

“It was a big project, it was a dream come true...”

To grow an ‘outstanding’ nursery from the ground up takes patience and commitment – qualities **Mahila Samarbakhsh** and the team at Lexden Lodge Kindergarten have in abundance, as *TN* discovered...

For many people a job is something you begin at 9.00am, leave at 5.00pm and ignore as much as possible in between. For some, like Mahila Samarbakhsh, principal of Lexden Lodge Kindergarten in Colchester, it's far more. “To be able to buy this place, we had to sell our own home – we moved to the top floor and lived here for over three years,” she tells us. “We put everything we had into it, heart and soul, because it's something we believed in.”

We're speaking in late June, almost eight years to the month since the 125-place Lexden Lodge opened its doors to children and parents. In that time much has changed: numbers have risen dramatically and what was once confined to the ground floor of the expansive, three-storey Victorian former residence has spread throughout the building and its grounds. What clearly hasn't changed, though, is the emotional investment Mahila has in her business and her role within it. When she describes her setting as a “dream come true” it doesn't sound like hyperbole but a heartfelt expression of both the satisfaction overcoming the challenges involved in growing a business from the ground up has brought, and the meaning the nursery and its work has for her.

And it is perhaps this fact above all that has resulted in the success the setting has had, for example, its two ‘outstanding’ inspections, the first coming just six months after opening. Mahila's attitude towards her work is echoed throughout Lexden Lodge, by manager, Angela McQuitty, and deputy, Carrie Chapman, and from them down to senior staff, nursery nurses and their assistants, and as a result the children in their care are



The children are calm and relaxed because they know that they are in safe hands, and their individual needs are being met

MAHILA SAMARBAKSH, PRINCIPAL

Talking points



Heading home

"When parents decide that they're going to join us we offer them a home visit," Mahila says. "The child's key person and one of the management team spend a couple of hours there, to see the child in his or her own environment, and to answer any questions the parents have. After the visit, there are a number of free settling in sessions - it's quite a long process before children actually start."



Fair fees

"A simple thing we do to help parents is to give them the option to choose another day when we're closed for bank holidays," Mahila says. "If the child in question is full time, we give the money back."

"Otherwise, if your child is booked in for Mondays, that's five Mondays you'd be paying for in the year that you couldn't use," Angela explains. "It's out of a sense of fairness!"



Award winners

As well as having two 'outstanding' inspections to her nursery's name, Mahila was named Business Woman of the Year at the 2011 Essex Countywide Business Awards and saw her setting receive a more than creditable third place in both the 2006 NDNA and *Nursery World* Awards. The team have also just been awarded their e-Quality counts by NDNA.



Formal dress

They say you should never judge a book by its cover, but what about an early years setting by its staff uniform? Lexden Lodge has taken the formal approach: "If you've got something that looks more formal," Angela says, "it's an indication of the expectations parents should have; it's a commitment to a standard, a statement from staff that 'I'm going to work, I'm going to meet expectations'."



receiving early years care and education of the highest quality...

1 Building a business

"I'm always here - I come in at half past six every day to open up, and I'm here until about six thirty every evening, five days a week. At weekends I catch up with anything that needs to be done... I enjoy what I do, I need to be hands-on." For Mahila, running Lexden Lodge has meant nothing if not a significant investment of time - and from the very outset, too.

"We fell in love with it because it's such a beautiful building," she says of her setting's home, "but it took us a year to get planning permission - it was sitting here and we couldn't do anything. It then took another year and a half to complete the renovation. It had been a nursing home, so there was a lot of work that needed to be done. Everything was a mess - we had to change the electrics, the flooring, the walls, the plastering..."

But it wasn't only the physical work involved in making the building fit for purpose that posed a challenge. Mahila, though she had worked as a nursery nurse herself, admits that she had no prior experience of running a business. Luckily, she had support: "My husband had his own business," she explains. "Though it's completely different in some ways, he had that to call upon, and I had experience of working in childcare. So we put the two together to make it work - without him I don't think I would have been able to do it, he played a big part in this."

Early years expertise was also provided by Angela and Carrie (previously co-deputy managers at the setting Mahila's own children attended), who with Mahila make up the nursery's management



team. "I wouldn't have been able to do any of this without the help of the lovely ladies around me," Mahila stresses.

Having opened its doors with only five children, and confined to the ground floor, Lexden Lodge expanded quickly. Within three years numbers had grown enough to warrant first the opening of the building's first floor and then its top floor; today, it has 186 children on roll and over 30 members of staff.

2 Committed staff There are many factors that influence the quality of an early years setting, but when looking for reasons why Lexden Lodge is excelling, the attention paid to staffing seems particularly significant. At a basic level it's about numbers, with support staff supplementing nursery nurses between the hours of 10 and 5.30 every day. "For the 3-5s we never stick to the 1:8 ratios - we're always either 1:6 or 1:5," Mahila says by way of example; "so today there are 38 children on the second floor, and there are nine members of staff, to give them support and help with extra activities. The fact that we're able to give our children extra attention is something we're really proud of."

It's also, however, about the expectations the management team have of their practitioners, and their attention to detail, whether it's in regard to the recruitment process, appraisals or to continuing professional development. "When we're interviewing for new staff it can take us a long time to find the right person, because we demand a lot," Angela explains. "We want commitment, and we also want those we employ to genuinely understand that the effect they have on the children - their lives and the lives of their parents - is profound. They have to take it as seriously, as we do, and they have to give the children the best that they can. It's hard for our nursery nurses, but they have tremendous job satisfaction."

Helping practitioners to deliver what's expected of them is a key element of the management team's role: "We look at staff and make sure they're in the right place; that everything they should be doing is being done, and that they're on task with their learning journeys. It's up to us to make sure the garden is set up when they go out, that the risk assessments are in place, so that when they arrive everything's ready for them, and they can concentrate on the children," Angela says. "We're the emollient in the mixture; we draw everything together and make sure it runs as smoothly as possible."

"And each little problem," she adds, "we view as an opportunity to develop - if you can do that you've already got a head start. Everybody here knows that if you don't move forward you're actually falling behind!"

3 Independent learners

An important end goal of early years education is, of course, to provide children with the skills and confidence they need to succeed when they make the step up to primary school. To this end, the team at Lexden Lodge place great emphasis on fostering the independence of those in their care. As cases in point, Mahila highlights the value of the nursery's Atelier: a small but bright and resource-rich room, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, that provides small groups of children, from the age of two upwards, with the opportunity to take on a project of their own choosing and work on it until satisfied with the outcome - the range of creative options on offer includes wood and real hammers and nails. Angela describes the cooking sessions children engage in, during which chances to weigh and discuss the origins of ingredients, and make meaningful decisions about the preparation process - be they right or wrong - abound.

Efforts aren't just confined to the activities practitioners plan, either; they're embedded in day-to-day life at the setting. On one level, the presence of sinks and toilets in the rooms is a convenience (if you'll pardon the pun), but it also enables staff to encourage and support children as they come to learn that they can turn on a tap and wash their hands for themselves, and take themselves to the toilet when they need to go. Similarly, the over-threes are trusted with crockery and glasses at mealtimes - "Yes, they can drop them on the floor, but they soon learn to be more careful," Angela says.

"What's important is that they're learning about life in a safe environment, but one in which there's an element of risk," she says of their philosophy. "When there's an element of risk, children's learning is greater; they

understand that they can do things for themselves. Suddenly they're more aware and more capable, and when they go up to school they're ready to learn because they think 'I can do this, I can manage'.

"It's inherent in each of our rooms," she continues; "there's an element of understanding about something in every one that's age appropriate. To give another example, when the children get to the over-threes, there are rules - so they learn to understand that 'if I do this to this person, this is going to happen, and if I do this again this will happen, so I need to do it this way'. In every case, the key person is there to guide each child - they can support and direct, and help their children to know what's expected and how to manage themselves."

Both Mahila and Angela stress the importance of the individual throughout; every child at Lexden Lodge is planned for and supported according to his or her needs, from the scheduling of nap-times to the activities they are offered - a commitment built upon strong relationships between children and key person, and key person and parents.

4 Striking a balance

Running a large early years setting is a juggling act at the best of times, with competing demands often clamouring for attention. It's perhaps no surprise, then, that when asked what the team are most proud of about Lexden Lodge, Angela points to the successful balance that has been achieved. "We balance a lot of things," she says: "staff ages - we have as young as 17 and as old as 72 - their qualifications, and the way that we deploy them in the nursery. We think about their qualities, how they'll work together; about how new staff coming in will affect those already in place - they have to be happy working together."

"We look at the wellbeing of the children, but you can't look at that without being aware that the wellbeing of the staff is part of that too," she explains. "It's important. There's not a lot of financial reward in early years - there never has been and I don't suppose there ever will be - so it's about something else, and that something else is a feeling from the heart that, actually, you're doing something you believe in. If you feel good about what you're doing then you feel happy, and you've got to have an element of happiness in there, otherwise how are you going to spend nine-and-a-half hours doing the job?"

"Sometimes the balance is ruffled, the boat might rock, but we get it right - and we work hard at getting it right. That matters a great deal."

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