

“WE NEED TO BE MORE FLEXIBLE...”

Early years providers should take a proactive approach to meeting the needs of every family, says **James Boddey...**

As the manager of an early years setting I've been keeping up-to-date with the discussions generated by *More Great Childcare* and the government's proposed changes. The issue that caused the most uproar, and rightfully so, was the change to ratios. It's obvious to me that childcare needs to be more affordable, but changing ratios was no way to do this as it would have had negative effects on both the care and education of young children. At my setting we employ more staff than we are required to, and this enables us to better meet individual needs, go on outings and ensure all children are safe, secure and well cared for at all times.

The problem I had with the opposition to the proposed changes, however, was that many of those who came out against them did not offer alternative suggestions of their own. It's no good to just say something won't work; as early years professionals, we should be highlighting strategies that we think could make childcare more affordable for families whilst retaining the necessary levels of quality.

PAY AS YOU GO

One approach I feel might work well is to make early years provisions more flexible. To give you an example – at my setting we offer parents total flexibility when it comes to when they want their children to attend. We're open 7:30 till 5:30 Monday to Friday and we charge £3.50 an hour. Families can use the setting as much or as little as they like. Unlike many settings nearby to us, where parents are forced to pay for a



morning or an afternoon, we only offer hourly sessions.

This makes us a lot more affordable as parents/carers only use us when they need us – if they work 10-2 Tuesday, 3-5 Wednesday, etc. they only pay for the hours they actually use. This is how early years settings should be, in my opinion.

I understand why settings do 'sessions', of course: it's a lot easier – it means they know in advance that everyone will be arriving, and leaving, at the same time. With our system, children and families are arriving throughout the day, so planned activities have to be made available all day; key workers' individual planning has to be flexible and dynamic, and staff have to be knowledgeable, flexible and creative. But with such a big push for planning for individual children, working closely with each family and celebrating the unique and special differences, I believe this way of working is just an extension of an existing philosophy.

Doing things this way would, I believe, lead to settings being used by families who can't afford to do a full morning, which would be

great for their children – four hours a week is better than no hours at all. We need to be ensuring that we can be used by every family in the area, and offering hourly sessions is one way to do just that.

CHILDCARE FOR ALL

It's up to each individual owner and manager to decide how to run their nursery, obviously, but I believe our system is worth considering. It enables us to offer affordable childcare that is effective for each individual family. Our ratios remain high, the education and care we provide remains of the highest standard, and the reputation we have in the local area is outstanding. Early years providers can do more to ensure they are meeting the needs of all parents in their community – I ask managers and owners to try this method and see the improved results for themselves.



about the author

James is the manager of Busy Bodies Childcare Centre in Ludlow, Shropshire.

FLEXIBLE CHILDCARE IS MORE **AFFORDABLE**, AND IT SUPPORTS FAMILIES AS IT **ALLOWS** US TO FIT AROUND THEIR **LIVES**