

— make *yourself* AT home

Linda Collins has been providing quality childcare for more than 20 years. *TN* visited her outstanding nursery to discover what she's doing right...





been in this building for 16 years now.

“When I was starting out, there was a lot more creative license for childcare providers,” she adds. “Ofsted and the old social services were in place, but they didn’t really get very involved; you only heard from the former, for example, when you were in trouble. So, whilst I appreciated being able to ‘do my own thing’, I didn’t have huge amounts of confidence in the system in terms of providing a framework of best practice. I decided to implement strict standards of my own, writing and rewriting policies and working 12-hour days, five days a week, because no one else understood where I was coming from. I had staff, but I was spoon-feeding them; until eventually I realised that I had to get them on board. Now, we write policies together, and of course this means that they are no longer dry documents in a folder on a shelf, but dynamic, interactive working aids, based on actual needs and experience...with the result that staff members are far more likely to use and abide by them. As a manager, you never stop learning – and one of my earliest lessons was the importance of highly trained, strongly motivated and fully involved staff.”

Linda is a qualified teacher and early years professional, and invests a good deal of time and energy in the professional development of her team of enthusiastic and intelligent employees, knowing that this is a sure-fire way of ensuring that the most important people in the building – the children – benefit from the best possible care and nurture during their time at nursery. Posters on the wall emphasise ways to foster high self-esteem, and they are as much for the benefit of the adults as the infants. “In my opinion,” Linda points out, “there is a worrying trend in this industry towards the creation of ‘accidental managers’ – individuals who are in positions of huge responsibility and authority, simply because they have moved through all the levels and management is the ‘next step’. That’s not how I work here. Staff members are mentored individually, and progressed according to their

It could be seen as slightly ironic that, in order to reach the door of Home From Home Nursery in St Albans, parents have to walk through the car park of a setting owned by one of the UK’s largest (and most successful) care providers. In an industry that can often seem to be dominated by the big players, it’s not always easy for small, independent operators to compete, let alone flourish – but Home From Home, with 20 years’ experience, Herts Accreditation Status and an Outstanding Ofsted report under its belt, has nothing to fear from its familiarly branded neighbour; and in fact, there’s something rather pleasing about seeing these two businesses, very different in terms of scale and structure, standing comfortably side by side, and offering parents genuine alternatives.

“I think there are different types of care, and parents who seek different types of care,” agrees Linda Collins, 50, Home From Home’s owner. “Some families enjoy the security of a more corporate approach – but we are often chosen precisely because we are small, and

more personal. We work hard at establishing excellent communication with parents, and they are very much partners in what we are doing – moreover, as I am the founder and principal, it’s easy for me to make on-the-spot decisions, which is something else that I think is appreciated by both staff members and parents.”

Home From Home currently offers care for 43 babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers, in a purpose-built building that has a distinctly and deliberately domestic feel. “I originated the business in an extension attached to my house,” explains Linda, “and I was idealistic from the beginning. The name I chose was absolutely key to my ethos – quite simply, I wanted the environment I was providing for children to be as homelike as possible, and this is still the case. At the same time, it has always been important to me that standards should be absolutely irreproachable. I didn’t even consider moving to larger premises until I was confident I could provide the same level of service that I was offering at home – we’ve



I came back to Home from Home, having taken a promotion elsewhere. The atmosphere is relaxed for children, but dynamic for adults, which is perfect.

TIFFANY ALDRIDGE, 23





1. self expression

1 “Once you put a uniform on someone, they tend to work in that mode,” explains Linda. “Colour says a lot about people - so staff members here choose the shades they wear, which allows them to express their personality and is a great motivator.”

abilities and experience. I certainly would never promote someone simply because he or she has reached a particular plateau of qualification; that’s the way to risk shattering a person’s confidence.” The EYFS is firmly embedded, and Linda is not only compliant, but actively in favour of its methods and aims. “As long as I’ve been in this industry, people have moaned about the paperwork,” she smiles, “but if you think about it for a moment, you realise that it’s vital to be able to provide reflective evidence for every child, and for your practice, and once you’ve taught staff how to use them, and the initial setting up has been done, both the EYFS and the SEF are so easy, and credible.” She is positive about how Ofsted has evolved, too, describing it as a “hugely valuable reflective tool – to help settings succeed.” She runs regular training sessions, not just for her own staff, but for other early years professionals; and is also working on organising swap days with reception classes in local primary schools, to enable the



2. child led

2 Babies and toddlers at Home From Home are in adjoining rooms and often share facilities. There are adult-led activities, such as painting, twice a week, but mostly it is the children who decide what to do. A separate bedroom is provided for those little ones who are happiest sleeping away from the hubbub, in the dark.

respective staff to understand more completely how the EYFS is implemented in each case, and what is expected of the children.

The atmosphere at Home From Home is a comfortable mix of relaxed, child-led activity and bright professionalism, with a distinct underpinning of values that some might describe as ‘old fashioned’, but that could just as easily – and perhaps more accurately – be referred to as ‘timeless’: respect, good manners, reasonable boundaries, and a sense of order. As founder and owner, Linda answers to no one but herself and the families who use

3 At meal times, the pre-prep children use personalised place mats they have made themselves, and take turns laying the table, matching water bottles to mats.



3. Social skills

4 Rain is no bar to outside play; there are always spare wellies for effective puddle jumping, and dry clothes that can be worn while soggy sets are tumble-dried.



4. Out in all weather

the nursery - and her vision of the kind of childcare she wishes to provide hasn’t dimmed over the 20 years she’s been in the business. “Whether they love you or hate you, parents like to see someone in charge who is strong, and who sticks to policy,” she insists. “We’re clear about our expectations at the outset, from parents and from children. For example, we say grace here before meals. To me, it brings a sense of decorum – it’s about paying respect, calming the children and being grateful. As I told the Ofsted inspectors, this will never change. There are some principles I simply can’t afford to mess about with – and actually, parents have never had a problem with it. Then there’s our sickness policy. As a working mother with four children, I know just how hard it can be when you are called in the middle of a meeting (it’s always in the middle of a meeting!) and asked to collect your son or



I graduated with a degree in education last year. This is my first permanent placing; it’s great here, because your voice is always heard.

MIKE PEARSON, 25



5. Qualified staff

5 All members of staff in the pre-prep room are graduates, and fully qualified to facilitate children's social and academic education according to the EYFS framework, and the abilities, needs and interests of the individual.

daughter. I make it very clear to parents that I understand, and also that it's in our interests to keep their offspring here if possible. So, when I do say, 'This child is too ill to be at nursery,' everyone knows that I mean it! It's important to make firm decisions, and stick to them - but it's a two-way thing, and we are always listening to parents and enabling their involvement. We have an active parent-staff association, which is a true platform for them to express their views; there are monthly and weekly newsletters emailed out, and daily diaries in which both staff and parents can write. These are all ways to bridge the gap for the children - to connect home and nursery in their minds as part of one, bigger family."

Despite the evident success of Home From Home, Linda is adamant that her ambitions do not include expansion. "People who know me sometimes get cross that I'm not 'businesslike' enough - I've always felt lucky to be able to

earn a living doing what I enjoy," she says, unapologetically. "I've been offered the opportunity to open additional nurseries, but for me, sustaining what we have here is my focus, and I've just signed a new 15-year lease. Staff need to be managed, and I need to do it - I employ a full-time administrator precisely to enable me to free myself much more for the role I prefer and for which I am qualified: teaching and training, being available to help and advise wherever I'm needed, and generally making sure the house runs smoothly, as it should do. And the thing is, it's not just about my own setting. I'm developing staff all the time, and sending them out into the wider industry. It's relentless, and tiring (and expensive!), but ultimately, what I do here can contribute towards making a difference for every child... and that's what gives me the reason to carry on."



6. aspirational environment

6 "I studied drama at university, which is really relevant to working with very young people; so much of how they learn at this stage is through role play. It builds confidence, and children benefit according to their specific needs. I feel fully supported here - I'm currently working towards my NVQ level 3, and in the long term would like to work either in child psychology, or as a drama therapist or social worker." **Lindsey Collins, 29**



7. natural transition

7 Transition between rooms is arranged according to the readiness of individual children. It's a very gentle process, involving a gradual build-up of visits. "We do form strong attachments with the children," says Tiffany, "so it's good that we are able to move them forward at a pace that suits everyone."