



# “We refuse to not do what’s right...”

At Angels at Play only the best is good enough – and that might not always be what’s in the training manual. *TN* spoke to Angela Spencer and Louise Walsh about a three times ‘outstanding’ setting and what makes good childcare...

**J**ust over 20 years ago, Angela Spencer decided that rather than continuing in her office job, liaising with staff taking maternity leave at Glaxo, she would start her own nursery business. The maternity leavers, she explains, weren’t coming back due to a lack of childcare, and armed with that knowledge – and, Angela admits, little else in the way of early years experience – she set up Angels at Play and opened her first setting.

Around nine years ago she opened her third, on Park Road in Ware, Hertfordshire: an expansive, 114-place day nursery located in the somewhat unlikely surroundings of a former canteen and industrial storage building. Under the leadership of manager, Louise Walsh – who started her own career

with the company 19 years ago, straight from college – it’s since been judged ‘outstanding’ three times by Ofsted.

Speaking to Angela and Louise about the growth and development of business and setting alike, what quickly becomes apparent is that the success they’ve enjoyed hasn’t happened by chance. A huge amount of thought and research has gone, and is going, into every aspect of childcare at Angels at Play, built upon firmly held beliefs about what is best for children in the early years, and what will stand them in good stead once they leave for primary school. They have a willingness to tread their own path when they feel that official guidance is lacking, and a motivated and hardworking team behind them to put their approach into practice...

## 1 **A strong team**

With three ‘outstanding’ inspections in eight years, Louise’s time as manager at the Park Road setting could hardly have gone better. In January, she left to take up a role coordinating development across all three of Angels at Play’s nurseries, having worked her way up from nursery nurse. “It was quite daunting being offered the chance to take over here,” she admits, “as it was my first management experience. I was on maternity leave at the time and I remember saying to Angela, ‘I’d love the position, but I’m not sure I can do it’. She said, ‘Don’t doubt yourself – just do it!’”

“We opened the nursery with just six children, believe it or not, but it’s thriving today,” she continues. “We currently have 30 members of staff – and that’s a lot to manage. It’s making sure that you hear everyone – what they want and what they need – that’s the most challenging part of the job. But we worked collectively as a management team to get to ‘outstanding’. All of them – the room supervisors, the catering manager and assistant, the deputy manager – have been here for over 10 years now, which I think is a key factor as it’s enabled us to train new staff members to the standards we require in house.”

The quality of the staff team, Louise makes it clear, lies at the heart of her former nursery’s success, and motivating,

# Talking points



## Getting physical

According to Angela, not enough emphasis is placed on physical skills in the early years. "They're a pre-cursor to cognitive skills," she explains. "Twice a day we have something called 'motivate me': a targeted time for children to do physical activity. It might involve ball skills for coordination or balancing, but we also might do football, tennis or drama. If we want children to develop all round, they need physical stimulation."



## Protecting standards

"We were totally against the proposed ratio changes," Louise says. "The quality of care would have gone down massively, and I worried about health and safety. Nobody asked the fire department about what they felt was safe. Even with the current ratios of 1:3 it's a challenge to get children out; if we'd gone up another one, we'd have been strapping them to our backs!"



## Team building

"When we interview people, we look at them within the rooms and we can see where, and with whom, their personality will fit best – and it's not always where they think they should be!" Louise says. "People have different qualities, and you need those qualities spread out – you can't have them all in one place."



## Doing more

Angela sees a need for society as a whole to do more to set boundaries and instil a sense of self-discipline in children: "We should be insisting on manners, and on presentation. Before the children go home, we have a 'how I look' time. We get mirrors and ask, 'Does your face need wiping?' 'Do you need to brush your hair?' Why wouldn't we encourage children to do that?"



supporting and developing practitioners needs to be a high priority for any setting wishing to excel. "Their drive reflects your drive as manager, so you have to develop enthusiasm; sometimes you have to rein it in too – we don't need a lot of noise all the time!" she explains. "Just as with the children, you have to look at all staff as individuals, to see what they can bring. My belief is that you have to motivate the senior staff so that their enthusiasm filters down – if you don't do that, the staff lower down can get demotivated very quickly. You also have to make sure people feel included; if they don't feel they have a purpose you'll find yourself in a battle."

## 2 Family atmosphere

Another challenge faced by the managers of large nurseries can be fostering the kind of 'family atmosphere' that often comes naturally to smaller settings. For Louise, however, size is not an excuse for compromising on the quality of practitioner/parent relationships. "I didn't want there to be a divide between staff and parents, like you might get at school – I wanted to make it clear that we were very hands-on," she explains. "We have 160 families, which is a lot, but we get to know them very well regardless. Our room supervisors and the staff in the rooms play a key role; you need to ensure that you have the correct people in place to make parents feel that their child is being treated as an individual."

"Our staff will chat to parents about



things other than their children," she says when asked what the secret is to forging strong home links. "They'll ask, 'How's your day been?', or if they've seen that Mum's stressed in the morning, 'Can I help in any way? Is it easier if I come and meet you in the car park?' They might ring or email home just to tell them their child's had 'a really good day'. It's about reading the signs and offering support. They may be small things, but they can make a big difference. We appreciate that everyone is on a deadline, and if parents are feeling rushed and stressed their child will feel rushed and stressed too. Long term, going that extra mile helps everybody: parents, the children and us."

But, she stresses, it's not all down to the staff in the rooms: "Parents need to know the manager as well. It's important that if they want to speak they can, so small issues don't start to fester and things escalate. It's easier said than done," she admits. "It often means staying late – but that's what you have to do if you want to be 'outstanding'."



If a child feels **nurtured** and they're in the right **environment**,

they'll nurture others and **care** for others, even as toddlers

**LOUISE WALSH, DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR**



If I can't say I've got 100 per cent **trust** in the **knowledge** and ability of all my staff, then I'm doing **something** wrong

**ANGELA SPENCER, DIRECTOR**

### 3 Positive influences

If you're looking for evidence of the thought that goes into childcare at Angels at Play you need look no further than Babyopathy and Nascuroopathy, programmes of Angela's devising (for ages 0-1 and 1+, respectively), which take a unique, holistic approach to children's wellbeing and development. "We look at everything that could be an influence, or have a detrimental effect, on the children," Angela tells me, "their environment, what and when they eat, their activities and when they sleep."

In practice this has meant the use of colour therapy and natural imagery in all three of Angela's settings, the idea being to create as welcoming and calming an environment as possible. "Every room is coloured differently depending on the natural light, what the room's to be used for and the age group of the children," she explains, "and we use the natural imagery – flowers, photographs of the sky, things like that – because what is natural to the children, and therefore very welcoming and calming, is what they see around them, not a big, fluffy bunny!"

Children's experiences of the nursery are also subtly influenced by the use of aromatherapy – "We use different aromas at different times of the day, for example, calming oils first thing in the morning, a cleansing oil after breakfast" – and music therapy, which sees jazz played during mealtimes, for its digestion-aiding tempo, and classical music employed to begin and end the day in relaxing fashion.

Away from the environment, there's a strong focus on nutrition, which Angela sees as a key factor in children's development and behaviour. All food is prepared on the premises, and a weaning programme that departs from official guidelines, in an effort to reduce the risk of iron deficiency and develop facial muscles to support emerging communication skills, is also in place. "All of our food for children under one is gluten-free, too," Angela adds; "the idea is to reduce allergies, eczema, asthma within the nursery by removing anything from the first year that's a potential allergen."

The timing of meals and periods of rest has also been tweaked, in response to research carried out within the setting: "Our children sleep in the morning, before they

have lunch, and we have four meals a day instead of the traditional three," Angela explains. "The children eat better now because they're not falling asleep in their food, which we'd found was a common occurrence, and their activity level is also better because, as they're not sleeping late into the afternoon, parents aren't struggling to get them to go to bed at home."

### 4 Taking the lead

Nascuroopathy's focus on natural, sensory experiences is also evident in the resources and activities engaging children at Angels at Play, though not to the exclusion of other early years staples. As Angela tells us, "You'll find a lot of traditional activities going on in the rooms because, at the end of the day, they work for children."

What Louise and Angela highlight about staff/child interactions at Angels at Play, in whatever context they occur, is the balance struck between allowing children to take the lead and directing them towards adult-led activities designed to develop key skills. "I really don't agree with the 'sit back and let the children do it all themselves' approach," Angela says. "Children want to learn; they want to see, they want to experience – all you've got to do is grab their attention and guide it towards something you want to do."

By way of example, in the setting's 'my time', Angela tells us, children are presented with three sets of activities, each with its own distinct level of staff interaction. In the first, staff will direct, point things out and explain; in the second, they will be on hand to engage with children and guide where necessary; in the third, they sit back unless the children have a question. With children moving between each activity in small groups, they consistently receive the levels of interaction with staff the Angels at Play team feel is necessary to support their development while retaining the freedom to play and pursue their own interests.

The nursery takes its own approach to assessing children's progress, too (as do its sister settings), working to its own 'Ages and Stages' rather than relying on an official system that has, in Louise's opinion, become too flexible: "We're seeing an increasing number of children down the line who are unable to achieve, or who are achieving things much later because it's so lax; our approach enables us to see if children are struggling sooner and do something about it," she explains.