

Foreign exchange

In a globalised world, building overseas relationships has never been easier. *Catherine Gaunt* talks to three nursery groups about how it's done

Nursery groups around the UK are forging links with nurseries and families abroad and reaping the benefits.

Five years ago Russell Ford, chief executive and founder of nursery group All About Children, set up a charity called Auntie that now provides training and support for nurseries and crèches in impoverished South African townships.

The inspiration for the charity's name came from the way in which female 'auntie' elephants help the mother elephant and her young.

Initially the aim was to twin early years settings in the UK with nurseries in South Africa. Staff from nursery group Childbase Partnership fundraised and visited the Cape Town Educare Centre and other chains Happy Days, Casterbridge Nurseries and kidsunlimited have all raised money as well.

The charity then evolved into a partnership with a South African-based organisation, which runs early years and school projects.

'Auntie has turned into something different from what we envisaged. What we've done is find an absolutely fantastic partner based in Cape Town,' Mr Ford says.

Ikamva Labantu started work 50 years ago this year and now supports more than 12,000 children in 200 nurseries and pre-schools. Its food programme, which it runs alongside, ensures that all the children in the nurseries have hot, nutritious meals.

The charity also provides support centres for vulnerable older people and a foster programme for children affected by Aids. The vast majority of women running these centres have



no formal training or prior experience in early childhood development and education.

Explaining Auntie's change of direction in linking up with Ikamva Labantu, Mr Ford says, 'I was looking for something to become part of – who am I to create it? People there know what is needed.'

Many settings have been set up in people's own homes 'in corrugated shacks' with 50 or 60 children, Mr Ford says.

Auntie has helped Ikamva Labantu to build a training centre for their workers and a model pre-school for children from birth to seven, which is attended by 60 children.

The UK charity partnered with Rotary International to raise £30,000 to build the centre.

So far, 70 nursery owners and 70 lead practitioners have been trained there and a further 35 have embarked on courses ranging from the principles of early years, to finance and how to run a nursery business.

Auntie has also set up a registration centre with Ikamva Labantu which will help nurseries to get access to public funding: in South Africa

Staff from All About Children at a nursery in Khayleitsa township in Cape Town earlier this year

'Children's rights are universal. We want to learn from others and advocate for children'

all nurseries must be registered to receive any government subsidy and must meet strict standards.

Mr Ford says that early years practitioner training is similar to that in the UK, but is also specific to South Africa. 'HIV and Aids education is part of what we teach six- and seven-year-olds.'

Staff from All About Children visited Cape Town in April this year.

'We raised about £8,000 to put a building on a spare plot of land to care for 120 children,' says Mr Ford.

This was to expand a nursery originally housed in a building just twelve-foot square, providing care for 60 children in Khayleitsa, one of the largest townships in South Africa.

Mr Ford says, 'If nurseries want to get involved, we can help them link up with others. It's great to do it, but it's a big commitment to sustain the relationship. We can set twinning up, but it's much more rewarding to twin with the purpose of repairing or restoring a nursery.'

● www.theauntiefoundation.org

WELL CONNECTED

Paintpots Nursery and Pre-school, a group of eight nurseries based in Southampton, has a long history of links abroad.

Owners husband and wife David and Anna Wright have visited nurseries all over the world, including Florida, Italy, Slovenia and China. 'We've always been interested in finding out about provision in other countries,' says Mr Wright. 'When we're on holiday we try to track down a nursery and turn up. We find people are quite welcoming. Children's rights are universal. We want to learn from others and advocate for children across the world.'

The nursery has had visits this year from two childcare students from Austria and a student from Sweden.

'Social media have made the world a much smaller place and it's empowering to work together. We put ourselves out there a bit on Twitter and Facebook and people contact us.'

One such contact led to a link up with an Italian nursery via Skype.

'We'd sing happy birthday to each other,' says Mr Wright.

The nursery has also recently taken part in the Comenius programme (now Erasmus+). Funded by the European Union and run in the UK by the British Council, the programme fosters educational and cultural exchanges for children growing



up in the EU. Paintpots led a two-year project, 'Children of ICT', that linked up nurseries and schools in Spain, Belgium and Austria.

The participants set up a website – www.childrenofict-org.webs.com – to enable the nurseries to share photos and children used Skype to contact each other, sing carols and songs and upload videos.

'It was a great learning opportunity, says Mr Wright. 'We took some of our staff on visits to the other countries.'

Paintpots is also involved in a fund-raising project with charities Tearfund and Cord that provides people living in poor communities with clean water, a decent toilet and better information about hygiene. A toilet in each of Paintpots' five nurseries is now officially twinned with a toilet in different countries across Africa, India or Asia.

Mr Wright says, 'It's a very good way of explaining to children that some children don't have as much as they do.'

Each nursery has a certificate on display in the nursery with a photo of their toilet's twin and its GPS coordinates so the nursery children can see its location on Google Maps.

BENVENUTI IN BIRMINGHAM

First Steps nursery group in Birmingham has partnered with an Italian language school to arrange visits for Italian families and their young children, in what is believed to be the first trip of its kind.

Owner Debbi Gould, who runs the group of four nurseries in Birmingham with her husband Andy, explains that the relationship, now in its second year, came about when

a former apprentice at the nurseries returned home to Italy and opened a language school.

Alessandra Messina worked at First Steps for several years and studied for her NVQ Level 3. Now based in Turin, she manages the First Words Centro Ludico Linguistico there, together with her sister.

The school's first UK trip involved three-and four-year-olds from the language school and their families attending one of First Steps' nurseries for a week of English lessons, nursery activities and visits.

The parents' English lessons were held in the setting's conference room with a qualified teacher, while their offspring joined the nursery children.

Ms Gould says, 'The idea was that the children would spend the morning session in our nursery and take part in activities, while their parents had an English lesson.'

First Steps also owns 15 acres of private woodland near Kidderminster,

Italian families visit First Steps Nursery group

Nursery staff from Spain, Belgium and Austria on a visit to the UK organised by Paintpots as part of the Children of ICT linking project

and runs forest school sessions there, which the children also took part in.

The nursery put the families up in the Holiday Inn 'two miles down the road' and picked them up every day in a minibus at 9am.

The Italian children ate their lunch every day at the nursery to socialise with the other children.

The families were free in the afternoons to explore, with trips to the Black Country Museum – where they ate fish and chips, Cadbury World, the Bullring shopping centre in Birmingham and Ash End House children's farm near Tamworth, and Giffords circus in the Cotswolds.

'We wanted them to experience things that they wouldn't do in Italy. They loved Cadbury's World!'

Other trips included a visit to a pub, where the Kidderminster male voice choir, including Andy Gould, sang for them.

The Italian children already knew some English words, but 'When they're so young they manage to communicate in so many ways,' says Ms Gould. 'They spoke different languages but understood each other perfectly, using lots of expression and signs. It was fascinating and gave great insight into how pre-school children communicate non-verbally. It was amazing, too, how quickly children fitted in and understood routines. and how quickly they became friends.'

The UK visit has proved very popular and the language school has had lots of interest from other parents who would like to take part.

Ms Gould says, 'In Italy a lot of children do holiday schools in the summer time. Alessandra has found that a lot of people have contacted her asking whether their child can come because parents in Italy are very keen for their children to learn English.' ■

