



that what you think makes your setting special is different to what parents think.

The next step is to make sure you have a reasonable website that communicates these features. There is no doubt that the central pillar of your marketing efforts should be your website; all other activity will ultimately be driving people there and it is via it that parents with a positive feel about your setting will ultimately get in touch for more information or to arrange a visit or trial session.

## Creating your website

Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet when it comes to setting up an effective website. There are many ways it can be achieved – from getting a local company to build and maintain it, to building one from scratch, using a blogging service like Wordpress or using a ‘simplified’ DIY website design service like Moonfruit or Mr Site.

There is not enough room here to go through all the alternatives or to discuss the technicalities, but here are some critical things to consider before you start:

■ **Choose your address carefully.** Your website address (or ‘domain’ or ‘URL’) is going to be with you for a while, so it needs to be memorable and as close as possible to your setting’s ‘brand name’. At Blackboys, we used to use [blackboyspreschool.co.uk](http://blackboyspreschool.co.uk), but when we took over the running of the site from a former parent we chose to change it to [blackboyspreschool.org.uk](http://blackboyspreschool.org.uk) as this reflects the non-profit status of the school (something that was considered important as one local competitor is a commercial organisation). There was a downside to this: the old domain had many ‘inbound links’ from other sites and appeared on a

**M**ost people would agree the highest priority for a nursery or pre-school is the quality of care it provides.

But how many would agree the next priority is marketing?

In difficult economic times the only sure-fire way to maintain a healthy income is to ensure your early years setting is well-attended. More children attending a greater number of sessions is a more sustainable way of paying the bills than relying on fundraising or grants – and while a good reputation for care and development is no doubt a significant factor when parents decide upon a nursery or pre-school, they will need to have heard about your setting before they even get to this stage. This is where marketing comes in.

Marketing can be daunting for those who have not done it before. It’s easy to spend lots of money on advertising and end up wondering whether it was all

worth it. As such, although traditional advertising can be effective, there is a lot you ought to do before you book space in your local media.

When considering the marketing for a nursery or pre-school, it’s best to step back a bit and think about the process parents go through when selecting a setting. At Blackboys Pre-School, a non-profit, parent-led pre-school in East Sussex, research undertaken by the committee showed that for the majority of parents their choice of setting is influenced by recommendation and the proximity to the popular primary school down the road. And during their decision-making process, almost all parents take a close look at the pre-school website.

So, we can learn from this that before you spend a penny of that limited marketing budget (if you have one at all) it’s a great idea to identify what it is about your setting that sets it apart from others. Survey your parents anonymously – just five or six questions about how they chose your setting. You may find

# stand out from the crowd

Marketing your nursery can be a daunting prospect, but there are simple and cost-effective steps you can take to reach parents, says **Daryl Willcox...**



lot of printed material and pre-school signs. The old address now redirects to the new one, but this is a good example of how important it is to get it right in the first place.

■ **Make sure you can edit the site easily.**

The current committee at Blackboys Pre-School inherited a very nice website that had been created by a previous committee member who worked in IT. However, as an ex-committee member their commercial projects understandably took priority and getting changes made to the site was a little cumbersome. We took control of the site (by transferring it to a user-friendly website hosting provider who the pre-school deals with directly) and now it is possible to update text very quickly, though this does rely on website design skills in the committee. However you set it up, being able to update your site easily will allow you to adapt and develop it and keep it relevant, for example, by keeping the 'events' page up-to-date. An average website that you can update easily is better than a wonderfully designed website that you can't change.





■ **Get the basics right.** Your website is your shop window. That does not mean you need to win an award for design, you just need to get the right information on there. Tell people what's good about your setting, where your setting is and how to make contact. It is a good idea to include your phone number on every single page, and to make sure the email address on the contact page is correct and whoever receives it is responding appropriately to enquiries. Beyond these basics, try to include real photography of the setting, details on your approach to care and development (a curriculum, for example), an events page and, of course, major on all the things you have identified as important selection criteria for parents.

■ **Keep reviewing.** Don't just build your site and forget it; make a habit of going through every page regularly. You'll be surprised how quickly stuff goes out of date, and in any



## find out more

Daryl Willcox is the treasurer of Blackboys Pre-School, a rural, non-profit community school near Uckfield in East Sussex run by a parent committee. It is a registered charity and is rated 'good' by Ofsted. Daryl is also founder and chairman of DWPub, which provides online services to journalists and public relations professionals, allowing them to communicate more effectively.

## Socially networked settings

**Sites such as Facebook are a free and effective way to market your nursery...**

An innovative way to drive traffic to your website and also build your local parent community is to employ social media marketing. The world of commerce is in a state of high excitement over the potential of social media, but when it comes to early years settings there is resistance by some. It's been known for early years practitioners to be told to 'keep well clear' of social media due to child protection concerns.

These concerns are largely unfounded; the perceived risk of social media is blown out of proportion compared to the community-building benefits, and there are simple ways an early years setting can engage in social media without risk. In a small organisation like a nursery or pre-school it is very easy to monitor and coordinate social media activity. At Blackboys Pre-School a Facebook page has been created ([facebook.com/blackboyspreschool](https://facebook.com/blackboyspreschool)) and details of past and future events are shared. Parents have responded very positively to the development, and it is showing the potential to bind the parent community together, helping to ensure these ambassadors of the pre-school feel more involved and therefore more likely to talk about and recommend the setting to others. That's what marketing is all about.



case, a regularly updated site is preferred by search engines, helping to ensure you come higher up the search results when people try to find your site.

Once your website is in place further marketing activity becomes a little easier, as your site becomes the reference point for what to say and how to say it. All activity should also refer to the website – don't just include it on posters, flyers and advertising, always mention it in communications with parents (even invoices), signage and merchandise (book bags and uniforms).

## Finding your audience

A website on its own is all well and good but it will not get many people paying you a visit. You need to drive traffic to it and there are many ways of doing this:

### Email newsletter

Start an email newsletter to parents (parents are your most powerful marketing asset – their recommendation to others is in many cases what makes people choose your setting) and also include other stakeholders in your distribution list: local media, councillors, headteachers of primary schools, and local businesses. Two or three short stories about activities at your nursery or pre-school every two weeks or so is all you need. Use a free email distribution service like MailChimp to ensure the emails look good and recipients can 'unsubscribe' easily. Make sure every email includes a couple of links to the website.

### Get listed

Make sure you have an up-to-date listing on relevant websites: many local authorities have listings of pre-school settings and there are many local community websites cropping up that do the same. Ensure they link to your website and make sure the links work.

### Do some PR

Every time you have an event like a fundraiser, sports day or similar, make sure

your local media know about it. Local papers, radio and even TV stations love this kind of community stuff. Include local community websites too. It helps to provide pictures. If local media cover your event then they will often include the story on their website and, if you're lucky, will include a link to your site.

There are many further techniques you can employ: conventional advertising, posters and flyer distribution are all legitimate ways to get the word out there. Just remember to always include the website address.

## Online expertise...

### Fine design

NurseryCam specialises in website design for the early years sector, focusing on the specific needs of nurseries and pre-schools. It provides a packaged service, priced at just £299, comprising everything from the registering of a domain name, the design of the site (including an online contact form to ensure you don't miss any potential customers) and unlimited updates, to the administration of email and Google paid advertising, helping to keep your business at the top of the search results. For more details, visit [nurserycam.co.uk](http://nurserycam.co.uk)

