

Ways and means

How the practitioners at one nursery group have become confident in supporting the needs of visually impaired children. By **Annette Rawstrone**

The Elmscot Group has five nurseries in Cheshire and 16 years' experience under its belt in looking after children with SEND, including autism, speech and language difficulties and Down syndrome. However, dealing with visual impairment was an area in which its practitioners had little experience until two registered blind children started at their settings four years ago.

'It was all very new to us when we introduced the children to the setting, and we were learning on the job,' says Lucy Yarnell, nursery manager of the Elmscot setting in Timperley. She was responsible for settling one of the children, Ruby (not her real name), who has since started school.

'Thankfully, we liaised a lot with the children's parents and carers, plus had lots of support and help from Trafford sensory support team, and we built a great relationship with them. They were so approachable that no question was too silly and they explained how and why they work in certain ways.'

RIISING TO THE CHALLENGE

The Elmscot Group rose to the challenge so well that Trafford Council recommended another child with visual impairment to them (see case study) and they won the Inclusive Practice award at last year's *Nursery World* Awards.

Staff have attended many training sessions and been invited by various organisations to give presentations on case studies and how staff are trained to work with children with SEN.

'We believe that every child adds value to our settings, whatever their individual needs may be,' says Ms Yarnell. 'We believe in the principle of early intervention, as all children are observed, assessed, planned for



and monitored on an individual basis. This ensures children with SEND have an equal opportunity to learn and progress to the best of their abilities.'

SENSORY SUPPORT

In the case of Ruby, Trafford sensory support team provided one-to-one support for six of the ten hours that she attended the nursery each day. They gave staff training and advice on what it is like to have no sight and how to change the environment to support a visually impaired child, such as:

- clearing space to enable the child to manoeuvre safely
- moving furniture and resources around as little as possible to enable the child to become familiar with the environment
- helping them settle into the



Adam, who is partially sighted, enjoys his independence at the setting he attends in Timperley

environment by commenting on what the child is holding onto or passing as they move around the room; 'That's Lucy's cupboard' or 'There's a step coming up so hold on to the door frame' – and then guiding the child's foot onto the step

- using tactile methods for labelling resources, such as sticking a Lego brick onto the Lego drawer
- (if the child is to learn Braille), introducing this into the environment on coat pegs and name badges
- using lots of repetition to develop skills, such as putting balls into a box again and again.

'All the staff had a heavy involvement with Ruby and she was familiar and comfortable with everyone in her room so there was

case study: Adam

'It wasn't as daunting when four-year-old Adam, who is partially sighted, started attending nursery part-time in October 2015 because we felt more confident in our practice with visually impaired children,' says nursery manager Lucy Yarnell.

'We receive funding to provide one-to-one support for Adam and regularly liaise with sensory support services. A differentiated curriculum has been compiled by the SENDCO, Adam's key person and sensory service advisors to ensure that targets are tailored and relevant to his development.

'Before starting nursery and then before moving to our pre-school room, we assessed and changed the room layouts to support Adam in his independence to explore. Adam is inquisitive and not dependent on an adult. He holds on to furniture to move around and isn't phased if a child bumps into him. We try to keep resources, such as the water tray, in set places but will tell him if they've been moved.

'It's still unclear just how impaired Adam's vision is, but recently he's been showing a lot of interest in bright lights, so we do lots of activities with him using lights, such as putting a flashing ball on the carpet for him to find. His speech is limited, he'll just string together two or three words, but his understanding is amazing and he will follow commands and knows routines. He has been supported to learn signing and is now very good. Since moving to the pre-school room we've noticed that he has become more vocal.

'Adam loves sand and water and likes to splash. He likes construction and building things high, finding it funny when he knocks them down – possibly because of the impressive noise, but he's also very cheeky. In the garden, Adam seems to look around to find things and enjoys the space. He loves going outside in the rain and he'll tip his head back and enjoy the sensory experience of it falling on his face. His one-to-one support will regularly take

him on walks following the same route and introduce him to things such as trees and walls. There's a certain wall he likes to feel for and he has a big smile when he sits on it.

'Children seem drawn to Adam, especially girls, who call out to him when he arrives, but he also likes his independence. He finds it hilarious when he climbs up the slope of the slide and down the steps. He attends Forest school and we enable him to take risks like any other child. We're all happy with Adam's progression.'



no problem when her one-to-one support was not around,' says Ms Yarnell. 'In fact, she became so comfortable in the environment that she needed the support of an adult less and less. She would become quiet outside and would need encouragement to walk around, but one boy in particular used to enjoy taking Ruby and guiding her around, which was lovely and she enjoyed it.'

MONITORING PROGRESS

With no previous experience of supporting visually impaired children, practitioners were particularly concerned about how to monitor their progress. They appreciated the sensory support team sharing their learning journey, which enabled them to more accurately monitor progress. 'This was a massive thing for us because we wanted to make sure that we did the best for them,' says Ms Yarnell.

'We follow children's interests and the play that they initiate, so we included lots of sensory play for Ruby to help to get her engaged. She loved water. First, she loved the feel of her hands in the water, then she moved on to enjoying splashing and listening to the noise it made. By the time she left nursery, we'd introduced resources such as jugs

so that she could pour water from high up and listen to the sound.'

Elmscot Group has invested heavily in sensory resources, particularly toys that light up, as they have been found to benefit all the children, not just those with SEND. 'Inclusive practice is something that we at Elmscot feel extremely passionate about and there really is nothing stopping us from giving our children the care, attention, support, resources and equipment they require,' says Ms Yarnell.

WORKING WITH PARENTS

Ms Yarnell believes that building strong partnerships with parents and carers, through regular meetings and informal conversations, brings the benefit of both earlier intervention and ongoing support for children's development. Being part of a nursery group also provides additional support and knowledge.

'The SENCOs from the different settings regularly meet and have each developed expertise in particular areas – such as visual impairment, speech and language or autism – which means they can draw on each other's skills,' says Ms Yarnell. 'This might include going to another setting to observe a child when there is a concern in order to

offer advice and support. As well as offering further support for the child, it enables the setting to feel more confident in asking for external advice.

'We have a lead SENCO who chairs meetings every 12 weeks for the SENCO group, which is really valued by the SENCOs. We also make use of the area SENCO for those children with higher-level needs, and the local SEN Advisory Service, once additional funding has been awarded.'

Working with children with visual impairments was a steep learning curve made easier by practitioners finding out what support was available in the local area and seeking professional advice to ensure the children's specific needs could be met.

'Accessing high-quality training is vital, and open and honest partnerships with parents is key – don't be afraid to talk to parents and ask them their views and experiences,' advises Ms Yarnell. 'Ultimately, it is about having the will and desire to meet the needs of all the children who you look after. You'll find that, by becoming well-informed, you will be able to say with confidence that you can support a child well, rather than feeling that you have to say no to them.'

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