



“The children learn so much more from being outside...”

Shunning the convenience of a cosy nursery room to spend all day in the fields or woods isn't everybody's cup of tea, but for Sandra Roles and the practitioners of Dimples Day Nursery, nothing beats the outdoor life...

Sometimes the modern world, and the modern world in Britain, in particular, seems to have evolved to discourage us from venturing outside. Increasingly alluring technology drags the gaze from window to glowing screen and the bottomless pit of information both useful and useless that is the Internet; fears about stranger danger and busy roads stoked by the media prompt parents to keep children safely where they can see them. And then of course there's the weather, about which the less is said the better (the glorious July I'm currently admiring through the office window notwithstanding). All of which is a shame in the opinion of Sandra Roles, the owner and manager of Dimples Day Nursery in Kent.

More than anything it's Sandra's belief in the health, educational and

developmental benefits of time spent outdoors that have shaped her setting's approach to childcare. Whereas staff at 'outstanding' nurseries invariably acknowledge the importance of getting children out into the fresh air, instinct plus a great deal of thought and training has seen Sandra place heading outside at the heart of Dimples' provision; it dominates every day's schedule come rain or shine, and – thanks, too, to expanses of grass on site, and the proximity of local woodland – is providing attendees of the 174-place setting with a brand of early education seldom found elsewhere.



The reason that we maintain our 'outstanding' is that we still know the children; we're not a detached management that sits in the office all day

SANDRA ROLES, OWNER AND MANAGER

With three consecutive 'outstandings' to its name, the most recent earned following inspection under Ofsted's new, tougher framework in April this year, Dimples is proof that there's more than one way to deliver high-quality care and early education...

1 Ground work

Occupying what was once the site of a stable, with land totalling eight acres, Dimples Day Nursery opened in 2002 with two members of staff and 11 children – the culmination of a reinvention of the site and a change in career. "I used to produce show ponies here for my children," Sandra explains as we talk about the nursery's beginnings. "When I decided I didn't want to continue that, I went to work in a special needs school. I trained as a TA, and really enjoyed the developmental side of the role, particularly in the case of the younger children as I came to appreciate the impact what happened in the first five years had on what happened later.

"After a short while I started my Level 3, and became really interested in early years. At that point – it was about 13 years ago, now – I started to look at the market and realised that, actually, childcare was a growing industry and there was a huge need in Dartford for good nurseries.

"Stupidly I assumed the biggest milestone would be getting the planning permission," she admits, "but it was financing the work we needed to do that was tough. I managed to get a grant from Defra as this was a redundant farm building and I was converting it into a viable business. I don't really remember how I managed to get it all done – I was still working and trying to do this in my spare time, but eventually the nursery just took over!"

Expansion of site and staff team soon followed: an extension was added, taking the setting to 71 places, before the stables themselves were converted in 2007 – "When we opened there were still horses in them!" – and that number rose to 108. The addition of a portacabin and changes upstairs in the main building account for the 66 added since. "I could probably have two or three more rooms and fill them," Sandra, who today manages a team of 58, says. "We're unique – there's not another nursery in the area with as much ground as us, or with such a focus on the outdoors. There's definitely a demand for it."

2 Taking risks

With its abundance of space, which includes open fields accessible at its rear, Dimples occupies a site almost tailor-made for its educational approach, but it was Sandra's own experience of growing up, parenthood and the value of risk-taking that



Talking points



Keep it in mind

Practitioners at Dimples no longer plan in writing. "The things staff plan in their heads are usually more relevant, because they're ideas that might only have occurred 10 minutes before they're tried," Sandra explains. "We thought, what's the point of writing everything down? What practitioners need to do instead is be descriptive about the learning that took place in their observations, and then the next steps need to be strong."



Families welcome

Strong parental partnerships are a key part of Dimples' success – during the week of *TN's* visit whole families have been walking to the woods as part of 'Dad's week'. "I've heard other managers say 'Our parents just don't come in', but it's about persevering," Sandra says. "It's taken us time to create this ethos; you only have to get one parent in, then that creates a bit of peer pressure!"



Affordable for all

Despite the setting's expansive grounds, and the considerable and ongoing investment being made into its facilities, Sandra has endeavoured to keep her nursery's fees affordable. "I've been doing a few more boot fairs recently!" she admits. "I only buy good quality stuff, but we can save a lot of money doing that. We also bartered to reduce our food, electricity and insurance bills."



Kids on the go!

Dimples is clearly a healthy place to grow up – and it's all thanks to good food and lots of exercise. "We really push healthy eating, we have no obese children at all," Sandra tells us. "They walk to the library, which is 45 minutes away, come back through the country park and still have the energy to play!"



set the nursery on its path. "I like to think we take the best bits from all the different early years theories, but from the beginning I wanted to have a focus on the outdoors," she says. "My children grew up on a farm and while I wasn't reckless, I didn't bat an eyelid about them climbing haystacks or going to muck out the ponies when they were two-and-a-half, because my parents had been the same with me."

"I wasn't trained at the time, but I brought that instinct to the nursery from the beginning, and over the years we've become more and more focused on the outdoors. When we first opened we'd get parents saying 'We don't want them to get muddy' and we'd go along with their wishes, but we slowly began to realise that we knew what we were talking about. Now I feel I can really push it because we have trained staff and the academic knowledge to say, 'Actually, if you look at this model or that country, this is really important'. When people come to look round, we tell them that we're an outdoor nursery, that we encourage risk taking – the children go to the woods, they climb trees, they do wood work. If someone visits and isn't sure, we recommend they don't sign up because their child will miss out – they'll be the only one staying back in the room."

There's no shortage of activity outdoors on the day of *TN's* visit, that's for certain. Every room at Dimples has its own garden – into which all but the very youngest can free-flow – equipped with canopies to prevent heavy rain from spoiling the fun; alongside these spaces are the nursery's communal Music garden and Rainbow garden, which provide extra room and enticements for children to make use of. There's a large fallen log to clamber on and jump off, a Teletubby-style hill to walk up and roll down, sand to dig in, tree stumps to sit on, and a willow arch to take a break



OUTSIDE ALL AGES

It's not just how often children go outside at Dimples that impresses, it's how many, too. Sandra and her team put a lot of effort into providing opportunities for virtually all age groups to regularly head out into the fresh air. From three months-old upwards, every child at Dimples spends the majority of his or her time out in the sun or rain, in the gardens, on the field or in the woods.

Sandra acknowledges that in the case of babies in particular, the amount of effort required to leave the convenience of the rooms behind can be off-putting, but in her opinion all practitioners need to do is get organised. "Sometimes it takes an hour for us to get the field set up, because you have to take the nappies and the milks - and our practitioners are in and out the whole time as they have to come in and heat the bottles up - but it doesn't stop them. The children can still have the whole day in the field, it just means more planning."

beneath. All weather surfaces are deployed alongside natural grass and overgrown areas - and then there's the aforementioned field and all the possibilities its expanse presents...

3 Letting children lead

Being outdoors is important but it's not enough in and of itself - what children are allowed and supported to accomplish while there is a key part of the equation too. There is a firm emphasis on child-initiated learning at Dimples, backed up by an understanding of how children's interests can be harnessed to extend their knowledge, and an acknowledgement of the importance of simple play. "For our preschool children we allow unsupervised play for up to five minutes," Sandra says with regard to the latter. "They're never out of sight or earshot, but if children are playing beautifully outside and the phone goes, the practitioner won't say, 'Right, everybody inside'. It's only the same as leaving your children in the sitting room while you go to cook the dinner - we need to have trust in children's abilities."

When it comes to more formalised activity, be it outside or in, Sandra stresses that first and foremost practitioners must know their children in order to be able to offer resources that will engage them, but also warns about the risk of providing too many options - as she puts it, "sometimes less is more". She also highlights the value of giving children time: "That's something we've spent a lot of time talking to staff about - if children are really engrossed in something, leave them to it; see how far it can go."

Finally, Sandra counsels, "let children's

questions lead the way". By way of example she describes an occasion last year when a trip to the woods led to the chance discovery of a dead slow-worm, and - driven by the children's fascination - staff dissected it back at the nursery. "They spent ages doing it, they talked about hearts beating and exercise," she remembers. "It started as a child-initiated activity, but knowing when to intervene enabled staff to facilitate their learning. Afterwards they even went to the butchers and bought a lamb's heart and pig's eye, and looked at them too."

4 Can-do attitude

Learning opportunities such as the example described above are dependent upon a confident and knowledgeable staff team, a fact Sandra is well aware of. "My staff are my biggest asset," she says. "It doesn't matter how beautiful this building is, how great my gardens are - the fact that we're only 25 minutes from the woods and the country park - if my staff aren't enthusiastic, highly skilled and highly motivated, it doesn't mean anything."

"The way I run the nursery involves telling

each room that they are their own mini nursery. There is a team leader and a deputy in charge, and as long as they follow the nursery ethos and I okay the budget, they can pretty much do what they like. They'll often come to me and say, 'We've got an idea - we've sorted the budget, we've asked the parents, can we do it?' I can't really say no then, can I! But it's great because they do really fantastic stuff. Our preschool team leaders took the children to Hyde Park in November, and they'd costed it out, worked out the transport arrangements and recruited parent volunteers before they asked me. It keeps them coming up with new ideas, it keeps them excited - and the children are never ever bored."

For Sandra, having a team with a can-do attitude is also an important part of meeting children's needs: "If the children say 'Can we do something?' we try to do it," she says. "We don't say no unless it's really a no - if it's a 'no, I don't want to', that's not good enough!"

5 Down to the woods

A forest school ethos is in place throughout Dimples, Sandra tells us, from the baby rooms upwards - reflected in general terms in the manner practitioners use the outdoor environment to allow children to both play and come to understand more about the world around them. "Our children learn that 'Wow, that's a really huge tree' because they're standing underneath it - not because they're looking at it in a book," Sandra says by way of example. "When they're measuring its girth, they can put their arms around it or use a piece of string - they'll be thinking 'that's rough bark', or 'that's smooth bark', so they're learning about nature first-hand."

But in addition to this overarching philosophy, the nursery also offers more formalised forest school sessions, delivered by the three qualified practitioners Sandra has on her staff. Each of the preschool rooms runs regular programmes of six three-hour sessions, offering all children at the setting the chance to experience a range of organised activities. These are usually held in local woods, or on the nursery's field if the weather presents a hazard. Whilst the activities are pre-planned, Sandra and her team make sure that individual interests aren't allowed to fall by the wayside: "Children can still dip in and out," she explains. "If they go to the woods and one or two aren't interested in lighting the fire but are very interested in collecting leaves, there are enough practitioners to ensure that one of them can go and do that with them."

Expanding the setting's forest school provision is high on Sandra's agenda. Trees have been planted on the grounds to bring a flavour of the woods closer to home, and plans are afoot to install two sizeable yurts, which will allow children to spend even more of the year camping out and getting closer to the natural world.



I **relied** a lot on my gut **instinct**, I **think** - a lot of it was how I'd want my own **children** to be **cared** for

SANDRA ROLES, OWNER AND MANAGER