

Laying the foundations

Outstanding practice at Lavenders Day Nursery is built upon a well-supported staff team who never settle for merely 'good enough'. *TN* went to find out more...

Speaking to nursery manager Juliana Di'Niro and Childbase regional director Sue Andrews, it's easy to understand why Lavenders Day Nursery passed its most recent Ofsted inspection with flying colours – assemble a confident and well-qualified staff team overseen by a dedicated, hands-on leader, and back them up with a support structure devised to give them both the tools to do their jobs to the highest standards and the freedom to address the needs of the children in their care, and few would claim that you were going about things the wrong way. But whilst spelling out a basic formula for early years excellence might be relatively straightforward on the

page, putting it into practice is an entirely different matter; speaking with Juliana and Sue, it's equally easy to identify the passion and the hard work that has gone into – and continues to go into every day – providing those passing through Lavenders' doors with the best possible start in life.

At the time of writing the Childbase group can name 15 'outstanding' settings amongst the 40 it runs across the south of England – a particularly impressive ratio given that just 10 per cent of the 22,000 registered nurseries nationwide achieve Ofsted's top mark – with Lavenders, located in the town of Bedford, achieving its 'outstanding' early in 2011. It's a sizeable





Whilst **Lavenders** is a big **nursery**, the **groups** of children are **small**. Each **practitioner** knows exactly what their children need and can **adapt** accordingly

JULIANA DI'NIRO, MANAGER

setting, situated in a converted residential property on a quiet road not far from the town centre, with space for 112 2–5-year-olds at any one time and an adjoining building dedicated to the under-twos. Nine play rooms plus secure outdoor areas are overseen by 36 members of staff – and when asked about the reasons for Lavender's success it is they that Juliana points to first: "There's no single 'right

way' to become an 'outstanding' nursery, it takes a combination of different factors," she explains, "but one of the most important factors here is our team – their knowledge of the children's needs, and the way in which they can adapt activities to suit every one of them. Many of them have worked together for a long time – my deputy has been here for 20 years – and understand each other's



1. Something for everyone

"With the term 'inclusive practice', people tend to think, 'Have I got a range of different dolls, images and books?'," says Sue. "To Juliana, it's not about that; it's about the individual child standing in front of you – what is their culture, who are their family, what do they need? – and adapting practice to meet that need. That's a very different approach to that of many other settings."

needs and strengths, and can work together to benefit the children. Of course, we've had new arrivals too, because the nursery has expanded over time, so we've always had new ideas coming in, which is also important."

"I think another thing that makes Juliana's setting so strong is that the team take ownership of what happens in nursery," adds Sue. "Where in other nurseries you may find that the manager directs and the staff follow, here the Ofsted inspector was impressed by how well the team knew the children, and how there wasn't just direction from Juliana but from every member of the team."

That Lavender's practitioners are capable of operating in such a manner is, of course, testament to Juliana's leadership. She took over as manager at the nursery in 2001, bringing with her an emphasis on the use of natural resources and the educational benefits of heuristic play which is employed across the age range at Lavenders, and more recently applying the experience she gained from a degree in Child and Adolescent Studies and her Early Years Professional Status to the setting's continued development. There is a relaxed atmosphere throughout the nursery, with a wide range of activities for children to engage with in the manner they choose: "We allow the children





2 United we stand

to explore first and then come in to extend their learning,” she explains. “The practitioners are there to support, to challenge, to extend the children’s learning and move them on in the direction that each child needs.

“I always spend a lot of time in the rooms,” she continues; “the staff need a role model and support – they might ask if I can come and observe a child so that I can give them a different point of view; I might be an extra pair of hands, or just observe them to see what they do to make sure that everything is being done properly. And the children need to know that there’s someone there, too; they have their practitioners, but we’re really like a big family.”

Juliana’s hands-on approach is not only a personal one but part of a broader Childbase policy which Sue believes has been a key factor in Lavenders’ and the group’s success. “In Childbase in general we’ve tried to make sure that managers have the right support in place to enable them to play a hands-on role,” she says. “It’s important to us; they’re not office managers, they’re appointed to the position because of their expertise in working with the children. All of the Childbase nurseries that have earned ‘outstanding’ are strong settings because their managers are fully engrossed in the practice in the room.”

Whilst Juliana and her team are those responsible for delivering outstanding practice on the front line, they undoubtedly benefit from the solid foundations put in place by

2. Excellent partnerships with parents and the wider community underpins Lavenders’ ‘outstanding’ practice. Juliana has forged strong links with local schools, the library and neighbouring Russell Court – a residential unit for the elderly: “We welcome support when it’s offered but also let parents know when we might need it – we need to work together”.



3 “There’s continuous reflection about what we do, and what we can do. Looking at the group of children we have, we’ll ask is the way in which their room is set up suitable for them? Do they need more space or different resources? We’re always adapting activities to suit different groups of children – you can’t just say ‘We’ll always have it like this’.”



3 Making changes

4 What comes naturally

“We’ve always employed a treasure basket, heuristic play-based approach for younger children,” says Juliana, “but I always thought, why stop there? The older children benefit from having a variety of resources to engage with too. It’s important, because with plastic or wooden toys, there’s only so much a child can do to develop their imagination.”

Childbase. The company, founded over 20 years ago, has developed its own approach to early years education, staff training and self assessment, which has stood its nurseries in good stead come inspection time – and, most importantly, the children during their time at its settings.

“Before the EYFS was introduced we had our own learning programme called Sound Foundations, which focused on key areas such as self-esteem, language, social and physical skills,” explains Sue when asked about the ‘Childbase approach’. “When the EYFS came

in, we used the programme to enhance it, concentrating on the areas we felt were really key for children’s development, and which would best support them with the rest of their learning.

“We heard the other day about the proposed changes to the EYFS,” she adds, “and it makes us feel quite comfortable about the way it’s going! We’re happy about the idea of a greater focus on social skills, languages, the personal and social development of the children, on their self-esteem, because that has been our focus too, and we’re looking forward to developing it further.”

Supporting staff is a comprehensive training provision that aims to meet the unique needs of each nursery in the group. “We’ve got a whole range of approaches,” explains Sue. “There are training days at head office [located in Newport Pagnell] for those working towards management or curriculum qualifications, but we also have a training support team who come out to every



We’re trying to encourage every practitioner to feel that this is a profession of choice, something that they should be incredibly proud of

SUE ANDREWS, REGIONAL DIRECTOR, CHILDBASE



5. Speaking their language

5 Around 20 to 30 per cent of children attending Lavenders have English as a second language, so staff are encouraged to build up a basic vocabulary in the likes of Hindi and Italian, as well as eastern European

languages. “If you go to a place and nobody speaks your language you’ll always feel a bit of a stranger; but if someone can speak even a few words, it can make a real difference,” says Juliana.

nursery, as frequently as they are needed – be it once every couple of weeks, or once a month – to support, mentor and coach the practitioners in the rooms. On top of that, at Lavenders Juliana provides training sessions in staff meetings and room meetings. So, it goes from the one-to-one that might happen as the result of a review meeting, to groups or whole nursery sessions, or everyone working with, say, the ‘Butterflies’ age group [3–5-year-olds] Childbase-wide meeting up at head office to train and exchange ideas.”

Standards are maintained, and areas needing improvement are identified, with the aid of a rigorous internal audit, conducted annually and based on the internationally-recognised Early Childhood Environment Rating and Infant and Toddler Environment Rating scales (ECERs and ITERs to those working with them regularly). “Once a year the training team and the area manager will come into the setting, almost like

external inspectors, to conduct the audit, a spot check on that day, with a fresh set of eyes,” says Sue. “But Juliana’s team use it as a working document the whole time.”

“We have the audit once a year formally, but obviously the practice has to be continually good – not just when we do the audit,” agrees Juliana. “It’s a tool to help us evaluate our practice, to see if we’ve forgotten anything, however small.” It’s clear that the focus on meeting children’s individual needs that this system fosters, and the confidence in dealing with external inspectors that the regular audits impart to practitioners, is an important aspect of Lavenders’ and Childbase’s success.

But despite this centralised form of self-assessment, Sue is keen to stress that it is those working at Lavenders, and other nurseries in the group, who decide what their nurseries’ focus should ultimately be: “Childbase provide all the right tools for managers to assess and

6 Staff take joint responsibility for the children in the setting. “They add into each other’s learning journeys, they give opinions about children outside of their key group during planning meetings,” says Sue; “it means that in the nursery environment all of the children are supported by all of the adults.”



6. A team effort

evaluate their settings – the knowledge, the training – but at Lavenders, Juliana is the manager, and she selects what her nursery, children, families and practitioners need.”

There’s lots to say about Childbase – a growing company that was rated 23rd in the *Sunday Times* ‘Top 100 companies to work for’ list on account of its policy of staff development, that will in the not too distant future be entirely employee-owned, giving its practitioners a personal stake: the opportunity to shape and contribute towards the business, and a real sense of pride in what they do. But its focus, rather than on the corporate whole, is on the needs and development of individual nurseries – just as its ‘outstanding’ nurseries such as Lavenders focus on the needs and development of individual children, their families and the local area. It’s a philosophy that, judging by the achievements of Juliana and her team at Lavenders, is working perfectly.