

# Supporting... Jaipreet

How one nursery in the West Midlands helped a Punjabi-speaking girl become a confident talker in English before moving on to school. By **Annette Rawstrone**

**J**aipreet, who was born in England to Punjabi-speaking parents, grew up very isolated until she started at Little Rascals Day Nursery in Bilston, West Midlands when she was two years old.

Her parents moved away from their family in India to find employment and settled in Bilston, where they knew no-one and there is not a significant Punjabi community. Her father was able to speak some English but her mother could understand very little, which left her unable to visit groups or befriend many people.

Jaipreet grew up speaking Punjabi, so she could not understand English when her parents accessed two-year-old funding and enrolled her at the nursery, part of the Little Rascals Childcare chain.

Deputy manager Hannah Pearce says, 'Jaipreet's mum was lonely and struggling at home with two young children while her husband was working long hours as a delivery driver. The nursery is located on a council estate in a deprived area where a lot of the families are white British, but we do have children from Eastern Europe, Muslim families and a few Sikh families.'

'Her parents wanted Jaipreet to attend nursery so that she could make friends and improve her English before starting school, while also enabling her mum to have more time with her baby sister.'

## LANGUAGE BARRIER

Ms Pearce was Jaipreet's key person and conducted the induction with



her mother, which included discussing policies and procedures and filling out paperwork. It normally takes around 45 minutes but took closer to three hours because of the language barrier.

'We communicated through gestures, writing things down, using an online translator and phoning her husband who was able to explain some things,' she recalls. 'It was difficult but we managed.'

They carefully settled Jaipreet into the nursery over a few weeks, ensuring that she slowly developed a bond with her key person and was familiar with routines before her mother left.

'We made sure that Jaipreet played together with her mum and me on the floor and that I communicated with them both so that Jaipreet could see that her mum trusted me,'

**Jaipreet now speaks English well, thanks to additional support at nursery**

**She would laugh and be very loving towards members of staff, so we knew that she wasn't unhappy**

says Ms Pearce. 'I think the process was made harder because Jaipreet couldn't communicate what she wanted with me. Also, she'd gone from only knowing her parents, baby sister and a few neighbours to being in a setting with 30 other children, which must have been massively overwhelming.'

'We encouraged Jaipreet's mum to explain in Punjabi the different things we were doing. As I built up a relationship with Jaipreet, I encouraged her mum to get toys from the other side of the room, or go to the staff room so Jaipreet and I could play together and she would know her mum would come back.'

Ms Pearce feels that the process helped to develop a lasting strong bond with Jaipreet and her mother.

The nursery has 'family books' for each child, containing photographs

## additional advice

Primary National Strategy guidance *Supporting children learning English as an additional language* advises:

- Bilingualism is an asset, and a child's first language has a vital role in identity, learning and acquisition of additional languages.
- Many children go through a silent phase when learning a new language. It may last a few months, but is not usually concerning. Rather than being a passive

phase, learning will be taking place with a child usually understanding far more than they say.

- It's important that children do not feel under pressure to speak until they feel confident, but adults should continue to talk to children with the expectation that they will respond.

→ The guidance is at <https://bit.ly/2P8BfEi>

of people special to them. These are used as a comfort and also help to create a sense of belonging.

### WORDS AND PHRASES

In order to help Jaipreet to start understanding English, staff followed a 'language routine', such as feeding the fish together every day and using the same words and phrases. They would also wait for around 15 seconds after asking a question in order for Jaipreet to process what had been said. Photographs and pictures were used to explain different concepts; for example, an image of a cup of water.

Although Jaipreet was confident to talk to her parents in Punjabi, she went through a silent period at nursery, which lasted around six months. She communicated through nods, pointing and would cry when she needed the toilet. Staff continued to speak to her and model simple phrases.

'We knew that she understood us through the gestures that she used,' says Ms Pearce. 'Her dad was worried about her not speaking at nursery especially because she spoke a lot at home. It seems strange for a child to deliberately mute themselves but I researched this and found out that it's quite common for children with English as an additional language to do this.'

'Despite not talking, she would laugh and be very loving towards members of staff, so we knew that she wasn't unhappy. It was probably a response to all the big changes she was experiencing.'

### PLAYING TOGETHER

Lack of language did not prevent Jaipreet from playing alongside other children and making friends. 'Children included her in their play, such as giving her a teapot during role play and she'd smile back. They all dealt well with her having no

language. This could be partly down to the children not seeing her as anyone different because many have global language delay. This means that children with EAL are not much behind their peers,' explains Ms Pearce.

Staff regularly conduct activities – such as cooking, messy play or experiments – in small groups of around two to four children so that each child has the opportunity to speak and have input. 'This encourages the use of language away from children who have a higher ability,' says Ms Pearce.

'Jaipreet likes music and playing instruments so we particularly included her in these groups. The children can choose the genre of music so we have anything from Bhangra to classic and country.'

Staff understand the importance of the home corner for children to role play, talk and interact socially with each other while using familiar resources. They ensure that this area is well stocked so that children have plenty of domestic items to support their play, such as different-sized spoons, towels and flannels. They introduced familiar objects for Jaipreet, including saris and bangles.

Eventually, after around four months, Jaipreet started to speak to her peers and staff were able to track her speech development, which they found to be at a decent level. Slowly, she also started to speak to practitioners too.

Unfortunately, soon after Jaipreet started speaking at nursery, her mother had a miscarriage and was very unwell. The family returned to India for two months for support when Jaipreet was three years old.

'Her language regressed while she was in India and we were quite concerned that we would need to do a lot of work with her to support her speaking English before she started school. We had to reassess her

**Jaipreet likes music and playing instruments so we particularly included her in these groups**

**Jaipreet's transition to primary school went smoothly**



baselines and settle her into nursery again. By this time her sister was also attending nursery, which we feel helped her to settle quicker,' says Ms Pearce.

### STAY AND PLAY

The nursery holds sessions for parents to interact with their children and each other in the nursery environment and welcome parents to chat informally about their child's development or attend sessions modelling reading books. Online learning journeys enable parents to upload photos from outside of nursery, such as attending parties or weddings. The children can then share these photos with their peers.

Ms Pearce encouraged Jaipreet's mother to attend stay-and-play sessions so that she would be less isolated.

'Jaipreet's mum has worked really hard to learn English and communicate with others,' says Ms Pearce. 'Her English is now a lot better, and if I see her in the street, she will always stop and talk. She brought home-made samosas in for the children when we celebrated Diwali and recently came to Jaipreet's graduation.'

The nursery has a system of 'SOS cards' for parents to use when they need extra sessions, provided at no extra charge. They try to be flexible and help out if families need childcare to cover hospital appointments or funerals. Knowing that Jaipreet does not have extended family nearby, Ms Pearce ensured that Jaipreet's mother took advantage of this for attending hospital appointments while she was unwell.

### STARTING SCHOOL

Jaipreet has now moved to the local primary school where Ms Pearce feels she will thrive. The nursery has a strong relationship with the school. If staff have concerns about a child's transition, they visit the school with the child, talk to their teacher and help the child to settle, but this wasn't necessary for Jaipreet.

'She's very funny, loving and sociable and has made many friends so I've no concerns about her move to school,' says Ms Pearce. 'Jaipreet is now confident in speaking English and is developmentally where she should be, using humour and nonsense words. It's obvious Jaipreet has learnt English from us, she's got a Black Country twang.'