

“We’re descriptive, not prescriptive”

Child First is a nursery provider with a passion for exploration and risk-taking, a firm belief in the benefits of freedom of choice and good food, and a desire to share its vision with the sector. *TN* visited its Ofsted ‘outstanding’ Northampton setting to find out more...

For a setting situated only 10 minutes away from Northampton town centre, and next door to a business park, Child First Day Nursery

Northampton is surprisingly hard to find. Surrounded by trees, tucked away at the end of long driveway at the end of a quiet road, entering its grounds feels somewhat like stumbling into a lost world – even more so when you catch sight of the resident (model) pterodactyl, hanging sentinel from the branches to surprise the unwary and delight imaginative minds. Indeed, with even the company sign outside hanging back in the foliage you could be forgiven for thinking that this was a nursery perfectly content to keep itself to itself. On the contrary, however, Child First’s director, child development expert Tom Shea, is on a mission to highlight the enormous impact childcare can have on children’s lives, if it’s done



The vast **majority** of things that we can do can be done in any **setting**; you don’t need three acres of **woodland** with a hunting **lodge** attached

TOM SHEA, DIRECTOR



right – and Child First Northampton, which received its first ‘outstanding’ from Ofsted last August under manager Angela Green, is his most convincing physical proof.

Once you’ve found it, this is a nursery where there’s much that catches the eye: the extensive grounds packed with learning opportunities, the Georgian former hunting lodge in which the setting has made its home, and the newly built barn that has boosted its capacity to 130, for starters. But in talking to Tom and acting deputy, EYP Kimberley Wilford, what becomes apparent is that it’s not the location and its obvious benefits that are most important here; it’s the knowledge behind the practice, and the genuine determination to do what will benefit children most.

1 A new approach

Child First is a group of six nurseries and the latest project in a career that has seen Tom, an NNEB himself, work with children with disabilities at the first Adventure Playground setting in Chelsea; travel to Italy, where, he explains, he got the grounding in brain development that has informed his approach to child development ever since; and spend time in local and central government. In 2001 he stepped away from Jigsaw, a nursery group he had grown from nought to 30 settings over the course of nine-and-a-half years, and he describes Child First, whose nurseries first opened their doors in 2006, as part of his ‘winding down’ – though that rather underplays the hard work that’s obviously gone in to getting the group up, running and operating as intended.

“It was about empowering staff, creating an atmosphere where they could feel confident enough to do things properly, and as a result make the children’s journey from when they start to when they’re five years of age a much more rewarding one – which in turn would make it more rewarding for staff, parents and our investors,” Tom says of his original vision for Child First. As director, he rejects micromanagement in favour of giving managers autonomy – the key, he says, are great management teams: “if you haven’t got that then the staff team won’t be right, and if the staff team aren’t right, it’ll go to pot” – within the scope of an overarching philosophy.

The philosophy is fundamental to Child First, though. A copy of it, in the form of a 34-page booklet, is given to all staff and parents, and is available to download via the group’s website at all times. “We live and die by a phrase, which is ‘we’re descriptive, not prescriptive’; I think that sums up the ethos of the entire organisation,” Tom says. “Being ‘descriptive’ means that we’re trying to get our children, and our bigger children – our staff and our parents! – to recognise that learning is about discovering, about exploring, about being excited, and about us being excited as well.



Talking points



The right stuff

According to Tom, some 'sparkle' is what's required to work with children: "If you've got it you can come from anywhere. We've got people who have degrees in dancing, art, early years, languages... What matters first and foremost is that bit of magic. And if you don't have that magic, all the training in the world ain't going to make you a worker with children."



Sharing knowledge

"We want to impress upon others what they can do for themselves," Tom says. "We offer consultancy, free of charge, to other settings. I get told off a lot for bringing too many people round; but the idea is that if we can get other people operating the way we're operating then it'll be better for children."



Evolving early years

"Early years is a strange sector," Tom argues, "because it's still perceived as a business – the business of looking after children. Eventually I think it will emerge that there's something fundamentally different about it. We're not a social service, but we are a social service. We're not brain developers, but we are brain developers. As soon as it develops its uniqueness, I think that's when we'll start succeeding."



Muddy hands

A bit of dirt won't hurt, Tom tells us: "The final part of the brain development journey is about not wrapping children in cotton wool – too many of the eczemas and asthmas come from children not being exposed to things early enough. The fact that you can kill 99 per cent of household germs now isn't necessarily a good thing. So, just a word to the wise, our children eat worms..."



"The ethos is a bit of Montessori, a bit of Steiner, a bit of High Scope, a bit of Pen Green, a bit of Reggio Emilia – but it's ours. It's a philosophy in which children can learn respect, trust, honesty, and they can experience risk and excitement. If they do that, they'll grow up to be more wonderful people."

2 Free to choose

Child First Northampton is a treasure trove of learning opportunities for young children. Outside, amongst the trees, are swings, platforms – cunningly, and securely, constructed from old fencing – on which to climb and from which to jump, and taut ropes to balance on. Two firepits, employed regularly as part of the setting's forest school provision, are joined by muddy pits to dig in, while a construction area affords children real house bricks and offcuts of wood with which to build. Then there's the fairy garden, allotment, mud kitchen, sandpits, dens, dipping pond – and even a building in which to lie down and have a nap. Indoors, the well-resourced rooms for each stage-group are complemented by a dedicated art studio (and resident artist) and role play room, inhabited on the day of our visit by a walk-in, home-made Thomas the Tank Engine. And there's much more besides – put simply, there's no shortage of things to do.

But for Tom and Kimberley, the crucial thing is not so much the variety of options – though clearly that's important – but that the children and staff, have the freedom to choose what they want to do and when they want to do it, even if that means changes to what has been planned. "An oft-used phrase here is that 'the routines follow the children, rather than the children following routines'. If there are chickens about to be hatched and lunch is ready, the chickens don't wait!" Tom sums it up.

"We follow children's interests as much as possible," Kimberley explains. "If they're



We don't **dictate** to children what they've got to do; we **follow** them, we **guide** them, we support them – we let them be **children**, really

KIMBERLEY WILFORD, ACTING DEPUTY

doing an activity, they're making something out of clay and natural resources, for example, we won't say, 'Right, it's 10 o'clock, snack time – put that away, clean that up'. And we can leave that activity out, ongoing, on the table for a week if the children are still interested. Equally, we'll set planned activities out in the morning, but if the children don't go near them we'll scrap them. If Jack comes in excited about a feather he's found, we'll focus on that instead."

Freedom of choice extends to free-flow, which is firmly embedded in the Child First approach. Children spend 70 per cent of their time at nursery outside, and their desire to explore is encouraged by staff who are attentive but confident enough to give those in their care a long leash. "The Icelandic rule is if you can hear or see the children, they're within a safe distance," Tom says. "We're not quite at that level, but we'll have one practitioner with maybe five children, and three of them will be in one area and two of them will somewhere else, but close enough that an eye can be kept on them."

3 Growing minds

The nature of brain development in the first four years of a child's life is the central theme of the Child First approach – stressed in the opening paragraphs of Tom's philosophy, referenced throughout, and addressed in detail via the reproduction of a speech made by Dr Joan Lessen-Firestone on the topic in the closing pages. It shapes every aspect of practice at the group's nurseries, from the freedom to explore and take risks described above, to nutrition (more on which later) and the decision to strictly limit children's access to screen-based technologies.

"If I had a pound for every time I'd said to somebody '70 per cent of the brain has developed by the age of four, isn't that the most important time of a child's life?' I'd be quite rich by now," Tom says. "But if I only had a pound for each of those who hadn't been aware of the fact, I certainly wouldn't. It's a surprise still, and that's shocking."

"If you feed children the right information in those first four years, give them the right foundation, they can learn enormously. We don't have computers, we don't have televisions, we don't have iPads because there's sufficient evidence to say that sitting in front of screens is detrimental. I've worked with slightly older children as well, and it's so easy to put a snooker table or a table tennis table down and say, 'There you are, you've got an activity' – but all they really are are diversions. What you really want to do is explore opportunities, and you can't do that with TVs or videos or iPads. Open-ended resources are all that we use."

Communicating the significance of the early years in this regard to parents is an important part of the setting's role, according to Tom and Kimberley, with practitioners endeavouring to explain why daycare is more than a safe place to leave a child during working hours. "I've been doing this 40 odd years. If you go back 20 years, the number of parents who considered these kinds of issues when selecting their childcare would probably be one in a thousand; now it's more like 30 per cent. So the awareness is growing, but if parents don't understand it, we'll explain," Tom says of the challenges involved. "I think you need to be frank and honest and open. We won't shy away from things. We're not confrontational... Actually, that's probably not true; from time to time we are!"

4 Open to all

Child First Northampton, and the group as a whole, has a particularly strong commitment to inclusion – be it children with English as an additional language, those with disabilities, or those who may not be able to access high-quality early education without financial support.

"We've not only won the battle but the war," Tom says of the funded places for two-year-olds now available in every one of Child First's settings, despite the latter being located in relatively affluent areas. "The best research around about what will benefit children the most highlights the value of a mixed environment. So special needs/no special needs, black, white, rich, poor – all of those things together is what is best. Anything less than that and you start to get ghettos, whether it's special needs ghettos, poor ghettos or rich ghettos, which is a bad thing in my book. So when we started to look at opportunities here for two-year-old funding and the local authority

said, 'You're in an affluent area, you can't have that', we said to them, 'No, actually, we get quite a lot of referrals from the local authority, social services and from Sure Starts and health visitors'. We are a mixed environment; we've got some children who are very disadvantaged in traditional terms, living in disadvantaged areas with disadvantaged environments, possibly with disadvantaged parents as well, and thankfully the local authority agreed."

There is ample support to cater for the needs of all who do attend. Bilingual staff are on hand to help many with EAL, while sign language is employed throughout to aid communication for everyone. Children with conditions as diverse as autism and cerebral palsy are cared for alongside those with no special needs, and every effort is made to say 'yes' not 'no' to those wishing to attend. "Rather than segregate the children, we try to integrate them into the environment," Kimberley explains, "and when they leave us, they usually go to mainstream schools with the other children – which, depending on the individual, obviously, we really recommend."

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT

"It's not only your stomach that benefits from good food, it's your brain as well," Tom says as he describes the efforts that go into making Child First's menu as healthy and nutritious as possible. "We're about 70-75 per cent organic, and we try to buy only local resources, though it doesn't always work – we don't grow avocados or bananas in this country, yet! We're mindful of children's nutritional needs because a third of their brain development comes from what they eat. You need to get the balance right – if children are running around like mad things all day, they need their carbohydrates; if they're sitting in front of an iPad they don't need them at all."

"Everyday the food is prepared and cooked freshly on site," Kimberley says of the policy in practice. "We even have home-made biscuits and puddings, and the majority of our nurseries now cook their own bread and pasta. There's a four-weekly menu, which we rotate, so there's always variation – and we change them seasonally. A lot of thought goes into deciding what's served."