

Management

Work Matters: Achieving outstanding: Little Learners

Karen Faux, 24 November 2010, 12:00am

The inspector could hardly believe her eyes at the sight of the excellent practice throughout this nursery, reports Karen Faux.

Earning an 'outstanding' in 2009 and scooping Nursery World's Nursery of the Year 2010 demonstrate how owner and manager Marie Walker has realised her ambition to create an exceptional nursery.

Since it opened in 2008, Little Learners Nursery, in Skegness, has demonstrated the very best practice under the EYFS, with highly qualified, committed staff and an environment that gives children a wealth of learning opportunities.

For Ms Walker, the process of studying early years theorists as part of her Early Childhood degree was what sparked her passion to create a pioneering nursery.

'Before we opened, Skegness did not have a particularly good reputation for the standard of its provision, although that has improved now,' she says. 'I was determined to launch a setting that was special and give children and parents greater opportunities.'

When the inspector called at the beginning of January 2009, the nursery had been up and running for under a year.

'Our inspector was very formal, and when she said she wanted to come back for a second day we became quite anxious. But we all felt that we deserved outstanding,' says Ms Walker.

At the end of the second day, the inspector revealed that she had felt the need to come back - because 'she just could not believe what she had seen'.

'We were told that we wholeheartedly deserved outstanding in every area, and she had just had to check with Ofsted that she could award this to us, as we were such a new nursery.'

Ms Walker says the inspector was particularly rigorous in the areas of safeguarding, risk assessments and incident and accident forms.

'While she was here, a little girl coughed on a grape and the inspector later checked to see if the incident had been recorded in our book, which it had.'

MUTUAL RESPECT

Little Learners occupies a substantial Victorian house and is organised over four floors. It has a spacious outdoor area and has just acquired another building at the back, which is set to be converted into a sensory area. Despite its stairs, it has full disabled access and facilities.

All of the rooms are beautifully appointed with a wealth of resources and vibrant furnishings. Rooms are designed to have a similar feel so that the children can feel at home as they grow and progress through them.

The baby room has a sensory wall with a black and white area and resources that include silver balls and tin foil, a stethoscope, treasure baskets and swathes of chiffon fabric. In the pre-school room, which leads directly on to the garden, there is a PC and a laptop attached to a Smartboard, enabling more children to access ICT at the same time. The home corner features real cooking utensils and foodstuffs.

'What's great about the house is that it has a homely feel and we have tried to create as many cosy areas as possible,' says Ms Walker. 'This even applies to the toilets. Initially I had red cubicles fitted, but these looked horrible, so I asked our builder to design some wooden cubicles which fit in much better with the overall feel of the house.'

The outdoor area is undoubtedly Little Learners' crowning glory. It boasts a water feature, an artists' studio, a house the children have built themselves from natural materials, and a fire pit which is used to toast marshmallows and bake potatoes. Ms Walker says the nursery decided to keep chickens to educate children that eggs didn't just come from supermarkets.

On the day of my visit the rainy weather did not deter children from trying to construct a den with blue plastic sheeting, which kept being swept away by the wind.

Very detailed folders are compiled for each child's learning journey and these are passed to schools when they leave.

'Right from the start we strive to understand every aspect of each individual child. This means working closely with parents and being meticulous in the way we document their progress.'

Ms Walker adds, 'One of the things that really impressed the inspector was the way in which children and staff interacted. It was commented upon that there was respect on both sides of the relationship and a mutual approach to exploring learning.'

'This comes down to having staff who are prepared to be 100 per cent involved and understand how to extend an experience that little bit further.'

TIFFANY CARTER, DEPUTY MANAGER, SAYS:

'One of the biggest strengths of the nursery is that everybody is working along the same lines. We all recognise that the focus is on child-initiated play, and an important part of our job is to ensure that flows.'

'All of the team is involved in all four rooms of the nursery so that we can maintain a close-knit feel and work in sync.

'We enjoy responding to the children's interests, and we find each group of children is different. This year's pre-schoolers are keen on superheroes and we have been pursuing this across the curriculum, with quite a lot of input from parents, particularly dads.

'One of our most rewarding activities is our Beach School. There is so much for children to experiment with and learn about down there. You literally see the children developing in front of your eyes - it is very exciting.'

SNAPSHOT

- - Little Learners employs 15 staff, all of whom are qualified to Level 3 or above. Five staff have degrees.
- - It is registered to care for a maximum of 53 children from birth to five years at any one time and currently has 98 children on roll.
- - The nursery was part of the local pilot for free entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds. It also part of the ARK group, which is involved in delivering assessment and record keeping.
- - Little Learners has developed a Beach School which involves regularly taking all children to the nearby beach to experience challenge and learning.
- - The next project for the nursery is to develop a sensory area in a newly acquired building at the back of the existing property.
- - Little Learners was named Nursery World's Nursery of the Year 2010, with the judges concluding, 'The nursery is a real community of learning that makes a powerful contribution to the physical, emotional, social, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing and development of the children'.

<http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/news/1042501/Work-Matters-Achieving-outstanding-Little-Learners/>