

With purpose

At London setting Tuffkid – from the Hebrew word meaning ‘purpose’ – children with SEND flourish alongside their mainstream peers, explains **Annette Rawstrone**

Step inside Tuffkid Nursery, part of Kisharon, and you’ll see children playing and supporting each other, whatever their needs and abilities.

‘Despite a third of our children having complex special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), it doesn’t feel like a special needs setting but a mainstream one,’ says nursery manager Janice Marriott. The 30-place nursery, rated Outstanding by Ofsted, was established in Barnet, north London 17 years ago by two sets of parents who could not find suitable Jewish provision in the area for their children with SEND.

They named it Tuffkid, a Hebrew word that means ‘purpose’. Chani Halpen, one of the founders, explains, ‘I honestly felt that my son, who has severe developmental delay following brain damage at birth, was given to us for a purpose. Also that he could cope, he was tough, so the name felt right in both languages.’

‘It was a new concept in the community at the time, and I think some parents thought we were strange to suggest that their mainstream two-year-old should attend the same nursery as our children, but it started off slowly and worked. For a parent with a child with special needs, to see their child accepted so freely by others as a friend is very heart-warming.’

‘Awareness has grown and now there is a waiting list for mainstream children to attend the nursery. The stigma of the SEN aspect has gone and all parents are proud that their children attend.’

ALL WELCOME

The nursery will accept any child with a complex need, whether they have a known condition such as Down syndrome or autism, rare



genetic conditions or a global delay due to unknown factors.

‘Sometimes the child has a specialist need where there is very limited data available regarding their profile and developmental expectations. We work very much on an individual basis and support these children one step at a time with carefully set targets, working closely with our in-house therapists and wider health professionals,’ explains Mrs Marriott. ‘We welcome any child and do all we can to help them develop, which is why our staff have an excellent understanding of early years development so that we can encourage and move children on.’

‘Parents are often surprised when I say that I’ll offer their child a place without even meeting their child. These are parents who are used to having to fight for everything, from education welfare grants to disability living allowance. For them to be accepted by the nursery without having to navigate complex paperwork is a huge relief for them, and makes them feel supported

Netanel (centre) joined the nursery in September (see Case study)

from the very beginning. It is a privilege that parents trust us with their children and it’s a partnership. These children are our children.’

WHOLE TEAM

Tuffkid provides a range of therapists:

- Physiotherapist
- Occupational therapist
- Speech and language therapist
- Dance movement therapist
- Hearing therapist.

They work alongside the children in the nursery environment and use other children as role models, rather than take selected children out for treatment. ‘By experiencing the therapy as part of a small group or in free play – both inside and outside – the child may experience the input as being less intense and more motivating,’ explains Mrs Marriott. ‘Children react better to therapy in the nursery environment because it is a place where they are comfortable, happy and their friends are around.’

‘Significantly, they will often continue playing in a therapeutic

case study: Netanel

'Netanel is a very popular member of our nursery. We're all amazed by the progress he's made,' says his key worker Angela Biro. Netanel, who has Down syndrome and had a stroke when he was one year old, is non-verbal and unable to walk unaided. Support from the nursery's therapists has resulted in him now using a walker instead of crawling, and communicating through Makaton and symbol cards.

His mother Ruchama Barr says, 'We chose Tuffkid because children receive therapy on-site and, importantly, this is run alongside their play rather than having structured therapy time. I love that it's a mix of mainstream and special needs children. Netanel is a social learner and by looking at the other children he is learning from them as well as the staff.'

Netanel enjoys music and singing, so dance movement therapy is a favourite activity, while he is also being supported to develop his spatial

awareness and proprioceptor skills. Through the use of symbols, Netanel is able to indicate to staff what activities he wants to do, with favourites including messy play, sharing books and the slide. 'He chooses what songs to play in music sessions and can also tell us when he wants to go elsewhere,' explains Ms Biro. 'Communicating through Makaton helps him to interact better with his friends. He's also able to join in with his peers a lot more now that he is using a walker and able to enjoy the playground.'

Ms Biro posts photographs on the Tapestry online learning journal to share with Netanel's parents, and she uses a daily link book to inform them of specific activities that he has been enjoying so that they can talk to him about his day. Ms Barr comments on how staff have supported them with minor behaviour issues and given guidance on choosing a primary school. 'I trust them to make important choices,' she says. 'Netanel is always



very busy at nursery. He never comes home looking picture perfect, so we can tell that he's enjoyed himself.'

way once the therapist has moved on to another child.'

Another benefit is that staff can observe the therapists and increase their skills. They learn how to target children's needs using everyday nursery items, rather than form the opinion that therapy is a standalone intervention that is someone else's responsibility. For example, a therapist may support a child to eat a yoghurt at the snack table or by feeding dolls in the home corner.

Verbal and non-verbal children are encouraged to communicate with Makaton sign, symbols and objects of reference so that they can interact together. 'All the children are allowed to use the BIGmack switches to say hello; we don't single any children out,' says Mrs Marriott. 'We expect participation from all the children. So, for example, when it's time to tidy up everyone joins in including children with cerebral palsy who are given wipes to clean down the tables like everyone else. This level of inclusion has a profound effect on everyone in the nursery.'

'No child has a keyworker Velcroed to them. We use a whole-team approach. Every keyworker knows all the children, including their learning goals.'

Staff have carefully designed the nursery following Elizabeth

Jarman's Communication Friendly Spaces approach, which focuses on the role of the environment in supporting speaking and listening skills, emotional well-being, physical development and general engagement.

Hessian-covered noticeboards help with soundproofing to support children, including those with hearing difficulties and autistic children who can be overwhelmed by loud noises. Cosy, small spaces are created by the arrangement of furniture, material and cushions, and the nursery is painted in neutral colours with lots of use of natural materials.

A landscaping architect recently helped to design the outdoor area to enable children to access and learn to take risks through a multi-sensory approach. 'We adapt the nursery every year to ensure that it meets children's individual needs,' adds Mrs Marriott.

The Orthodox Jewish nursery aims to help children feel at home so they feel 'like fish in water,' as Ferre Laevers says. They have familiar objects in the home corner, share daily prayers, bless food and celebrate Shabbos together.

ALL DIFFERENT

The inclusiveness of the nursery benefits all the children. Mrs

➔ MORE INFORMATION

- **Communication Friendly Spaces**, www.elizabeth.jarmantraining.co.uk
- www.kisharon.org.uk/our-services/education/tuffkid-nursery

Tuffkid is contrary to how we perceive integration because it is the mainstream child who experiences inclusion

Marriott believes that everyone gains fantastic role models and that it can encourage empathy and caring skills. 'Children become very nurturing and become mini-therapists as they support their friends through play,' she says.

Rivka Steinberg, whose mainstream daughter attends the nursery, says, 'Tuffkid is contrary to how we perceive integration because it is the mainstream child who experiences inclusion. They reap the benefits of an enriched setting together with a tailored child-centred approach that is not the typical offer in early years settings.'

She appreciates that, apart from the appropriate provision and necessary support, there is no distinction in how the staff engage with the children.

'Our daughter has benefited from learning in an environment that allows her to see that we are all different and this is just part of life,' she says. 'This supports her understanding of our family as our eldest daughter has SEN with a physical disability and attends a specialist school. I believe she will be better able to empathise and engage naturally with SEND children. When children are exposed to an inclusive environment they will learn to truly include everybody.' ■