

Strong points

How Elmscot Day Nursery in Greater Manchester makes working with parents and carers a priority, both inside the setting and beyond. **Annette Rawstrone** reports

Building strong partnerships between the nursery setting and parents or carers brings great benefits for everyone, especially the child. With this in mind, practitioners at Elmscot Day Nursery, Altrincham in Greater Manchester work hard to develop a trusting and warm relationship with parents from the first contact meeting.

'We put a lot of time into gaining trust with parents because we know that if a parent is happy and relaxed with their childcare decision then the child is likely to settle more easily,' says nursery manager Lucy Yarnell. 'A good ongoing relationship, through informal conversations and regular meetings, also brings the benefit of earlier intervention and ongoing support for children's development.'

The nursery, which is part of the Elmscot Group, gained the Leading Parent Partnership Award (see box) accreditation last year for its partnership ethos. While the practitioners have the expertise in understanding how a child develops and learns, they know it is the parent who understands their child best.

By encouraging a two-way exchange of information, it is felt that there is a shared level of expectation and the individual child's needs can be better understood and met both in the nursery setting and at home. Ms Yarnell believes they all gain from working together:

- Parents feel valued, respected and develop trust with practitioners, enabling them to ask for advice or support. They can use information passed on from the nursery to support their child's learning and development at home.
- Practitioners can better understand the children they care for as they find out about



their home life and speak to the parents about their child's particular needs and interests. This can be used to inform planning and make practitioners' own work more interesting and rewarding.

- Children are able to feel more secure, form stronger attachments and receive tailored support if needed. Being offered activities that follow their interests can also lead to greater engagement and improved learning outcomes.

BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP

The majority of children at Elmscot Day Nursery, Altrincham come from professional families where both parents are working.

The nursery has gained Leading Parent Partnership Award accreditation for its approach to working with parents and carers

Communicating with busy working parents brings its own challenges because they often have work demands and sometimes children are collected by grandparents or another carer.

For these reasons, practitioners use a number of methods for working with parents, with a positive settling-in period regarded as an essential foundation for an ongoing relationship with the family.

Settling-in

'Building trust and a rapport with parents from the start is crucial,' says Ms Yarnell. 'Settling-in is our opportunity to get to know the child and the family.'

The length of the settling-in period depends on the individual child, with the first session lasting

case study

'Four years ago and pregnant with our first child, I had no idea what to expect from a nursery setting, so I took advice from a close friend and landed on the doorstep of Elmscot Altrincham,' says parent Sarah Clark.

'I remember being shown around and feeling keen to understand everything so that we could make the right decision on where to send our child when I returned to work. Our love of Elmscot and its ethos with parents started then.'

'Care was taken to explain what nursery life was all about and I quickly felt that this nursery shared my values and high standards for my child, plus wanted to create a partnership with parents.'

'Now our two daughters are heavily

involved in nursery life. Lucy and the Elmscot Altrincham team are incredibly special because they genuinely care about providing exceptional childcare through creating true partnerships with parents. We work together to develop and care for our precious children.'

'I feel nursery staff communicate using every medium they have access to in order to keep us informed and included in nursery life. Along with verbally communicating daily, the team also use online Tapestry to regularly update us.'

'They also hold a range of useful out-of-hours information sessions – I found one on improving children's sleep particularly useful – and give parents the opportunity to drop in and talk about anything they wish.'

'Staff gather parents together to tell us about important room transitions, ensuring we are fully aware of the styles of learning that the nursery embraces and also giving us the opportunity to meet and chat to the wider nursery team and other parents.'

'We celebrate events together, such as Mother's and Father's Day and even afternoon tea for grandparents. The grandparents love this because it enables them to better understand what goes on at nursery.'

'I didn't expect that a nursery would give so much support or regard it as so important. Receiving this support has been crucial, especially as first-time parents. We're so lucky to have found Elmscot and this wonderful, thoughtful and caring team.'

around half an hour. Gradually parents will leave their child to play while they remain in the building and the time is lengthened.

Parents are asked to fill in medical and 'all about me' forms detailing children's routines, but also information about the family, such as its make-up, parents' jobs, languages spoken at home and anything special to them such as culture or religion. Settling-in sessions are held on the days that a child will be attending the nursery in order for them to become familiar with the children and staff.

Open-door policy

The nursery has a key worker and buddy system so parents know the person they are handing over to.

'Parents know that they can come into the office to speak to me or the other staff. Parents will often make a point of saying if their child has had a bad night or phone for reassurance if their child was upset at drop-off,' says Ms Yarnell. 'We see many parents on a day-to-day basis and become friendly. No question is a stupid question. We'd prefer to be asked and to give reassurance.'

The nursery tries to be accommodating to unique needs, such as providing extra sessions to a shift-working parent who was struggling to find time to study, and encouraging a mother to visit her child on her lunch break so she could continue breastfeeding.

Online journal

Practitioners give 'day sheets' to parents detailing food eaten, nappy

changes or toileting accidents, but use the online learning journal Tapestry to share children's special moments and observations.

'We brought in online journals so that parents could keep updated with their children's progress at a time convenient to them,' says Ms Yarnell. 'Most parents look at Tapestry and add their own observations around 8pm when their children are in bed and they have some down time.'

Workshops

Elmscot nursery group holds popular parent workshops every two months at 7pm covering topics such as sleep routines, first-aid, nutrition and Forest School ethos.

Stay-and-play sessions

'When parents are dropping off or collecting their children, the main focus is their own child and they don't necessarily see the wider picture of the nursery. We like to hold occasional stay-and-play sessions for new families on a

A parent recently came in to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in Arabic

Saturday morning so the new parents can meet each other,' says Ms Yarnell.

'They can chat and build friendships, which is especially great for first-time parents. It's also lovely for them to see their children play with others in the nursery environment.'

Parent feedback

The nursery has piloted informal evening 'coffee and conversation' sessions to chat about the nursery, such as how it can improve the day sheets. Staff gather verbal feedback from parents and reflect on it in regular meetings, and also use online tools such as Survey Monkey to poll parents about general issues, such as when to run workshops.

Environment

Although it is a large, 70-place nursery, staff have designed it to have a homely feel, so children and families feel relaxed and comfortable. Each room has a child-height 'family board' on the wall with photographs of the children with the special people in their lives.

Parents are encouraged to bring in familiar items from home for role play and the home corner so different cultures can be valued in the setting and children gain a sense of belonging. 'We like families to share their cultures with us because it's what makes them who they are,' says Ms Yarnell. 'A parent recently came in to read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* in Arabic. The children sat open-mouthed, they loved it.'

Leading Parent Partnership Award (LPPA)

The LPPA is an independent accreditation which investigates a number of key areas deemed critical objectives for settings to provide the best experience for both parents and children in their care. These include:

- establishing good links

between nursery and home

- supporting through transition phases
- encouraging parent participation
- communicating effectively.

See www.awardplace.co.uk/award/lppa