

Help me, I'm learning...

What kind of experience do students have at your setting? If it's one that may leave them considering their career options, you need to think again, says **Wendy Bowkett...**

Being a student in a new environment is nerve-wracking and thought-provoking. I can still remember my very first experience way back in the early 70s - it nearly put me off teaching as a career. I was introduced by the class teacher to 25 four- and five-year-olds as a student, given the register and told "I'll go and get a coffee while you find out who is who"! It was the first time (although not the last) that I'd been so unsure of myself that I just wanted to run. However, it did help me later on, having given me an insight into 'what not to do' when a student comes into your preschool setting.

Later the same day, when the teacher had returned with her mug of coffee and told me what her expectations of me were, I remember thinking, "How am I going to do all the activities, observations and studies I need to do to please my college tutors in the situation I'm in?" I was there as a trainee and was to do as asked. To make matters even tougher there were new people to meet, and routines, policies and procedures

to get to know, learn and understand in a completely alien environment. And, of course, there were lots of unfamiliar children, too, who, however young they were, knew I was new, inexperienced and nervous...

It never ceases to amaze me how children pick up on the fact that you are still learning. How do children as young as six months know you probably haven't had much experience of occupying and amusing a baby, let alone feeding, changing a nappy or settling one down to sleep, and as a result manage to put you through your paces? What is it that lets two-year-olds know that you haven't a clue about what to do if they pull their companion's hair, bite an arm or have a real temper tantrum, and so try one or all of the above just to test you? Three-year-olds seem to understand that you won't have tuned in to the idea of consistency and 'the rules of the house', and lead you round in circles. And as for four-year-olds... They know everything there is to know about trying out students!

In at the deep end

I have worked in several preschool environments where students from numerous different courses have come to

train, learn or experience. Nurses, speech therapists and physiotherapists, NNEBs, NVQs, BTECs and pupils from schools on work experience all arrive with the requirements from their college, school or university as well as their own agendas, experiences and expectations. Their experience, the way they are treated and their overall impressions may well affect their future careers, for good or ill.

Making a student feel welcome helps enormously with his or her initial impressions and feelings. Having asked lots of students their thoughts on work experiences, I've come to realise that most dislike being thrown in at the deep end without a mentor or someone to shadow. To illustrate what I mean, consider the following scenarios:

■ *"Just spend some time getting to know the children and I'll chat with you later," a member of staff said to a 16-year-old on work experience. She hadn't been introduced to the children, and didn't know their ages or abilities, never mind their names. The practitioner in the room was busy chatting with a parent and once finished said, "Oh, I didn't know I was having you today".*

■ *"I'll take you to the staff room where it's quieter, follow me. These are our policies and procedures and should be read before you leave today. Familiarise yourself with the fire drill and health and safety policies first, as they are very important. I'll be back in a while - if you have any questions, just ask. Oh, and you can put your coat over that chair, I'll show you the cloakroom later," said a deputy manager to an NNEB before disappearing. After an hour of reading the NNEB needed to use the bathroom but was hesitant to leave the room as she didn't know where to go.."*

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These are just two examples from a dozen more 'first minutes' that staff team members, students and I have experienced. Put yourself in those students' shoes. What would your impressions be of those two introductions to a preschool setting? Would you feel valued or needed? Bombarded with the 'wrong' initial information? Like a spare part? Staff too busy to bother with you?

There are many things you, as a student, may prefer to know on setting foot in the building – perhaps where the staff toilet is or where you could put your belongings; whether or not you have a lunch hour, and should you have brought your own lunch or do you sit/eat with the children; are you

allowed to make notes/observations in front of the children or should they be written up later; will you be with one person throughout your stay or will you be able to experience all the age groups; will you be directed to do various activities or able to do your own thing? The list goes on and on.

Most students feel the need to be guided for a couple of days at least and be introduced to a member of staff they can go to for assistance. This really helps to build their confidence.

Support from the off

When I opened my own nursery, we as a team thought about our policies and procedures, and the ways in which we could make parents and students feel included. We already had an introductory booklet for parents, informing them of room layout,

the activities available in each area of the setting, and details of where to find information relating to

their child's development, etc. Parents had said

how useful and informative the

booklet was, so we thought a similar booklet would help students.

Details about each room's activities, along with a floor plan, were added, as were a timetable and staff rota, fire drill procedure and 'ICE' (In Case of Emergencies) information. The information helped students orientate themselves to their

surroundings, so that if a new box of tissues or crayons were required, or a child needed to be taken to the bathroom, a student could find their way without having to ask directions or feeling they were likely to become lost. The booklet also explained why routines, timetables and staff shifts were in place, and when students would have time to do their activities, observations and paperwork, helping the nursery run more smoothly.

A student's first day was planned. The first staff member to open the door to a student would show them where their personal belongings could be kept securely in the staff room, and then begin a guided tour around the nursery, including visits to the garden, pets and staff cloakroom. Introductions to each staff member (all of whom would wear a self-adhesive name badge) were made as the tour continued. We always introduced students to parents and visitors, feeling that it went a long way in creating a sense of belonging and respect on both sides. The student was then left in the staffroom to read the fire drill procedure and other relevant documents, after which they were asked to write comments and notes in their booklet for their own use. Then a senior member of staff would answer any questions or suggestions, and the student would be asked what they hoped to gain from being at our nursery. Finally, the student would be introduced to their 'mentor' and left in his or her capable hands.

The booklet was often revised, as comments, questions and answers were received and given that we felt would help other students during their stay with us. It was just one way we found of helping our students feel that their presence was valued.



about the author

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to *Teach Nursery*, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.