



“We’re all nursery nurses at the end of the day...”

From the bottom to the top, everybody at Caring Kindergartens Peterborough is focused on putting children and their families first. *TN* spoke to manager, Sam Stokes, and area manager, Karl Goodridge, about an ‘outstanding’ setting and a growing business...

“Everyone wants to be seen as ‘outstanding’, to be recognised for what they do,” Sam Stokes, manager of 112-place Caring Kindergartens Peterborough, says. “I can remember it as clear as anything: my deputy, Tina, and I came in here with the Ofsted inspector at 10 to six for feedback. She told us she had our categories up on her laptop, and she turned it round. I started to count the ‘outstandings’ but it was quicker to count the ‘goods’. That was probably the best day of my career -

just getting that acknowledgement for the individual hard work we’d put in and the hard work the company does, because it was a real team effort.

“But for us,” she stresses, “it was never, ‘We must get ‘outstanding!’ We must get ‘outstanding!’; as a company, a staff and as individuals, we want to do what’s right for the children and the families - we did that and the ‘outstanding’ came to us.”

In the ever-changing and always challenging world of early years education, of course, it’s ‘doing what’s right’ that’s the

hardest bit, and Sam and her team’s achievement is the culmination of more than a decade spent refining good practice into best practice, and of a process of engagement that has put parents alongside children at the heart of setting life. Tellingly, two years on from their most recent inspection, there’s no sign that the hard work is going to stop, either...

1 Stepping up

Recruited as a senior member of staff in May 2000, Sam found herself offered the position of manager at Caring Kindergartens Peterborough only six months later - and this following a period spent out of the profession altogether. “I moved away from Peterborough and struggled to get nursery work,” she remembers, “so I left the sector for a while, went into retail and worked my way up to manager. But as soon as I returned to Peterborough, I went straight back into childcare because I missed it too much.



It's important to support **potential**; I was given the **opportunity** as a senior to take on the **manager's** role, and without that I wouldn't be where I am now

SAM STOKES, MANAGER

"I nannied for a little while, but I felt I had more to give than I could to only one child; I wanted to give what I'd got to a wider group of children. Taking on the manager's role was a big decision to make because it's a lot of responsibility, but you don't really always think about that - in fact, you just have to not think about it otherwise you'd never do it! But I haven't looked back from that day.

"I didn't make big changes when I took over," Sam continues. "The company has a good ethos, and this was already a good setting. But obviously what came with me was my style, techniques and personality. I'm a very open person, very responsive, open to new ideas - and I've built the team up with me. Tina and Nicky, one of our senior nursery practitioners, have been here since January '99, but the rest I've recruited, and we now have a lot of long-standing staff. It's really nice; we have a family atmosphere because we're all supporting each other, and we have stability."

2 A supporting role

For setting managers, one of the advantages of existing within a group of nurseries is the administrative support a head office team can provide. In the case of Caring Kindergartens, this extends to payroll, invoicing and the paperwork associated with

new starters, staff and procedures, amongst other things, and the upshot is that Sam and her colleagues are freed up to do what they do best. "I'd say that today my role is a quarter children, a quarter parents, a quarter staff and a quarter business, which keeps things interesting! But at the end of the day I trained as a nursery nurse, and as much as I love my job as a manager, I still enjoy carrying out that role," Sam explains. "At the moment I'm based round in the preschool area with the over-threes as our head of preschool is on maternity leave. We're open 7.30 until 6 and I'm on the door morning and night, four days a week, and on Wednesday mornings so that the parents have continuity and can speak to me about anything they need to.

"I work with the groups too. I'm not a key person, but I'll go up and cover staff so they can get paperwork done, write reports. I'm quite happy to go the extra mile to support them because it's not an easy job to do - it's not just sitting and watching children all day, as some people think! Although I'm not the setting SENCO - that's Tina's role - I've also taken over that side of things in the preschool as I'm there and know the children, and I'm also the designated person for child protection - I wear a lot of hats! But that's because childcare is my passion as well as what I'm

paid to do. It's lovely to have a job that you actually want to come to every day... not that I always spring out of bed in the morning!"

3 Culture sharing

Sam's hat collection doesn't end there. She's also the setting's ENCO (Equalities Named Coordinator), a mandatory role under the local council but one that has also been rolled out across all five (soon to be six) nurseries in the Caring Kindergartens group, regardless of their location, on account of the positive impact it has made. "I think one of the things that helped get us to 'outstanding' was the effort we made to link up with parents as partners, and in particular our 'culture sharing' days," Sam explains. "We held our first about three-and-a-half years ago when the council brought in the need to have an ENCO. Our families got to do a little stand, talking about where they'd come from, explaining a bit about their history. We had parents doing Indian dancing and henna tattoos, others made food and shared that. It was our biggest success in getting parents really involved, and it's something we've continued to this day."

There is a strong focus on exploring the festivals of other cultures at Caring Kindergartens that's in keeping with Peterborough's multicultural population. A

Talking points



Healthy eating

Caring Kindergartens' head cook, Lisa Morrison, is responsible for devising and tweaking menus served by every nursery in the group. Each dish has been nutritionally analysed to give parents detailed information on their children's daily diet, and menus are provided on children's tables at mealtimes to both show them what to expect and create discussion points that practitioners can develop.



Working together

"There's a lot of openness - everyone's views are listened to, from directors down to area managers, to managers, to nursery nurses and back up again," area manager Karl Goodridge says of Caring Kindergartens' culture. "Although there's a structure, it goes round more than it goes up and down - we're all nursery nurses at the end of the day!"



Flexible learning

"We're flexible with our routines," Sam says. "Take the painting this morning - the children were all really enjoying it, so we let them carry on. But equally, out of a group of 16 you might find only four are interested in an activity - in that case, one member of staff would stay with them while the others go outside or try something else. I think that was another thing that Ofsted picked up on."



Staff numbers

"We've always been very strict on our ratios," Karl says, when asked about the government's proposed changes to staff numbers. "It will be interesting to see if it does assist parents with the cost of childcare."

"We know the way we're working now works," Sam adds. "We've got the supernumerary staff to provide support when and where it's needed, we've got the capacity to provide one-to-one support."



recent celebration of Hindu festival Saraswati Puja again proved popular, and was organised with parental support: "There was a lot of interest, and not just from the Indian families," Sam says. "We sent home activity ideas, we had children who made garlands of lotus flowers, veenas [*a type of Indian guitar, for the uninitiated - Ed.*] - the response was overwhelming. Two of our families then invited us to their Saraswati Puja celebrations, so Tina and I went along and joined in, which was really enriching."

4 Engaging parents

Sam and her team have an excellent relationship with parents: "We don't really advertise for places," Sam says, "because we fill up, and we always have done, on recommendation. That makes you think, 'We're obviously doing something right!'"

But good relationships aren't built up by accident, and the nursery's 'culture sharing' initiatives are only part of the story. Parental engagement is everywhere, from daily information sheets that accompany verbal hand-overs at the end of the day, to annual individual learning plan meetings and quarterly progress reviews. Parents are spoken to about ways their children's learning can be extended at home, and supported with weekend activities based on what has gone on in the setting in the preceding days. Links with home are also forged with the help of Travelling Trunky, a



Building a team

At Caring Kindergartens, considerable efforts are made to develop staff and to keep them. A comprehensive, six-month induction process, with monthly progress reviews, helps to communicate the group's high expectations and explain the thinking behind its particular take on best practice, and professional development remains a constant focus. Sam endeavours to both source the training that will strengthen the setting's provision and help progress individual team members' careers. "A lot of our staff, including Tina and Nicky, joined us with no qualifications, did their CCE, did their Level 2 and 3 NVQ, and have developed with the company," she offers by way of example. "We look at who's where in their career, and work out how they could go further; I've got two staff who want to do their Level 3 and the company is paying for their courses,



which will bring all of our staff up to a minimum of Level 3. If you find the right person, it's important to support potential."



We really **appreciate** parents coming in to **talk** about their **background**, their **experiences**, and to tell us **how** we can better **support** them

KARL GOODRIDGE, AREA MANAGER

scaled-down version of Caring Kindergarten's elephantine mascot, who can accompany children on their travels.

There are parent questionnaires, an extremely popular Nativity performance – "We put on an extra performance for grandparents, which came from listening to the parents; so many asked for extra tickets!" – and a summer show planned for later in the year, to take advantage of the newly refurbished garden and its wooden stage. Last but by no means least, an enthusiastic response to a talk Sam gave at a parents evening has led to a series of workshops for mums and dads. The first held, on the revised EYFS, took place at the end of last year, and more, on topics such as behaviour and letters and sounds, are set to follow. "We're putting on two dates for each one," Sam explains. "It keeps the groups small, which allows us to talk to the parents as individuals, and it means there's flexibility for them too."

Of the strong relationships the nursery enjoys with parents, Sam admits it's something staff have to work at. "They haven't just happened," she says. "It's taken time and persistence, us letting them know that we need their involvement. There will

always be parents you don't have to ask, but some you have to encourage!"

5 Wellbeing & involvement

Alongside parental engagement, a recognition of every child's individuality lies at the heart of Caring Kindergartens' provision. Amongst the many ways in which this is translated into practice is the nursery's use of the Leuven wellbeing and involvement scales. "We've used the Leuven scale since day one," Sam says. "There's a grading scale of 1-5 with guidance about what is expected of a child at each level. If a child falls between 1-3 we discuss the reasons why, and our SENCO then puts targets in place to support them.

"Nine times out of 10, if we have a child on review it's because they're new to nursery and are settling in – or it may be because of a change at home. But in some cases our observations can pick up on SEN in children, and indicate that a care plan is needed. In those cases, it allows us to put our good practice in individually to that child, to build up their self-esteem, self-image and confidence with lots of praise."

6 Transition time

It's not only children's time in nursery that occupies Sam and her team's attentions; their transition to Reception and ability to cope in a primary school environment is also a key focus: "They go from being the big fish to the smallest in the pond, there's a massive ratio change; it must be so daunting," she says. "Last year, our eldest girl here went up to school, the most confident girl I've ever met, and it took her until the second half of the term to settle. It was a big shock. It made me think we need to do everything we can to give them confidence, to help them fit into their new setting."

Her team's approach includes the use of learning folders designed to give children a head start when they make the step up. "The folders are all about helping the children to learn their phonics, blending and that sort of thing, and number recognition," Sam explains. "We have an ideas leaflet that we put together to help parents use the same methods we use at nursery – so it's not a case of sitting them down with a pen and paper and trying to get them to write, it's about playing games and sensory experiences: getting children to draw letters with their fingers onto a bright bit of paper at the bottom of a tray of gloop or flour, or looking at the numbers in their environment. It's taken off unbelievably. With the parents doing it at home, in a fun way, and us doing it here, it really makes a difference."