

# Outstanding experiences

Staff at Butterflies Nursery School in Broadstairs, Kent are instilling both a love of learning and a sense of social responsibility in the children in their care, as *TN* found out...

**N**obody could accuse the early years sector of being short on innovation. What constitutes 'best practice' is constantly evolving, it seems, whether at the behest of government or on the back of the latest research; a state of flux has come to be the status quo. But surrounded by change, it is easy to forget that much of what was relevant to early years education in years past remains equally so today.

Butterflies Nursery School in the seaside town of Broadstairs, Kent is a twice 'outstanding' setting, and its staff have as excellent a grasp of the latest thinking as you would expect from such a rating. But it is also a setting whose success is founded upon years of experience, on core values and tried and tested practice which has consistently proven its worth.

Owner and manager at Butterflies, Marie Privett, opened the setting back in 1999, though in all she can call upon some 25 years of early years experience, time spent both in non-domestic settings and as a childminder. She is happy to admit that she favours a traditional approach to childcare: "I've always had it," she reflects. "Fads come and go, I've seen so many over the years – 'This works, that works, that doesn't' – but after working with children for so long, and having brought up my own







**Children** these days are often exposed to an 'I want' culture; we **try** to encourage them to **think** about giving, about thinking about someone else and being **kind**

MARIE PRIVETT, OWNER/MANAGER

children, you know what works; you know what keeps them busy, what keeps them happy and what they thrive on.

"Sometimes, if people don't have practical experience of working with children," she continues, "they might suggest new ideas that sound good in theory but which don't

work well in reality. Take 'snack bars': most people in the early years will have heard of them, and many nurseries tried them because they were told to, but we didn't like the idea so it was something that we didn't implement. It's because I've always felt that children need a proper 'sitting down time', "



### 1. Vital statistics

Located in a former infants school dating back to the Victorian era, just a short walk from the beach and Dickens' Bleak House, Butterflies Nursery School can cater for up to 39 children, nine of whom can be under two years-old. It's something of a family firm, with Marie's daughters, Sam Kelly – deputy manager, and Rosalyn Davidge – nursery room supervisor, both working alongside her. "It took us a couple of months from when we saw it to get everything into place, says Marie. "Actually finding the premises was the hardest part!"

she explains. "So many of them don't sit at the table at home– they might sit and watch the telly and have dinner on their laps – but it's really important for their social skills. Snack time was their only chance to do so each day, to have a conversation with other people. Then there were the children who would just keep grazing... In the end snack bars faded away, anyway.

"Manners are very important to me – teaching children to say 'please' and 'thank you'," Marie explains, when pressed further about her approach. "We like to keep a nice, calm atmosphere, though it doesn't always look controlled! You need to set boundaries because children don't always have them. Some behaviour, hitting or throwing things, for example, is unacceptable, so we have a 'thinking pond' – it's actually a *Super Nanny* idea! We have a little piece of blue felt with a big egg timer; children can sit there and watch the timer, which in itself calms them down. That's our last resort – we ask them to tell us what's wrong, or to say sorry, but you will always get those who push the boundaries, and the pond gives them the chance to take a step back.





## 2. Planning makes perfect

“Once the children understand our system, they all just fit in – they know what’s what, what’s acceptable, and it makes them happier. If they don’t know, they don’t know when to stop; if they have an idea, they can still do what they want to do but in a social way that everyone can enjoy,” she concludes.

For evidence that Marie’s approach is working you need look no further than Ofsted’s most recent report, published following an inspection in August last year, which notes both the excellent behaviour of the nursery’s children and their sociability. What’s also clear in the report, and from speaking to Marie, is that the emphasis at Butterflies stretches far wider than children’s behaviour. There is a clear sense that staff at the nursery are committed to opening their intake’s eyes to as many exciting and educational experiences as possible – both for the inherent good in doing so, and to ensure that all are as prepared as they can be when the time comes to make the step up to primary school.

“I remember taking children out who didn’t have a clue what a ladybird was, or a snail,” says Marie. “Some children don’t walk or go anywhere, they just don’t get the chance, and even the children who live by the seaside might not get taken to the beach. So, we encourage them to look further than what’s at the end of their nose, we try to explain things more to them. We’re lucky because there’s so much to do around here, so many places to explore. We’ll visit the beach maybe two or three times per term, but we take them somewhere every week. That might involve just heading out and about around here, perhaps looking at the different coloured doors, or number plates, or bark rubbing –

2. Children’s high levels of achievement at the nursery are built upon effective systems of planning. “It was the main thing we worked on after our first ‘outstanding,’” says Marie, “It’s so hard to develop planning systems that aren’t too paperwork heavy, that take staff away. I’d much rather staff be with the children all the time – that’s who they learn from. I think we’ve got it right now; it’s taken a long time, but we’ve perfected it.”



there’s a particular tree on the corner that puts its hands up when it sees the children! – or exploring cars, usually mine, looking at what everything’s made of.

“Then further afield there are lots of little parks and places to head to, lots of interesting shops – a lot of the children didn’t know about the lighthouse down the road. One of the things we’ve started to do recently, though, is to take them down to the

3. “We’re always taking the children out – to learn about road safety, to donate to collections for Christmas and the Harvest Festival,” Marie explains. “And in Broadstairs there’s a Dickens week and a folk week too – that’s a really big thing, we get so many people from around the world visiting, so we take the children to see what’s going on. People always chat to them and us as we’re walking around – it all helps to develop their social skills and build a sense of community.”



## 3. Out and about

## 4. Screen time

Using webcams to learn about animals at the local zoo and Google Maps to explore the town are just two examples of Butterflies’ skilful use of ICT, but Marie employs technology sparingly: “I’m in favour of weaning children off computers a little bit. I don’t like to see them sitting there for hours, I’d rather they were using their brains – not just answering questions but thinking for themselves and using their imagination.”

harbour. It’s only small, but it’s very nice, and there are lots of benches and a lovely view of the houses and the beach. It’s great to give them a clipboard and a piece of paper and ask them to draw what they see. They’re getting so much better at it now – before they’d ask ‘What is there to draw?’, but we’ve got them to think about it and now they love it. They come back and colour it in, and talk about what they’ve seen with their friends. It’s so much better to take them out there and let them explore, than going there and back in a hurry.”

The same breadth of opportunities are offered to the children within the nursery, with Marie and her staff taking every opportunity to introduce new experiences. “I’ve got a pony, so I bring the saddle in, and let them all sit on it,” Marie explains, “and Ros [Marie’s daughter Rosalyn Davidge] has a lot of exotic animals –

**Exceptional leadership and management, along with highly effective team working, results in a positive, inspiring environment clearly aimed at supporting children to achieve their full potential**

OFSTED, 2011 REPORT ON BUTTERFLIES NURSERY SCHOOL





**5. New thinking**

**5.** There is a strong commitment to ongoing training at Butterflies, with all staff members continually updating their knowledge. Deputy manager, Sam Kelly, is in the second year of her Foundation Degree, and believes it has already contributed to the setting's success: "It's probably

responsible for a lot of the reflective practice we do," she says, "and the way in which we encourage staff to go on regular training – the idea that everyone should be working to the best of their ability."

snakes, tarantulas, all that sort of thing – which she brings in for the children to see. Anything that I've got, or the staff have got, we use." With visits from the likes of the dentist, policeman or firemen, the offer of Arsenal Sporty Tots and Teenie Dance clubs and a very well-stocked resources cupboard, the opportunities for children at Butterflies to learn and have fun abound.

"We try to strike a balance," says Marie when asked about whether her traditional approach extends to how much her children are given the freedom to shape their own learning. "We aim to make it 60/40 child-led, but we'll always ask them what they want to do and listen to what they tell us. We try to pick up on what interests them, too – so, for example, if there's a film out, we might try to incorporate that into our activities; we see what they're interested in through their play,

and we then take that further." With Ofsted speaking in glowing terms about children's imaginative play, and the way in which they are encouraged to explore and investigate independently, Butterflies has clearly hit upon the perfect formula.

Behind Marie's clear vision of early years education there's a strong team ethic, underpinned by a great deal of experience: "We worked it out, and between the 10 of us it was something like 200 years," laughs Marie. "That makes a difference. I've got a nice balance of ages of staff, too – one is of pensionable age and people do comment on that fact, that's it good that we're not all young! All the staff have been with us for a long time – the most recently arrived has been here about five years – so we never have to worry about recruitment. I think that has played a big part in our success;

**6.** "I'm just a general dogsbody, really!" answers Marie, when asked about her role. "I'm a key worker and SENCO, as well as overseeing the rooms and staff. Sam has taken a lot of the paperwork on because you can be stuck at a desk for half or all of the morning just trying to sort out a problem with funding, or that sort of thing. I'll do it, but I'm not really a paperwork person, I much prefer being hands-on!"



**6. Leading role**

everybody knows everybody else, we can all pre-empt each other, so everything just tends to fall into place. Everyone has a place, and a role to play and their own strengths.

"Personally, I've always drawn upon the approach of a lady I worked with 20 or so years ago," Marie adds. "She used to be a nanny, and I still use her ideas and ways of doing things today because they work so well. Her experience has given me the experience to go on and develop my own, and my staff's, practice."

Asked about what has motivated her to achieve the success she has at Butterflies, Marie is quick to answer: "I've never really thought about 'outstanding'," she admits, "but I'm a bit of a perfectionist so the goal has always been to get it as good as it can be, with the money and staff I have available. But above all, I wanted to make it a happy place for all the children to be – a place they want to come to. One of the little boys, his dad said yesterday, 'It's half term so I gave him the choice of going to the nature park with his mum and dad or coming here, and he chose you', which is a nice compliment! Seeing that they're happy and smiling and wanting to come makes it worthwhile."