

Keystone crops

TN visits a Birmingham nursery where the children are encouraged to grow fruit, veg, and a real sense of community...

Diversity' and 'inclusion' aren't just politically pretty buzzwords for the staff, parents and children connected with Birmingham's thriving Keystone Nursery. "We're based within the Keystone Children's Centre, situated in a residential area with a diverse community," explains manager Hayley Hayes. "We are surrounded by high-rise flats, local schools, pre-schools and shops. We work in partnership with a variety of agencies based in the Children's Centre – including Barnardo's, KIDS, Jobcentre Plus, CAB, RELATE, and many more. We also run the crèches when courses are being held here for parents' further learning. Our children come from a range of backgrounds, both socially and culturally (and several have English as an additional language) – so ensuring we look after their individual and collective needs appropriately is as satisfying as it is challenging. And we are always conscious of serving the needs of the community, too."

As a Pre-school Learning Alliance setting, Keystone has all the benefits of being part of such a well-established organisation – such as access to experience, training and a wide peer-network – along with the freedom to adapt policies and procedures according to local

Fact file

Keystone Nursey

Manager: Hayley Hayes

Staff: eight full-time, eight

Alliance 'bank' staff

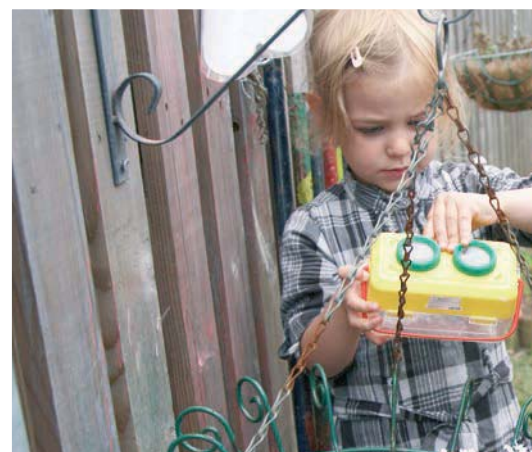
Rooms: two (0 – 2s, and 2 – 5s)

Outside area: two playgrounds (permanent free flow in operation)

Care provision: full daycare, 8am–6pm (divided into five sessions), 52 weeks a year. Funded sessions accepted.

Food: All cooked on site. Three meals, plus two snacks (optional) per day.

Children: from six weeks to rising fives



needs. "We recently had a training day that involved us visiting all the other Alliance nurseries in Birmingham and giving feedback," says Hayley. "It was fascinating to see the different ways of childcare practices, and the staff definitely benefited from this day. The ethos of the Alliance underlies all the direct service provisions, but the approaches differ slightly, depending on the area and the community's needs. For us, it's important both to embrace the diversity that characterises where we are, and empower the children within the context of their environment."

This idea of empowerment starts with the most basic elements of the care and education offered at Keystone, which is very much child-initiated. "There's a lot of choice," points out Hayley. "For example, we run a snack-café system, so it's the children's choice of when they want a snack and how much, with some encouragement both mid-morning and mid-afternoon. They select their own toys and activities – we don't have medium or long term plans. The planning is created from the children's interests as stated in the EYFS, with celebrations and festivals regularly covered throughout the year, which enriches the children's learning experiences. At meal times, children are encouraged to try a variety of foods – and if a child clearly really doesn't like something, we'll do our best to find an alternative. We aim to provide a happy, relaxed

and stimulating atmosphere, in which every child can learn through exploration and play."

An important lesson that the children who attend Keystone Nursery learn during their time there, is just how much influence they can have on their surroundings, both immediate and further afield. 'Green' issues are brought to their attention not through occasional projects, but as an integral part of nursery life. Recycling happens as a matter of course, as does conserving energy wherever possible. Hayley and her team pride themselves in using the resources around them, often inspired by the children, who quickly become skilled in spotting the creative potential, say, of a pile of stones or a fallen branch. Instead of glossing over local environmental problems, such as vandalism, the children are encouraged to contribute to positive changes – going out on walks and carrying out surveys; identifying areas for improvement and discussing ways to make it happen; and taking part in litter picking. "Hopefully, they are taking at least some of these ideas home with them," adds Hayley.

Along with eco-friendly values, Keystone children are also likely to take home with them delicious produce they've grown themselves. The nursery gardens are currently being redeveloped, so the veg patches are temporarily on hold – but this hasn't stopped the youngsters' horticultural activities. "We've got strawberries in hanging baskets, plus



spring onions, carrots, potatoes and lettuces,” smiles Hayley. “The whole learning experience is incredibly valuable, from planting seeds and watching them grow, to harvesting, washing, preparing and eating the crops. It gives the children ownership. When the gardens are ready, we’ll grow as much of our own food as we can.” Woodwork and other practical activities are encouraged – as Hayley says, “some of the children live in flats with little or no access to outside areas; perhaps messy play is impractical. It’s important that they can get their hands dirty, take supervised risks and connect with the world around them, while they’re here.”

As well as reaching out into the community, Keystone is keen to invite the outside in. Feedback from parents and carers is actively sought, on everything from menu planning to methods of invoicing, and regular ‘all about me’ evenings provide an opportunity for parents and staff to meet, and discuss issues both trivial and fundamental. It also gives parents and carers time to look through the children’s individual learning journeys. Future plans include regular family craft mornings – as Hayley explains: “In the run-up to Mother’s Day,

for example, perhaps dad or granny could come in to help make a special creation. And we’ve just put a sign up inviting parents to come in and read a story, sing songs, or join in with everyday life in nursery. We encourage strong parent partnership working.”

A lot of the energy and enthusiasm that contribute to making Keystone such a successful setting (places are fully booked, with babies who are not yet born on the waiting list for 2011), is clearly inspired by the leadership. Like anyone responsible for early years provision, Hayley frequently finds herself pulled between her dual roles of business manager and care provider – but ultimately, it is always the children who are most important, and she spends as much time with them as she can. “In many ways, managers are the most qualified in terms of actual childcare, but all too often they can find themselves in the office with a mountain of admin,” she comments. “I didn’t come into this job to push paper around a desk, and I would hate to lose the contact with the children, that is the most overwhelmingly positive part of my work that I love and find most rewarding.”

find out more

For further information about Keystone Nursery, and other Pre-school Learning Alliance nurseries and initiatives, visit the website at pre-school.org.uk



“I had my **daughter** 11 1/2 years after my previous child, so taking her to **nursery** was a big decision for me as I had stayed at home in the past. I was **reassured** when I first visited **Keystone** as the staff made me feel very comfortable. My daughter has **developed** so much since she started.”

