

a fresh start

Turning around a failing nursery is no easy task, but the team at Dizzy Ducks Day Nursery in Ongar needed only eight months to tick every one of Ofsted's boxes, as *TN* discovered...

"To be honest, I wasn't even here during our Ofsted inspection – I was on my best friend's hen weekend, driving a minibus of 12 of my friends," admits Sarah Taylor, manager at Dizzy Ducks Day Nursery in Ongar, Essex. "Because we'd opened in November, and they said that they'd come in the first six months, I'd thought it'd be safe to be away in July. I was only off for that one Friday too..."

It was a minor crisis that might have derailed less calm and collected teams, but far from panicking, their confidence and professionalism resulted in the nursery emerging from its first inspection with a

clean sweep of 'outstanding' grades.

"It didn't create a problem with Ofsted," adds deputy manager, Leanne Tuffen, "although it was a bit daunting for me at first – it was the first time I'd been in a managerial position and I was so nervous about being on my own for our first Ofsted!"

"But Michelle, our quality development manager, came over, and it was fine," concludes Sarah. "Leanne is a suitable person anyway. The Ofsted inspector did laugh! I was so proud of the girls, I couldn't have asked for them to do any more."

If this story says a lot about the quality of the team working under Sarah, and



about Sarah's leadership in the preceding eight months, what says more is the story of just how far the nursery had travelled in the short time since opening its doors.

Dizzy Ducks in Ongar is the youngest nursery in the Dizzy Ducks Day Nurseries Ltd group, which operates four settings in Essex. Situated on an industrial estate, today it is a busy, spacious and well-equipped setting, capable of caring for 47 children from birth until five, and beyond, thanks to its thriving before- and after-school club. Rewind to late 2010, prior to Dizzy Ducks' takeover, however, and the picture was very different.

"The nursery that was here before us had become really run down, and the lease was

repossessed," explains Sarah. "It was closed on the Wednesday, and I found out that afternoon that I'd be coming here on the Thursday, so I had a very busy afternoon trying to sort everything out! When we arrived in the morning, we didn't know anything about it, really, but we were open for business the following Monday."

For Sarah, who had worked her way up via baby room, pre-school room leader and then deputy manager roles, working in all three existing settings within the group, it could hardly have been a more challenging introduction to nursery management. "I knew I was going to move up when an opportunity became available," she explains.



We're always looking to improve ourselves and our practice, and as much as we self-evaluate things that we've done in the past, we're always looking forward to the future

SARAH TAYLER, MANAGER

1. A joint effort

Founded in 2005 by Sian Nisbett, Dizzy Ducks (dizzyducks.co.uk) also operates two nurseries in Billericay and another in Harlow. It's a growing business that boasts another 'outstanding' setting, and Sarah is clear about the benefits the group provides its individual settings: "Everyone is backed up: we're there for the staff, and head office supports us, be it with marketing or financial administration. We're all very close, and Sian really involves us in decisions."

"We had been tendering for the lease anyway, but had thought that it wouldn't be available until January, so before we got the phone call to say 'You can go in tomorrow' I had another month-and-a-half to get my head round it. It was a very quick turnaround, and quite an emotional time leaving the nursery where I was working!

"The first thing we had to deal with was explaining to the staff and parents what had happened, and how we'd only just found out that we were coming in," she continues. "They didn't know the lease had been repossessed, so they turned up as normal and were obviously very upset that they hadn't been told. We had to answer their questions, tell them who we were and reassure them that we were going to keep the nursery open.

"I spoke to all of the staff individually on the Friday, to find out what their goals were, and then called the majority back that evening to let them know we had decided to keep them on, and we started work from there."

On these, somewhat unsteady, foundations, Sarah and her team, supported by the wider Dizzy Ducks group, set to work transforming a failed nursery into an 'outstanding' one. Understandably, to begin with it was a slow process. "The first Monday was still very raw for everyone," Sarah remembers. "The staff were welcoming the

2 Imaginative play



3 Practitioners at the nursery are given a say in how the setting's budget is spent. "I assign each room x amount of money for each month, and ask them what resources they'd like to use," says Sarah. "They split it up into the areas of learning and make lists of what they have and haven't got, so we can then see clearly where we're lacking. I think it's important to give them that responsibility, because they're the ones who know the children best."



3 Sharing responsibility

4 Outdoor learning

As well as a large garden area, the nursery has access to nearby tennis courts and a tarmacked space, accessible via the pre-school room. "It's just an extension of the classroom, really," says Sarah of the latter. "Sometimes we lay lots of paper on the floor and the children just run in paint with their Wellies on; at the moment they've got big pots and pans on the fence, so they can go out there and be really noisy and just express themselves!"

children in and I was trying to be there for them, while attempting to reassure parents who I didn't know, none of whom had heard of Dizzy Ducks.

"I spent a lot of that first week talking to the staff, getting to know them – explaining how we wanted to move forward, what changes could be made, and really involving them so everyone felt they had a say," she continues. "For example, we had to clear the whole nursery and give all of the equipment back to the former owners, so I talked to the staff to find out what resources we needed and how we all wanted the nursery to look.

"They were also asked to do a lot of training about how we implement the EYFS at Dizzy Ducks, and our policies and procedures, and they spent days at our other sites working alongside other practitioners, just to get a feel for how the company works. It did take time, but all of the staff worked really hard. After every course they went on, I could see their self-esteem, and their confidence in their ability to put things into practice, growing. When they came back from the other nurseries with lots of new ideas, you could see that they were really inspired.

"And while this was going on," adds Sarah, "we had decorators and handymen in, building our new office, putting down new carpets and things like that. They worked around us and even overnight so we never had to shut the nursery. It was April when everything was finally finished, so we had a massive open day that

2 Providing children with open-ended resources and encouraging them to use their imaginations is an important part of the Dizzy Ducks approach. "Resources that you can do lots of different things with, give children a sense of independence," says Sarah. "They were so excited the other day because they'd made a big den in the garden; when they achieve something like that, they get so much out of it."



month. After that it was all about working towards our first inspection."

Working from such a difficult starting point, Sarah could have been forgiven for focusing initially on consolidation rather than excellence, but she makes it clear that the highest standards were her priority from the outset. "We didn't feel under pressure to get an 'outstanding' straight away," she reflects when asked whether that was the goal from day one, "but I wanted to show the staff that their hard work could make it 'outstanding'. I'd

worked at Dizzy Ducks since the company opened, so I knew what was expected of us, but it wasn't just for the company; it was for ourselves too.

"At the same time, I didn't want to expect too much, but we'd put so much hard work in that I thought that we really deserved it; it just goes to show what people can do when they put their minds to it."

There are many examples of excellent practice touched upon in the nursery's inspection report, which help explain what management and staff at the setting are doing so right. Alongside plentiful references to the skillful, confident and enthusiastic manner with which practitioners engage with the children in their care, the way in which children are included in decision making – whether it be agreeing rules about behaviour or deciding on next week's topic – and the strong system of



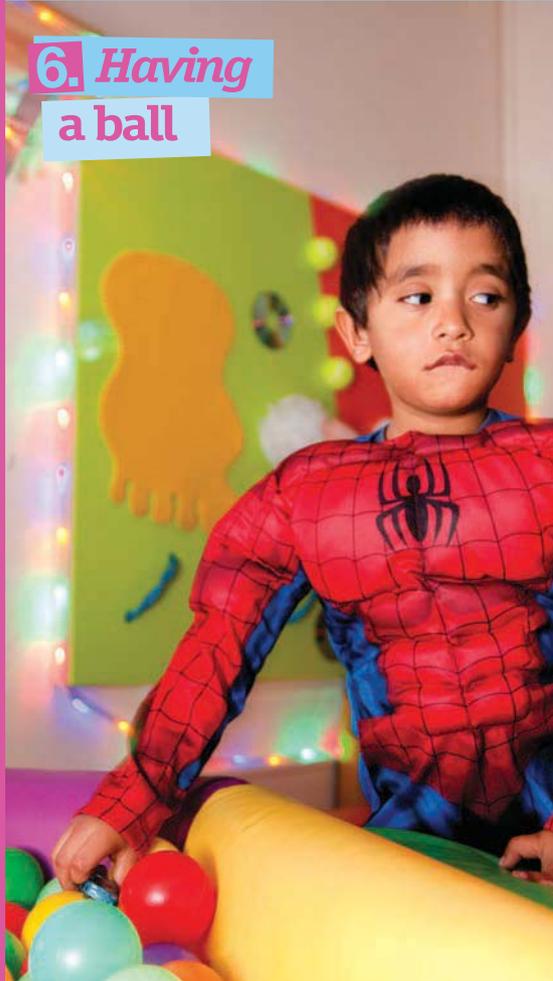
Children in the **after-school club** love to go into the other rooms to help out. It's **beneficial** for both **groups**, so we're always flexible

LEANNE TUFFEN, DEPUTY MANAGER

5. Fair fees



6. The stimulating sensory room is packed with resources, including a particularly popular ball pit. “Sian introduced a sensory room at our Mayflower nursery in Billericay, and because we got so much out of it, it was something she wanted to continue wherever we had the space,” explains Sarah. “It’s perfect for planned, small group activities, but children can access it during free-flow times too.” The nursery’s baby room also has its own, smaller sensory area.



6. Having a ball

5. While fees at the setting were kept at pre-takeover levels for several months, in September, 2011 the decision was made to increase them. “We’d kept our fees competitive to local nurseries,” explains Sarah, “but we had

bought in lots of new resources, and were the only setting in the area that was ‘outstanding’ and we felt we needed to reward our staff. Parents are prepared to pay for the quality of care their children receive.”

self-evaluation in place are highlighted. The latter, Sarah explains, includes annual, formal staff appraisals as well as regular observations conducted by her and Leanne to offer practitioners advice on developing their practice, and support where any difficulties are being encountered.

“Sometimes you can get stuck in a rut when you’re working,” Sarah says, “so it’s nice to evaluate the system – to find out what’s working and what’s not working. In addition, our quality development manager, who works from our head office, visits all four sites to observe and offer that extra bit of advice and feedback for all the staff.”

But despite all of their success, Sarah and her team have not relaxed in the months following their first inspection. With occupancy levels languishing at just 20 per cent at the time of Dizzy Ducks’ takeover, transforming

the reputation of the setting and attracting new customers has been an ongoing priority. “It’s been really difficult to change the reputation of the nursery in the local area,” admits Sarah, “but it was important that we did so we could build our occupancy. We’re at 70 per cent now, and the business is growing. Being the only ‘outstanding’ nursery in the area has definitely helped.”

Linked to this is the nursery’s focus on parental engagement – absolutely vital in the days following the change of ownership when building trust was essential, and equally important to the team a year-and-a-half on, as their inspection report makes clear. “We have a big list of diary dates that help us to engage with parents,” says Sarah. “We have a lot of charity days, family BBQs, Christmas concerts and bazaars. Today we’re celebrating World Book Day [that’s not the usual uniform, in

case you were wondering – Ed.], and a lot of parents have made a big effort to get their children dressed up.

“It’s really important to get parents involved in their children’s learning,” she adds. “We use social networking, Facebook and Twitter, to keep in contact with them, providing daily updates on what the children are doing, and we invite them in to work with us regularly – it benefits them, the children and us too.”

The future looks bright for Dizzy Ducks in Ongar. The nursery has taken on four additional staff members in recent times, and plans are being drawn up to refurbish its spacious outdoor area. More importantly, with the stewardship of Sarah, Leanne and their team, and the support of Dizzy Ducks as a whole, the children passing through the setting’s doors are being given the perfect start to life too.