

Nursery Chain of the Year

First Steps Children's Nursery Group



'First Steps St Edward's is full of love and fun. Oscar has blossomed into a confident, cheeky two-year-old who runs into nursery every day excited to see his friends and play, run, stick, paint, get wet, get sandy, eat glitter, cause mischief, read, laugh...'
 Parent

The family-owned nursery group started by Debbi and Andy Gould sums up its approach with a Chinese proverb: 'Tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I'll understand.'

The nursery's ethos is one of encouraging everyone to get involved, be challenged and take risks.

The group, started in 1992, provides 350 places across four nurseries in the West Midlands. Three are graded outstanding and the latest opened last year with a rating of good.

The nurseries work 'hand in hand' with parents in various ways, by holding regular parent workshops, a parent representatives group with an email hotline to managers and all parents, and 'You said, we did' boards. These are full of examples of how parents have influenced the settings, from meal recommendations to introducing first name

badges to help parents know who everyone is.

The group has also co-ordinated the first exchange trips with pre-school children from its twinning with a school in Italy – something it believes may be a first.

Staff training is considered extremely important and there is an in-house apprenticeship team. Five staff are currently taking early years degrees and others are taking management qualifications. All staff have their own individual training programmes and are encouraged to seek out other opportunities for development, including qualifications in forest school leadership, special educational needs and working with children with English as a second language.

The nursery group has also proved successful in turning things around during hard times.

In 2013, one outstanding setting was graded inadequate after reporting a 'no harm' incident involving a new apprentice. This was 'a massive

blow', but standards were raised to outstanding within a year, after working closely with the early years team in Birmingham. During a difficult time for the nursery, not one parent removed their child from the setting. The owners said, 'We believe we have shown that mistakes and difficulties can be overcome, particularly with the open and honest approach we adopted.'

First Steps has started to raise its profile as an outstanding nursery group by contributing to free mentoring for new and struggling nurseries, through an alliance with the early years team and Ofsted.

Gemma Barrett, from The Meadows nursery, Kings Norton, Birmingham, a beneficiary of this support, said First Steps' visit was 'helpful and inspiring'. She added, 'Hopefully, this mentoring will help us on our journey to a good rating. I have already made plans to continue the mentoring and support between our nurseries.'

Highly commended Mulberry Bush Nursery Group

Bury, Lancashire

Celebrating 25 years since the opening of its first nursery this year, the family-owned group runs four outstanding settings, and has opened a fifth this month. Started by Susan and John Robinson in 1990, the group is run by their children – Paul Robinson, Andrew Robinson and Joanne Kinloch. They say, 'Our passion for our business and for the provision of fantastic childcare

is obvious to anyone who meets our team or visits our nurseries.'

Snapdragons Nurseries

Bath, Bristol & Wiltshire

The group of eight settings has been highly commended in this category for the third year running, a testament to the consistency of its excellent provision. Early years teacher Rosemary Collard and her husband Paul opened their first nursery in their farmhouse home in 1998. The group continues to grow steadily, with a ninth nursery in development in Bristol.

Finalists

Growing Places Community Childcare Centres,

Hampshire (five nursery and six out-of-school settings)

Naturally Learning,

Cornwall (four settings)

Paint Pots Pre-School & Nursery,

Southampton (nine settings)

Criterion

Open to UK nursery groups with three or more settings