



# *We want to be the best*

*Providing ‘outstanding’ childcare and early education, for every child, at an affordable price – the team at **The Rochford Day Nursery** aren’t afraid to set themselves ambitious targets, as TN discovered...*

THE ROCHFORD DAY NURSERY HAS come a long way in its near-14-year history. “I knew nothing at all – the only experience I’d had was dropping off my daughter at nursery and picking her up in the evening,” co-owner Michael Bradley admits of the very early days. But armed with a determination to do things the right way, not just the profitable way, he and his wife, Tracey, have built up a successful business that’s going above and beyond to meet the needs of its families. In recent times, under the leadership of joint managers Tatia Singleton and Christina Murphy, the setting has received two ‘outstanding’ grades from Ofsted, and its whole team are determined to maintain the high standards it can boast of.

It wasn’t until the birth of his daughter and, soon after, redundancy from a job in the city that nursery ownership first entered Michael’s

thoughts. “When the time came to find work I happened to be looking round at various nurseries for our little girl,” he explains. “A lot of them weren’t up to the standards we wanted, so I thought, ‘I can do that!’” A visit to Southend social services followed, then a search for a property, which turned up the ideally placed – directly opposite a mainline train station, in a prominent part of town – but at that time derelict building the nursery still occupies. “Between us acquiring the building and opening our doors it was probably four months,” Michael remembers, “so it was pretty quick. But everything needed doing, everything. We employed one builder – I was his mate – and we gutted it, put new flooring in, new partitions, and basically did it up. The morning we opened we were still laying slabs...”

“We started off with three

members of staff and two kids. It was a bit worrying. Money was a big issue; we had to re-mortgage everything and borrow from everyone. But in many ways it wasn’t so daunting because we didn’t know what we were letting ourselves in for – if we’d known then what we do now! We soon started to grow but there have been loads of challenges to get to where we are today; it’s just been a case of taking them on the chin and working out how to deal with them.”

## ***Hands-on owners***

Even as the nursery’s home was coming together, Michael and Tracey made the decision to play a hands-on role in their new business, gaining Level 3 qualifications to enable them to work with the children. “In the early days I did absolutely everything, working in the rooms, changing the nappies – I

## TALKING POINTS

### 1 Best practice

What are you most proud of? “How we prepare children for going to school – that’s a big one,” Michael says. “The feedback we get from local primaries is really good.”

“And seeing the young children grow through the nursery; it’s a lovely feeling,” Christina adds.

“For me it’s our relationship with parents,” Tatia says. “We have a professional but very friendly atmosphere; we couldn’t do what we do without them.”



was down as manager at one point,” Michael, who received NDNA’s ‘Childcarer of the Year Award’ in 2007, explains. “It was a steep learning curve, but because I’ve done absolutely every role, I know now what the staff go through and what’s needed.”

Today Michael and Tracey have taken a step back. Though Michael continues to play an important supporting role (from working with staff to unblocking the drains), Tatia and Christina have run the nursery on a day-to-day basis for the last two years. Their combined expertise has seen the nursery develop further, culminating in ‘outstanding’ inspections in both 2013 and 2014. Both hold Early Years Professional Status and share Michael and Tracey’s commitment to providing quality childcare.

Tatia, a former social worker in the States before she moved to the UK and fell in love with the early years, and Christina, who has worked in the sector since studying for her degree, spent a year as deputy managers



### 2 Little scientists

While staff cover the span of the EYFS in every room, the ‘Lab’ provides a space for children to explore different materials (complete with white coats and clipboards for noting down the results of experiments). “Today we have lemons and limes on the table to squeeze and peel, plus our frozen dinosaur eggs: balloons filled with water, dinosaurs and glitter!” Tatia says.

before making the step up – Tatia at The Rochford Day Nursery, Christina at Michael and Tracey’s other setting, The Wishing Well Day Nursery, also in Rochford. Tatia takes up the story: “I remember Michael saying, ‘Do you think you guys could work together?’ We said, ‘We’ll manage!’ Christina came down, and while we both had different ideas we had the same ethos, the same idea of what good practice is. We gelled from the beginning, and we had Michael’s support as well.”

It proved to be a winning combination. Only three months after Tatia and Christina took the reins, the setting received its first ‘outstanding’ rating. Asked about the reasons for the success they’ve enjoyed, both they and Michael point to the effective communication that exists between the members of the leadership team, and the leadership team and staff, which keeps everybody moving in the right direction. “We don’t always agree about everything but we talk it through,” Michael says of the former. “I think we’ve all got something to bring; we’ve all got our own skills.” On the latter, he puts it bluntly: “A nursery is only as good as its staff – you can have the best equipment, the best grounds, but if you’ve got rubbish staff, the nursery’s going to be rubbish. So we have continuous supervisions with each member of the team, which help us pick up anything we need to work on. We use our staff meetings for training: they’re not very long – everyone’s been working very hard, so

### 3 Room to grow

Eighteen months after The Rochford Day Nursery opened, the old school house next door came onto the market and the setting expanded. “We couldn’t afford it, but it was an opportunity we couldn’t miss,” Michael says. Over time the buildings were joined, creating added capacity. But numbers are kept below a theoretical maximum to help maintain the setting’s good practice.



you don’t want to be sat there for the next two hours listening to someone droning on – but they’re productive.”

For Tatia and Christina, maintaining high standards means playing a hands-on role throughout the setting and focusing in on the minutiae, an



## 4 Embracing inspection

Should you fear the inspectors? Not in Michael's opinion: "They're not there to catch you out, that's the bottom line," he says. "In 14 years, all of my experiences with them have been positive. I've found them very helpful – some of them have come in and said, 'Oh this is good, but have you thought about doing this?'"

## 5 Sensory exploration

The nursery's long-standing and ever-evolving sensory room, created by SpaceKraft, brings an added dimension to every child's learning – and is employed by outside agencies too. Small groups visit to work towards specific learning goals, enjoy yoga classes, and, sometimes, just relax. "It is expensive," Michael says of the equipment, "but it's definitely worthwhile."



approach they feel their EYPS means they're well qualified to take. "I love nothing more than being in the rooms, joining in activities or giving ideas to the guys because we basically want to lead by example," Tatia says.

"It's about training staff as well," Christina says. "We might walk through a room and see something and say 'Try this, try this'. It might be a little thing but..."

"...the detail is where the important things happen," Tatia agrees. "You've

got basic provision but how do you take it up a notch? And that's what we do."

Being 'outstanding', they tell us, means being aware of the things that need to improve: "The way we work is through self-evaluation, so we're very honest about problems," Tatia says. "We look at every area of practice: this needs this, this and this, right down to very little things, and we set a weekly action plan to work on. We're always asking 'Can we do it better? How can it be improved next time?' It's okay to know you're 'outstanding', but you need to realise there's always still a way to go!"

Put simply, the team at The Rochford Day Nursery subscribe to the old adage that if you're not moving forward, you're moving backwards – and they're not just saying that: within weeks of receiving their first 'outstanding' they'd changed their planning system, implementing learning journeys, improving on what Ofsted was already more than happy with. "That's what these guys are really good at," Michael tells us. "They do a lot of research in their own time – looking up the latest information, finding out the best way to do this or that. They find out an awful lot through looking at other Ofsted reports, too: people who maybe lost 'outstanding' – why did they lose it? – or who have just got it – why have they got it? It means we always have a good idea of what we need to do."

## MEET THE TEAM



### Michael Bradley, Owner

"We've never turned a child away – it's not what we're about. Over the years we've had a child who had to be fed through a tube, and a girl who was blind; we've financed some places ourselves. We try to go above and beyond."



### Tatia Singleton, Manager

"We're very proud of our staff team. These guys work so hard; they're very passionate. They put up with a lot because we expect a lot, but they do it with a smile because they love what they do."



### Christina Murphy, Manager

"It was nice on the second inspection – we were like 'Oh Ofsted's here, yeah!' It wasn't 'Oh my goodness!'"

We were more than confident the second time; we felt we'd moved forward a long way since they were here before."