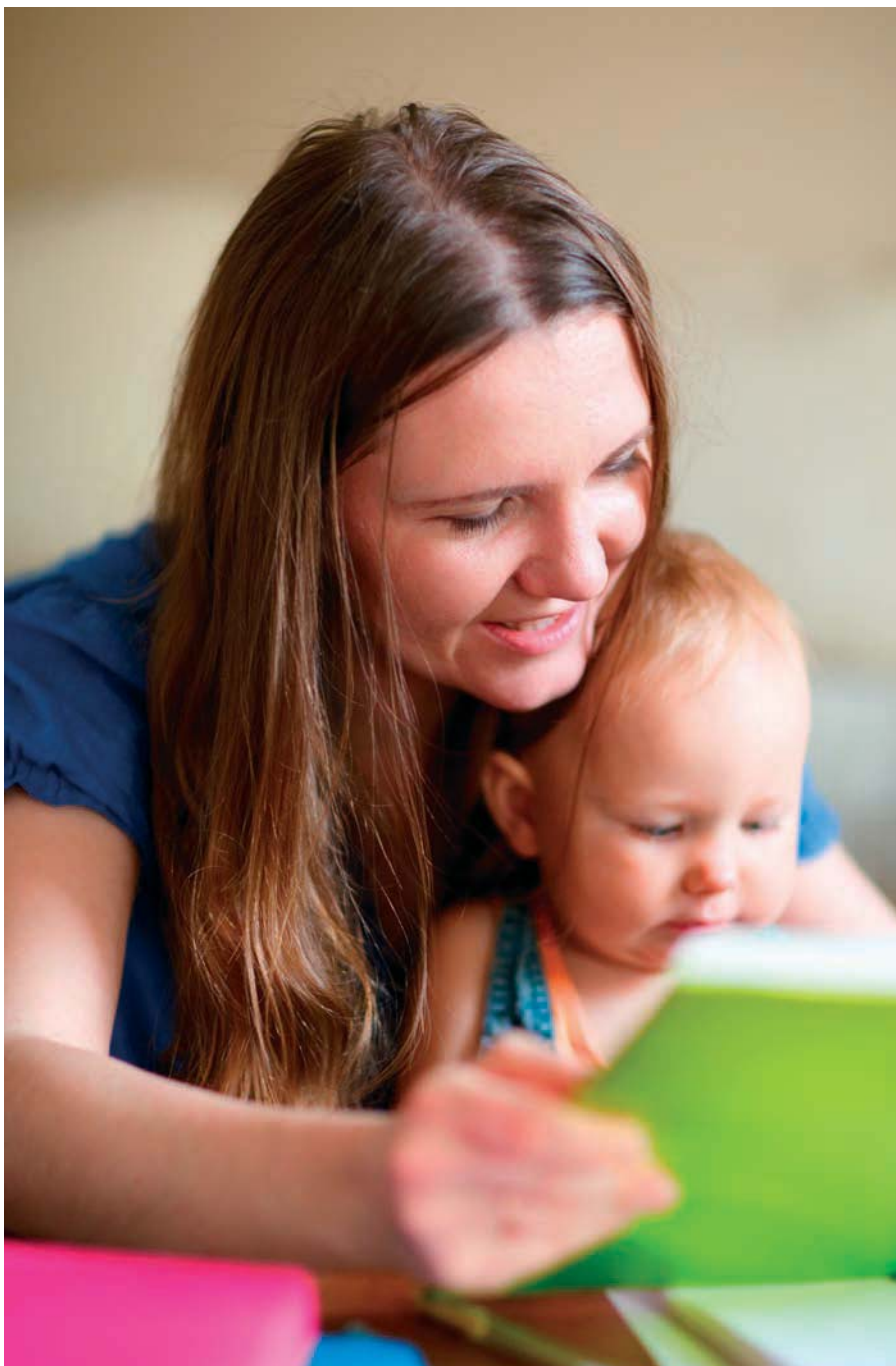


managers in the middle

Sarah Steel explains why developing the skills of room supervisors is vital for every nursery's present and future...



Having spoken to lots of other nursery operators over the 10 years I have been working in the early years sector, it seems fair to say that we are not alone at The Old Station Nursery in recognising that the role of room supervisors is both of critical importance and an area that is neglected by some of the major training providers. Once a member of your team has completed their NVQ 2 or 3, there is often a real gap in continuous professional development unless they are keen to pursue an early years degree. The NVQ 4 was a good stepping stone for some, although we did experience some difficulty in getting junior staff onto it, with some colleges insisting that potential students were already doing a management job before they enrolled on the course. But now that the level 4 qualification is on its way out, the path for developing management and supervisory skills is far from clear.

Room supervisors play an absolutely key role within the nursery; they are the 'front line' staff who must, on a day-to-day basis, manage their own team effectively, be the main contact/oversee all transactions with parents, ensure that planning and observations are of a high standard, and also continue to develop their staff team. Yes, they will have help and support from their manager and deputy, but often they will be left to get on with key parts of the business without much development.

We decided that succession planning needed to be a key target within our business plan, so we looked at what we felt was needed to give all new or potential room supervisors some extra support. The areas we identified included an overview of management and leadership, how to motivate staff, how to develop communication skills, improving customer care and then running effective appraisals for their team.

From these areas we wrote a course, designed to last a full day, which included listening, participation and lots of feedback from the group of supervisors undertaking it. Having taken the course, many of them felt really pleased to be 'invested in', and understood that while they might already be

great child carers, they had a need for formal training around supervisory issues, which they had often not had any preparation for.

Stepping up

It can be hard for anyone to go from being 'one of the team' to being a leader, and from the course we found that this first step was one of the hardest for practitioners to make. Many supervisors welcomed the chance to discuss how to earn respect from their colleagues, when to be firm and how to set clear boundaries (in fact, it doesn't sound that different from what we try and teach the children, does it?).

Lots of our staff had also thought about the idea of supervising, but hadn't had any chance to explore the differences involved between being a leader or a manager. They liked the definition of a leader as someone who could 'inspire others to follow your lead by creating a compelling vision for the future'. To actually realise how important they were as part of the business plan was also a new concept to many of them; how often do we come to work, do our job and go home, without remembering what an essential part of the organisation we are?

The course has proved a useful opportunity to talk about motivation and how different things are important to different people, too. We complete a short



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SARAH STEEL



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Sarah Steel is the founder and MD of The Old Station Nursery Group, which operates 14 settings in England. If you would like to get in touch with her about any of the issues raised in her article, you can email her at sarahsteel@theoldstationnursery.co.uk



questionnaire on motivation with each staff member attending, and it is interesting to score the answers to see what the main motivational factors are (particularly interesting is the fact that for most people recognition is far more important than pay). The aim of this exercise is to send all of our room supervisors back to their teams with three clear objectives as to how they will try to motivate them, which they then need to feedback in the next three months so they can consider how well it has worked.

Overall, we've been pleased with the feedback we've had from both staff attending our Room Supervisors Course and from their managers once they've returned to the nursery. This is such an important group of people to nurture and develop as they are the

deputies and managers of the future; but they need more than just more training on the practice aspects of their role, they need to think of themselves as part of the management team, and a really important part at that. If anyone has any comments on how they develop these staff, then do get in touch and let's give them the recognition they deserve.

New skills

Communications skills are essential for room supervisors, as they will be communicating both verbally – over the phone and face-to-face – and in writing. As such, advice on body language, tone of voice, content of their message and other basics of communication are useful tools to add to their collection.

For anyone who has survived a management course, completed a management degree or worked in a large corporation, communications skills courses may seem rather run-of-the-mill. However, in the early years sector many of our staff have simply not been exposed to these concepts, and I think it is so beneficial to cross-reference what we do with other industry sectors so that we can learn from their experiences.

A similar situation exists with regards customer care. Those working in a retail job will often be trained in this aspect of their role from day one. In our business, customer care is vital, but it is often not addressed because the focus tends to fall on practice regarding children rather than their parents. We are currently working our way through a number of fairly easy reading books on the subject and our supervisors get one of these to take away and review at their next staff meeting, in the hope that the message of outstanding customer care can filter through the company. If you're looking for a quick read but one which might provide you with some inspiration, do try *Raving Fans* by Ken Blanchard.