



“We still have the same high expectations...”

The hard work never stops at Kiddi Caru Day Nursery in Harlow, and three ‘outstandings’ in three Ofsted inspections has been its team’s reward. *TN* paid the setting a visit to find out more...

No one ever went into day nursery management for a quiet life. When you’re not doing the rounds of your various rooms, supporting staff, engaging with children and generally getting stuck in like everybody else, you’re probably sat in the office contemplating a lengthy ‘to do’ list that stretches from sourcing training opportunities to marketing, in between answering the phone, opening the door, replying to- well, you get the idea.

“When you starting listing it all, it does seem a lot!” Laura Evans, manager at Kiddi Caru Day Nursery in Harlow, admits as she and deputy manager, Aimee Hume, take *TN* through what keeping an ‘outstanding’ nursery ‘outstanding’ involves on a weekly basis. If you’re in a hurry, ‘hard work’ sums it up quite well, plus ‘flexibility’ and ‘a

willingness to get your hands dirty’...

“This kind of work is unpredictable sometimes,” Aimee continues. “You can plan things, but you can’t know how your day is going to go.”

“You start off nice and clean, then you come out of breakfast covered in Weetabix!” Laura agrees. “Every day is different, but in a nice way.”

Whatever the early years has seen fit to throw into the path of the team at Kiddi Caru Harlow since it opened in 2004 has been expertly handled, a fact evidenced by three consecutive ‘outstandings’ from Ofsted. For Laura, recently appointed as the purpose-built, two-storey setting’s new manager, the challenge is to continue the achievements of her predecessor – luckily, she has plenty of support to help her do just that...

1 **A fresh start**

Taking on the manager’s role at a three-times ‘outstanding’ nursery might daunt some, but while working within a group of settings like Kiddi Caru has been a new experience for Laura, delivering early years excellence has not: “I started my childcare career back in 2001, and the biggest chunk of it so far – eight years – has been spent working in a private day nursery in East London,” she explains. “I was employed as a deputy when it was a brand new setting, worked my way up to manager and in my first year received an ‘outstanding’ Ofsted.

“I started here at the beginning of November last year, just after the nursery received its third ‘outstanding’ – it’s nice as a new manager not to have an imminent inspection to worry about, but having to keep up the good work is its own pressure, and because this is a bigger company there are aspects to this role that are different to what I’ve done before, so I’m still learning!

“What’s helped is the fact that my ethos is the same as what the company has, and what the team here already had before I arrived – they could see that I wasn’t going to come in and try to change everything overnight, and we’re working together to maintain the high standards.”

Like Laura, Aimee started life in the early years working in a small, privately-run

Talking points



Positive experiences

The nursery provides a host of opportunities for parents to get involved in the life of the setting, amongst them its experience mornings. "Often, because of work, parents don't get to see what we do during the day," Aimee says, "so we give them the chance to come along on a Saturday morning with their children at least twice a year."



Outdoor opportunities

"We want to enhance our outdoor provision next; we've got so much lovely space out there, so we're looking into how we can develop it further," Laura says when asked about her plans for the future. "Our downstairs rooms have direct access to the outdoors, so we want to work on extending the learning, and doing it all year round."



A group effort

Kiddi Caru opened for business in 1998 and operates 20 settings in England, 30 per cent of which are currently rated 'outstanding'. "There's a focus on quality over quantity," Laura says of the company, "and the support from head office, and our other nurseries, is fantastic. There's always someone at the end of the phone, and we get regular input, feedback and training."



Ongoing learning

"I've definitely found my degree useful," Laura says. "The theory can be put into practice - you read something, and think, 'That's quite useful', or 'That's a good idea, we can adapt that, or look at that in more detail'. Now I'm supporting the girls with their training, sharing books and planning."



nursery; unlike her, she has been with Kiddi Caru Harlow since its doors opened, starting out as a senior practitioner and progressing to deputy manager in the years since. The balance of new and established in the management team is reflected in the staff as a whole, and Aimee believes this is one of the nursery's strengths: "There's three of us who are still here from the very beginning," she explains, "some of our nursery practitioners only qualified last year and are new to the role, and others have been here for five or six years. We have consistency, good levels of experience, and a range of ages in the team, which works really well."

2 Professional development

"To be 'outstanding' we need to have 'outstanding' childcare practitioners," Aimee says, as we talk about why the nursery has excelled, "so it comes back to how we recruit and the training opportunities we offer. We have high standards, and high expectations of our team - for us, to be a fully qualified nursery practitioner you need to have a Level 3 or above; those with a Level 2 we class as nursery assistants. At interviews for new staff, if they're not qualified, we ask them what they want to do - you can tell who are the enthusiastic ones! Experience does count for a lot, but having a qualification and the knowledge that provides goes a long way."

It's a sentiment that's reflected in



practice throughout the setting; apprenticeships are offered on a yearly basis, helping those starting out in the childcare sector to gain a solid foundation, whilst at the opposite end of the spectrum, two members of staff, including Laura, have a Foundation degree, and another Qualified Teacher Status. There's an emphasis on continuing professional development at all levels, with training covering the full gamut of nursery education and management.

3 The right attitude

'The management team communicates ambition and drive,' notes Kiddi Caru Harlow's 2012 inspection report, and speaking to Laura and Aimee it's clear how much importance they place on generating a sense of enthusiasm and positivity amongst their team. "The enthusiasm's got to come from us, because if we're not enthusiastic the staff aren't likely to be either," Laura explains. "Being a face on the



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practitioners, so it comes back to how we recruit and the training we offer

AIMEE HUME, DEPUTY MANAGER



It's important to encourage staff, because it can be quite daunting taking on training – it's good to hear, 'You can do it, you can achieve it!'

LAURA EVANS, MANAGER

shop floor, having that presence, helps – while I'm office-based, I'm constantly popping into the rooms. It's important to model the best practice that you want to see, and praise staff when you see it. It might be a small thing that you're celebrating, but it makes a massive difference."

"Just saying something like, 'That display looks really good', gives you a lift," Aimee agrees.

"And passing on parent comments, too," Laura adds. "When you hear, 'So and so was really helpful today', feeding that back to staff gives them a real boost."

"The way we look at it," Aimee says of the importance of attitude, "is that children don't have a choice whether they come here every day, but we do; therefore, we have to give them the best possible time here that we can. Our staff take that on board, they do it, they're mature enough to leave any problems at the door, and they have fun too."

The strong team ethos that exists at the nursery is encouraged both through the accessibility of management – "Being approachable is really important," Aimee says, "we always keep our office door open, and if anyone's got a question, they ask" – and the involvement of staff in the decision-making process.

"We have a big team network, from us to our senior practitioners, then our deputy practitioners, then our nursery practitioners," Laura says on the latter. "There's a hierarchy, but everyone works together to get that 'outstanding'. We have our seniors meetings so we can relay back to senior staff where we're at and what our next goal is, and then they relay that back to the team. At the same time, we're monitoring how things are going – listening to what staff have noticed and what they'd like to implement."

4 Individual interests

One of the hallmarks of every 'outstanding' nursery is its focus on the needs of each of its children as individuals, and Kiddi Caru Harlow is no exception. Efforts to provide the best support to each child begin before they have even started at the setting: "Prior to a child starting we sit down with their parents to create a learning map; we find out their interests, what they're into at home – what their learning style is, really," Aimee says. "And they're ongoing; when one's

full up, we do another one, covering what the child's interests were previously, what they are now, and how we can extend them."

This attention to detail ensures that each child's key person is tuned in to their needs and can, in turn, communicate them to others, including bank staff who may be less familiar with the children. Activities are planned on an individual basis, and regular thought is given to how each can be extended, so learning is continually being developed.

"We try to get the most out of our children," Aimee continues. "If they ask a question, we never say, 'I don't know', it's 'Let's find out'. We quite often get visits in the office because they want to looking something up online."

"The other day they wanted to know what bedbugs look like, before that it was, 'Do fish have teeth?'," Laura adds. "It sounds random, but we use their interests to extend their knowledge."

The nursery's predominantly child-led approach extends to the diverse selection of 'all inclusive activities' it offers, too. Comprising French, Sing and Sign, Yoga, Cooking, Treasure Basket Play, and Music and Movement, all six common to every setting in the Kiddi Caru group, they're introduced where possible throughout the day rather than in discrete sessions: "We sign at mealtimes, and use French words throughout the day," Laura says by way of example.

5 Best behaviour

The good behaviour of children in the setting is a recurring theme in Kiddi Caru Harlow's inspection reports, so what's the team's secret? "I think a lot of it is liaising with your parents," Laura says. "Sometimes you'll find a problem will occur because something's going on at home."

"And prevention is better than cure," Aimee continues. "If the children are engaged, you'll tend to find they don't have time for any negative behaviour! When you do get it, it's very much a case of distract and redirect; so rather than, 'No, don't do this', it's 'Do this instead!' With our older children, we talk to them about the importance of being nice to our friends and that sort of thing, and they do understand."

"It's part of our interview process, too," Laura says: "What would you do in such and such a scenario; how would you respond?; and we have a behaviour management coordinator."