

Against the odds

How do outstanding early years leaders manage change? *Katy Morton* speaks to our 2016 Nursery Manager of the Year to find out

Two moves in quick succession did not phase manager Debbie Gunn, who, despite experiencing her own health issues, did not let standards at the Natural Childcare Company slip.

In order to meet demand, the Solihull-based nursery group expanded the business in 2013, opening a new setting in a converted manor house, Bentley Manor Childcare Centre in Dorridge. Ms Gunn supported the directors with the move and conversion of the building, and helped to recruit staff. The following year, the nursery received an Outstanding Ofsted grade in its first inspection.

That same year, she was faced with another move: taking her

setting in Shirley from the primary school in which it was based to a former local library.

‘We had to relocate within a six-month period while having to cater for approximately 150 families. This was not an easy task,’ explains Ms Gunn.

When children and staff moved to the new premises, it was still undergoing refurbishment. Part of the building was out of bounds, and parents and children had to walk through the outdoor area in order to get inside.

There were no suitable toilets, so the nursery had to hire ‘child-friendly’ portable loos to use for a few months. It took five months for the work to be finished.

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The nursery manager, who has a degree in childcare and Early Years Professional Status, was charged with ensuring that parents and children were fully prepared for the move, and that the premises were safe to move into.

‘A challenge was having to cater for all our families, while reassuring children, so the transition was as easy and settled as possible.

‘Some members of the community were also unhappy that the library was being redesigned, but once we invited them in and they saw the high level of childcare we provide, they were thrilled to see an old building being given new life,’ Ms Gunn says.

OUTSTANDING PRACTICE

She held meetings in the evenings to discuss changes with parents, who were invited to tour the building through different stages of its development. An open-door policy was also put in place, allowing relationships to build.

Natural Childcare Company director Tim Landreth says, ‘Debbie exudes confidence, which is absorbed by staff and parents alike, allowing her to develop superb relationships.’ The move was ‘no mean feat’, he says, adding, ‘As a result of Debbie’s very careful management of the whole situation, bookings continued to come in, existing children remained with us and the new premises were safe and welcoming.’

Against the backdrop of drilling, dust and fumes, the nursery manager was dealing with health issues. Ms Gunn, who suffers from chronic endometriosis, suffered six miscarriages over a course of two years. This made working with young children a ‘bittersweet’ experience. She says, ‘Working in a childcare environment was not easy as it caused an emotional conflict. But my love for all the children in my care took my mind off the situation and working towards an inspection under the new framework gave me a distraction that I needed.

‘I had immense support given to me from the directors and my work colleagues.’

Since then Ms Gunn has overcome the odds to have a daughter, who is now two.

In 2016, the Shirley nursery was inspected by Ofsted and retained its Outstanding judgement. She says



Debbie Gunn receives her prize at last year’s Nursery World Awards



Ms Gunn was praised for handling a setting's move to a new premises

this was achieved because of the 'amazing' staff team who have the same level of professionalism and expectations as herself and the company's directors, as well as continued self-reflection.

REAL PROGRESS

The nursery's outstanding practice is reflected in the children's progress, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as well as children with English as an additional language.

Parents' testimonials back this up. For example, the parents of a child with profound and multiple learning difficulties say every effort was made to welcome their youngest daughter, who is moderately deaf, severely visually impaired and has a global development delay.

'We approached the nursery knowing that many people in our position had difficulties with mainstream nurseries, being made to feel unwelcome and even being turned away,' the parent says. 'The response from the Natural Childcare Company couldn't have been more

different. There was never any question of our child not being accepted, and every effort was made by them to ensure staff were trained and prepared to deal with her needs.

'At every stage in her time at nursery she has been welcomed, included in all activities and encouraged to learn and develop far beyond our initial expectations of what she might achieve.'

Currently the nursery has 10 children with SEND, all of whom are supported by their SENDCo and several members of staff who work outside of ratio.

The nursery also works closely with external agencies including physiotherapists, speech and language therapists, health visitors, nurses, council support teams and schools. Nurses have also paid visits to show staff how to use a feeding tube for children in their care, a service which Ms Gunn says she had to fight for. She adds that staff are happy to attend training in the evenings after work, which she adds is a must for those working with children with specific needs.



FURTHER INFORMATION

- The Nursery World Awards 2017 are now open. For more information, go to www.nurseryworld.co.uk/awards

The nursery also provides a lot of support to children with English as an additional language. Parents are asked to provide staff with words used by children in their first language, as well as any books read at home to provide comfort.

'We had one girl starting who was Chinese. Her mum and dad had limited English and brought someone in to translate for them during the induction.

'They created a book with Chinese words their child uses, and words commonly used in nursery, such as spoon and plate. This child has shown huge progress with her English language in just seven months,' says Ms Gunn.

'As a setting, it is so important for us to build strong relationships with the parents so that we are fully informed as to what specific needs there are and how together we can support individual children. We work as a team, and experience is shared between members of staff.'

In terms of her strategic approach, Ms Gunn continuously sets targets, a process that she says involves all staff. New projects involve extension of the outdoor area at the Shirley nursery, development of which has been ongoing for two years.

'What started out as a concrete car park now has grass, a soft surface for children to ride bikes and trikes on, a mud kitchen, barefoot trail, herb garden, potting shed and a climbing area with a hill,' says Ms Gunn. 'More recently, canopies were put up, and a decking area. An outdoor classroom is also in the pipeline.'

While Ms Gunn admits that running a successful nursery can be hard, particularly when juggling this with family life, she says having staff on-side is vital. The company provides a range of employee incentives such as health cover and staff trips to help. In May, staff will go on an overnight trip to Brighton, where the team will visit another setting to share best practice.

'Keeping up with an industry that is suppressed by a shortfall in funding and red-taped by legislation, while ensuring that children have enough time to play and, most of all, keeping them safe, brings new challenges daily,' Ms Gunn says.

'I have been a manager for more than 13 years, and it's about getting your staff team on-side and them understanding why you do what you do.' ■

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