

first impressions

Ofsted might say your setting has 'outstanding' qualities, but if a child's first experience of it is 'unsatisfactory' that's not *good* at all, says **Adele Devine...**



Imagine you are in a restaurant. The cutlery looks dirty and your glass is kind of cloudy. As you take in the dilapidated décor you are half expecting to see Gordon Ramsay and the crew of *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* appear. When the food eventually arrives it looks like a cheap microwave meal. So, do you...

- a)** kick up a fuss, refuse to pay and ensure every other diner knows why;
- b)** shuffle the food about a bit and leave quietly, but never eat there again; or
- c)** decide you hate restaurants and swear you will never set foot in one again?

The third option seems extreme, but to a child who's never experienced fine dining it might make most sense.

Apply this logic to your setting. Think of a child's first impression. Imagine a sound sensitive child arrives when it's most busy. Next they are expected to say goodbye to Mum, knowing that when she leaves they will be stranded. Fear and panic could quickly descend.

The child settles after a while, but they did not like the arrival or separation. In fact they may take this even further (as children can). They are not going to like school. Every teacher that follows could have a battle on their hands because of that first bad experience.

A good start

There are simple things you can do to ensure that children with special educational needs have a positive first experience of your setting...

- 1** Gather information about likes, dislikes, fears and comforters.
- 2** Suggest children bring in a favourite (non-breakable) toy from home.
- 3** Offer an initial taster visit when there are no other children around.
- 4** Stagger start times so sensitive children can avoid the masses.
- 5** Avoid shutting Mum off at the door. Suggest she stay while the child settles.
- 6** Create quieter areas and access to outside space away from the throng.
- 7** Kneel down to the child's level when speaking - it's less intimidating.
- 8** Use stickers and rewards. Be overly positive and enthusiastic.
- 9** Use Makaton signs, visuals, simple language and a consistent calm voice.
- 10** Build the child's trust and show empathy for things they might find tricky.

CASE STUDY

A Tale of Two Settings – Ronnie (Age 3, Diagnosis: Aspergers Syndrome)

Nursery Nightmare!

Ronnie was eyeing the entrance with trepidation amidst the bustle of children getting their coats and bags on pegs. A little girl was crying and protesting about going through the door, and her mum was trying to comfort and cajole her. Mrs Simms took the girl's hand and said in a matter of fact way, "Those are crocodile tears. She will stop as soon as you leave". She waved to an



about the author

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Every **teacher** that follows could have a battle on their hands because of that **first bad experience**

assistant, who led the now sobbing girl away. The mum left, but was visibly concerned.

Ronnie could see through a window that the girl was still crying. He took his coat back off the peg. "I'm not going in," he said with absolute conviction.

Ronnie's mum paused. She knew she was in for a battle and didn't want a big scene in front of the other parents. Ronnie was soon the only child in the cloakroom. He had put his coat on and his dinosaur rucksack was on his back. His arms were folded tightly and his hands were clenched in strong fist grips preventing Mum's efforts to get things back on the peg. Mrs Simms could see she had another little protester. "Come on in. It's time to say good bye to Mummy now," she said.

"No." Ronnie was defiant. "I don't like you. I'm going home." Mum saw the flicker of annoyance in Mrs Simms eyes. This was not a great start.

"Mum is going home," Mrs Simms said firmly. "Ronnie is staying at preschool." She opened the outside door and ushered Mum out.

Ronnie's eyes filled with tears.

From then on every morning there was a battle. Ronnie did not want to go to preschool. He said Mrs Simms was stupid and she told lies. In fact Ronnie was so unhappy that his mum eventually found him a placement in a different nursery.

A Nursery full of Dinosaurs!

Mrs May knew a lot about Ronnie before he arrived because she'd met with his parents

and they'd had a long chat. She knew he loved dinosaurs and books. She was aware that the sandpit might be an issue, and that sharing toys could require some supervision. She was also aware that saying goodbye to Mum at the door had been a big problem in the past.

Mrs May had suggested Ronnie arrive on his first day half an hour later than the other children. That way, she explained, he wouldn't have to deal with the hustle and bustle. She suggested that Mum come in with him, stay for as long as she wanted and leave when she knew he was comfortable.

Ronnie and his mum arrived at the preschool. They found his peg. Ronnie was chuffed to see the dinosaur next to his name. "Look, Mummy. There's a T Rex," he said with a smile.

Mum felt instant relief! Mrs May came out to greet them with a big, warm smile. She knelt down and introduced herself to Ronnie at his level. "I've got more dinosaurs in there and I've been trying to find out the different names from this book. I want to make sure I don't put the herbivores with the carnivores."

Ronnie smiled right back at her and was totally enthused, "I can help you," he offered. "I know all about dinosaurs." Mum followed, but actually felt like she could have left there and then. She watched for a while as Ronnie became engaged in his dinosaur heaven, naming them all and happily lining them up, leaning in for a closer look and flapping his hands in delight.

After a while Mrs May introduced another child to play alongside Ronnie with a set of plastic animals.

Mum had already prepped Ronnie that she would stay for a bit. Once he was busy having fun she might go home and then collect him before lunch. Ronnie saw that his mum was making an exit, but was far too absorbed in his dinosaurs to be bothered. Mum blew him a quick kiss and left. She could have hugged Mrs May.

As Mum left, her eyes filled with tears. What a relief to know that her complex little man was in good hands!

Final thoughts

First impressions are so important - each child should rate your setting as 'outstanding' from the moment they walk through the door.



RESOURCES

YOU CAN PRINT FREE PERSONALISED PEGS LABELS WITH PERSONAL MOTIVATORS AT SENASSIST.COM/LABELS.HTML



Ronnie Black



Sophie Simpson



Rose Taylor



Oliver Bishop