction meeting

An induction meeting is held before your child's starting date. The management team will take all parents through our policies, procedures and services.

Orientation session

- Within 48 hours of being offered a place, please complete the background information sheet and return it to the centre. The orientation session can take place once this is done.
- We recommend that your child attends one orientation session to meet their educator.
- Please book the orientation session in advance, so the educator is available.
- The centre coordinator gives each family a green fob key-ring to sign their child in and out.
- During the orientation session, please stay in the room with your child, so you can both get to know the environment and routines.
- Children on orientation are not counted in the ratios until their official start date.
- Parents are fully responsible for their child during the orientation session.
- Encourage your child to join in the activities our carers prepare, using positive phrases such as "Wow, this is fun!"
- During the session, the head carer will go through your child's routines and needs, and the areas of learning you would like educators to focus on, and record them on the background information sheet.

Settling-in period

Settling in is a gradual introduction to the centre, the other children, the activities, the routines and the staff. Your child needs to become familiar with the centre to feel confident and safe there. It can take two weeks or longer, depending on your child's age and how used they are to being away from home. The centre coordinator will agree a starting date with you, and at first your child will stay for one to two hours a day until they are ready for their full hours.

Your child's first day

An unfamiliar setting can be a challenge for both children and parents, so we encourage all families to take part in orientation.

- Arriving a little early for the first few days often helps you prepare your child.
- Always say goodbye, so your child knows you are going and that you will come back, even if this upsets them at first.
- It is normal for children to be upset and have mixed feelings at drop-off. Show your support and encouragement, and reassure them that everything will be fine.
- Our educators are very experienced in settling children and will take time to build a relationship with your child.
- Your child's educator will keep you updated through Procare.

Orientation tips for parents

Dear new families,

Welcome to the Stepping Stones family! We understand that starting childcare with your little one can be an exciting and anxious time for everyone. We are part of this journey with you, so please do not hesitate to come into the office for support, a chat or even a cry.

Getting ready

- Practise packing up, leaving the house on time and the drive to the centre. Time it, and allow for traffic and the unexpected. Planning is the key to staying calm and in control.
- Be clear about drop-off and pick-up times, and what happens if you are late. Late pick-ups after 6pm are charged at €15 an hour.
- Talk to our educators. They may have tips on what has worked for other children of the same age and stage.

If your child is finding it hard to adjust

- Remind yourself that this will pass. Most children go through an adjustment phase with any change.
- Introduce a comfort object, such as a teddy, doll, muslin cloth or special toy, that your child can snuggle up with. Some children take to these more than others.
- Remember that your child's protests show how much they love you. They are not trying to make your life hard.
- Remember that your child's behaviour now is not how they will always be. With time, patience and reassurance, they will grow out of this upsetting stage.

Managing your own feelings

- Share your feelings with your partner. They are probably having big feelings too, even if they show them differently.
- Let yourself enjoy your work, or whatever you are doing, while your child is at the centre. Guilt is a powerful emotion, but it does not have to be your default.
- Rely on our Procare updates to put your mind at rest. Educators update your child's page through the day with everything your child has been doing.
- Avoid rushing. If you can, pack your child's bag and prepare their lunch the night before.
- Try to stay positive, even if you do not feel it. Your child will follow your lead, so save your tears for the car or for work.
- Watch how your child responds to childcare. If they are happy and content, and you hear good things about their progress, feel reassured.
- Give yourself time to adjust too.
- Remember that you are still your baby's parent, and no one can take your place.

- Feel confident that you have made the best choice for you and your child. Doubts can be exhausting and distracting.
- Talk to your child's educators about how you feel, and to other parents, who are almost certainly going through the same emotions.

Separation anxiety in children

Separation anxiety is when children are afraid of being apart from their parents or carers. It is common and normal in babies and toddlers. A few preschool and school-age children develop a more serious form, called separation anxiety disorder.

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is the common, normal fear children have of being away from their parents or carers. It can start at around nine months and is usually strongest between 14 and 18 months. It usually fades gradually through early childhood.

Stranger anxiety is similar: children become upset around people they do not know. It can appear from 7 to 10 months and usually starts to fade after the first birthday.

Both are a normal part of development and nothing to worry about. Children start moving around at this stage, so these fears make sense for their safety: if children could crawl or walk away from their carers without any fear of separation or of strangers, they would get lost more easily.

Helping children with separation anxiety

If your child has separation anxiety, there is a lot you can do to help.

At home:

- However frustrated you feel, avoid criticising your child or being negative about their difficulty with separation. For example, avoid saying "Don't be such a baby" or "She's such a mummy's girl".

In new places:

- Let your child bring something they love from home, such as a teddy, pillow or blanket. It will help them feel safe, and you can gradually phase it out as they settle.
- Tell the centre about your child's separation anxiety and what you are doing to help, so everyone around your child can support them in the same way.
- Gently encourage your child to practise being apart from you. Positive experiences of separating and coming back together are important. Avoiding separation can make the problem worse.

When you leave your child:

- Tell your child that you are leaving and when you will be back. This helps even with babies. Sneaking out without saying goodbye can make things worse: your child may feel confused or upset when they realise you have gone, and may be harder to settle next time.

- Settle your child into an enjoyable activity before you leave.
- Say goodbye briefly; do not drag it out.
- Keep a relaxed, happy face as you leave. If you look worried or sad, your child may think the place is not safe and become upset too.
- Read books or make up stories with your child about fears of separation, for example: "Once upon a time, there was a little bunny who didn't want to leave his mummy in the hutch..."
- Build your child's self-esteem with plenty of praise and positive attention.
- Read about the "stepladder" approach, a gentle technique that can help children with separation anxiety.

Separation anxiety disorder

As children reach preschool and school age, they are less likely to have separation anxiety, although there will always be times when they only want to be with you. If your preschool or school-age child is often and noticeably upset about being apart from you, they may have separation anxiety disorder. About 4% of preschool and school-age children develop this condition.

Separation anxiety disorder is when:

- The anxiety interferes with your child's life, and so with yours
- Your child's anxiety is more severe than that of other children the same age
- The anxiety has lasted at least four weeks

If you are concerned, look out for times when your child:

- Dislikes being separated from you
- Worries that you or they might get hurt or have an accident
- Refuses to go to childcare
- Refuses to sleep at other people's homes without you
- Complains of feeling sick when separated from you

At around 10 months, most babies get upset if a stranger approaches them in an unfamiliar room. Only half get upset if they have had time to get used to the room first. So in new situations, babies cope better when new things are introduced gradually.

Professional help

You know your child best. If you are worried about their anxiety, consider seeking professional help. Good places to start are:

- Your child's GP or paediatrician
- Your local health centre
- A child counsellor

A typical day at Stepping Stones

Children generally feel more secure and learn better with a predictable routine. Each room displays its routine, although it may change during the year because of the weather, special events or the children's involvement in a project.

Each room follows this general routine:

1. Arrival
2. Breakfast
3. Indoor and outdoor play and exploration
4. Nappy changes and bathroom checks
5. Circle time
6. Main activity, linked to the emergent curriculum
7. Lunch
8. Nappy changes and bathroom checks
9. Indoor and outdoor play
10. Special sessions
11. Quiet time
12. Nap time
13. Nappy changes and bathroom checks
14. Indoor and outdoor play
15. Afternoon activities
16. Nappy changes and bathroom checks
17. Home time



SECTION 6

Facilities and provisions

IN THIS SECTION

- Birthday parties
- Transitions
- Parent and child club
- Outings

Birthday parties

Birthdays are special days for children to celebrate with their friends. We make your child's birthday fun and memorable, with a range of entertainment and activity packages to choose from. Our centre coordinators will gladly help you choose the right package for your child.

Transitions

As your child approaches the next age group, educators will talk you through the transition. In the weeks before the move, children spend short periods in the older room, so they can build strong relationships with the educators and children there.

This makes for a smooth, positive transition. Educators are guided by each child's reactions and move at the child's pace.

Before each transition, the children have a small party where they sing a goodbye song with their educator, surrounded by love and hugs.

A graduation party is held every January and September for all the children moving on to kindergarten.

Parent and child club

We organise parent and child clubs throughout the year, with fun learning sessions for little ones and their parents or guardians to enjoy together.

Outings

We love organising outings. Each year, our management plans at least two fun-filled outings for parents, carers and children to enjoy.

Children learn best when they can see, hear and experience things first-hand. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, we make the most of multi-sensory learning, an important part of early childhood, and our outings engage all five senses while children enjoy the outdoors.



SECTION 7

Fees and subsidies

IN THIS SECTION

- Fees
- Changes to attendance
- Uniforms
- Free Childcare Scheme: terms and conditions

This handbook is reviewed from time to time. As circumstances change, management may update any of these policies, and any changes will be sent to all families through Procare.

Fees

Registration is free and includes your child's registration, one set of the summer uniform, one set of the winter uniform and a Stepping Stones drawstring bag.

Any extra hours, or any other charges not covered by the Free Childcare Scheme, are charged at the hourly rates below.

YEAR	0–12 MONTHS	13 MONTHS UNTIL ELIGIBLE FOR KINDERGARTEN 1
2025	€5.00 per hour	€5.00 per hour
2024	€5.00 per hour	€4.85 per hour
2023	€4.80 per hour	€4.55 per hour
2022	€4.50 per hour	€4.30 per hour

- Families not on the Free Childcare Scheme pay their child's monthly fee one month in advance.
- Holidays and sick leave must also be paid in full to keep your child's place.
- Late pick-ups after 6pm are charged at €15 per hour.
- We charge an additional €50 for the extra activities, special days and cooking sessions held during the year.
- Fees are non-refundable.

Changes to attendance

- Please give four weeks' notice if you wish to withdraw your child from any of our centres.
- Monthly bookings cannot be less than 10% of the hours originally booked and accepted by the centre at registration.
- We will do our best to accommodate extra days or changes of day, but these depend on other children's bookings and staff rosters.
- Hours not used cannot be carried over to the following month.

Uniforms

One summer set, one winter set and a drawstring bag are included with registration. Extra uniform items can be purchased at your own cost; our price list is below.






Summer uniform **Winter uniform**

ITEM	PRICE
Jumper	€17
Jog pants	€15
Polo shirt	€15
Shorts	€10
Drawstring bag	€8

Free Childcare Scheme: terms and conditions

- **Who qualifies.** Children whose parents are working or in education can benefit from the Free Childcare Scheme. "Parents in work" means both parents or guardians are working, or a single mother, father or guardian is working, and paying social security contributions. "Parents in education" means both parents or guardians, or a single mother, father or guardian, are in education leading to a recognised diploma or degree. Free childcare is available for every child of childcare age, for a number of hours in proportion to the mother's (or single father's) working hours.
- **Changes to hours.** Please tell us about any change to the hours or days you need one month in advance, in line with the Government deadline. The date will be given in the Stepping Stones newsletter.
- **Booking hours.** Please do not book more hours than you need. To cover overtime or the unexpected, the Government pays for up to 10% more than your booked hours if they are used.
- **Extra hours.** You may use more hours than the extra 10% allowance. These count as extra hours and are paid directly to the centre. We will tell you the hourly rate before you register.

- **Absences.** If your child is ill for more than 3 days, you must present a medical certificate before they can return. Each month, your child may attend up to 10% fewer hours than booked: for a 100-hour monthly booking, your child must attend at least 90 hours. A further yearly absence allowance of 15% of the booked hours also applies.
- **Choice of centre.** You may use free childcare at any centre of your choice, as long as that centre has a Free Childcare Scheme agreement with the Government.
- **When it ends.** Free childcare ends once your child is eligible to start Kindergarten 1.
- **Maternity and parental leave.** The Government continues to pay for free childcare while the mother is on maternity leave. Free childcare does not cover parental leave.
- **Tax rebate.** Parents can choose either free childcare or the tax rebate scheme.
- **Leaving or transferring.** If your child is leaving the centre for any reason, please give the centre one month's notice.

A WELCOME FROM OUR

Managing Director

On behalf of all our staff, I would like to welcome you personally to Stepping Stones Early Learning Centre and thank you for your interest in our centres. A passion for early childhood education has been the cornerstone of Stepping Stones for over 15 years, and we still live that passion every day. It has been a privilege to work with Stepping Stones families and educators over the years.

Our caring and committed staff will guide your child to reach their full potential. As a child play therapist, I have the opportunity to observe and support children emotionally and psychologically.

Thank you for taking the time to read our Parent Handbook. Feel free to drop into my office or call at any time. It will be a pleasure to meet you and answer any questions you may have.

Michelle Spiteri

Managing Director



SECTION 8

Appendices

IN THIS SECTION

- Admission form
- Injury report
- Outing consent form
- Complaint form
- Cleaning routine

Application Form

Stepping Stones Childcare Centre

Name _____ Address _____

Surname _____

Date of birth _____ Town _____

Gender _____ Postcode _____

Email _____

Parent 1 (name) _____ Parent 2 (name) _____

Service Applying for: Childcare

Monday ☐
Tuesday ☐
Wednesday ☐
Thursday ☐
Friday ☐
Saturday ☐

Amount of hours per week _____

Deposit

Registration fee - €85
Uniform – €65 (uniform includes 1 set of summer, 1 set of winter and a bag)
Total – €150 ☐

Payments must be made in cash or via bank transfer. Applications will be accepted on a first come first serve basis and must be accompanied by our deposit. Acceptance will be confirmed in writing.

Pick up Authorisation

Name the persons authorised to pick up your child. No other person will be able to do so without the parent/guardian's consent. (Kindly include yourself)

Name & Surname	ID Card	Relationship to child

Emergency Contact Details

Please ensure that you include the correct details of the persons who may be contacted in case of an emergency.

Name & Surname	Mobile no.	Fixed line no.

Medical History

Please answer all questions carefully.

1. Does your child have any type of allergy? Yes | No

If yes, specify: _____

2. Has your child ever had an operation/injury? Yes | No

If yes, please describe: _____

If yes, please specify which month and year it occurred _____

3. Does your child have any specific dietary needs? Yes | No

If yes, specify: _____

4. Is your child under any prescribed medicine? Yes | No

If yes, specify medicine and dosage intake: _____

Please describe any other health or physical conditions (or any other condition) that we should be informed about:

The data requested will only be processed by the administration of Stepping Stones for the general administration of the centre and for correspondence with participants themselves. Under no circumstances will this data be passed on to commercial parties. All this information is required so that, should the need arise, procedures may be carried out without unnecessary delays. In case of an accident or emergency, stepping stones administration will attempt to contact the person listed in the emergency contact details. If no one can be reached, the responsibility of your child's health will be assumed by the doctor.

Kindly tick the below to give consent to Stepping Stones staff and management: -

- ☐ We give permission that any images including your child may appear on our Facebook page and website, in printed materials produced for promotional purposes including leaflets, posters and adverts, or in material sent out to media.
- ☐ We give permission to include your child in group photos or videos sent to all parents of the same classroom on our pro care application.
- ☐ We give permission to the child care educators/management to provide first aid and take the appropriate measures, including contacting 112 (emergency services) and arranging transportation to the medical facility.
- ☐ We, the undersigned confirm that we have read carefully and accept policies and procedures included in the Stepping Stones parent handbook.

Kindly attach the following documents to this application –

1. Birth Certificate
2. Immunization Record
3. Prescriptions

Parent/Guardian name _____

Id card _____ Date _____

Telephone _____ Mobile _____

Workplace _____

Workplace tel/ext no. _____

Signatures

Parent 1 - _____

Parent 2 - _____

Injury Report

Child's name –

Area accident took place –

Date - Time of incident –

Description of incident –

First aid given -

Carer in charge –

Parent/guardian signature -

Outing consent form



Date of outing: _____

Place of outing: _____

Information about the child

Name and surname: _____

Allergies: _____ **Photos:** _____

Emergency contacts

Name and surname: _____ **Relationship with child:** _____

Signature: _____ **ID Card:** _____

Name and surname: _____ **Relationship with child:** _____

Signature: _____ **ID Card:** _____

Signature of both parents/guardians Emergency Contacts:- _____

_____ _____

Complaint Form

We hope that you feel comfortable enough to discuss any concerns or issues that you may have with us directly should our services fall short of your expectations. Should you wish to make a formal complaint, you may use this form to detail your concerns in writing. All complaints are dealt with in line with the complaint's procedure. Please ask if you require a copy of this.

Parents may also file a complaint directly to MEYR (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation) either via telephone on 20953753 / 25982853 or else by filling a Complaint using the following link : https://dqse.gov.mt/en/complaints/

If you require further advice and would rather remain anonymous or feel that the matter remains unresolved following the complaint's procedure, you can talk in confidence to:

Details of concern/complaint -

Date:

Your details: (Do not complete this section if you wish to remain anonymous)

Name & surname –

Contact number -

Nature of concern/complaint:

Sanitisation and cleaning of toys and surfaces

Date										
Toys - Cheeky Monkeys										
Toys - Hungry Hippos										
Toys - Lion Cubs										
Floor cleaning - Cheeky Monkeys										
Floor cleaning - Hungry Hippos										
Floor cleaning - Lion Cubs										
Staff Bathroom										
Childrens' Bathroom										
Front Door										
Outdoor Play area										
Outdoor toys/equipment										
Kitchen area										
Reception area										

Our centres

Fgura

38/44 Triq Censu Busuttil, Fgura

T 2180 3360

Marsaskala

133 Triq il-Qalet, Marsaskala

T 2163 3743

Qawra

482 Triq it-Turisti, Qawra

T 2158 4353

Smart City

SCM 03, Smart City, Ricasoli, Kalkara

T 2180 1434

Tarxien

29 Triq Xandru Farrugia, Tarxien

T 2122 4991

Get in touch

maltasteppingstones@gmail.com

steppingstonesmalta.com