

Naturally Brilliant

Nannas runs not one, but two outstanding nurseries – so what's the company's secret?

Broadly speaking, there are two ways to be 'outstanding': either you do exactly what your peers are doing, but much, much better – or you take an approach that is so fundamentally different, it instantly sets you apart from everyone else. Obviously, the latter course is potentially the riskier of the two, especially if you are working in an industry that is as heavily and publicly regulated, targeted and assessed as early years childcare provision. However, given a clear enough vision, and a team of talented and dedicated individuals, passionate about putting that vision into practice, it can yield truly remarkable results that more than justify choosing the path less travelled.

"I think we blew Ofsted's mind a bit at first!" laughs Hayley Chart, manager of Nannas Day Nursery at Colchester General Hospital, in Essex. "No topics; a different planned activity each day for every single child; and learning journey folders so comprehensive that they had to take a few of them away to digest properly." The inspectors may have been a little taken aback initially at Nannas' uniquely detailed and front line led approach, but they were certainly impressed with the standard of care provided by the company, granting 'outstanding' status to both its settings. (A second nursery, Nannas Hazelmere, is attached to a primary school in the same town.)

Key workers at Nannas will plan a daily activity for each individual child, based on one of the six L&D areas of the EYFS, and relevant to his or her learning journey. However, it is essential that the child independently chooses to access that activity, so if it is still being ignored after a couple of days, the staff member will need to start thinking laterally!



“I love my job. The team here is absolutely amazing - and we have the best relationship with the parents ever!”

KERRY SEABORN, 23

When CEO Keely Hogben co-founded Nannas Day Nurseries in 1997, she was inspired by strong ideas about both child development and staff empowerment. Understanding that a fully committed, motivated team is essential to create an atmosphere where ‘individual learning through play’ is not just a slogan on a brochure but a common aspiration, mutually achieved, she instilled an extraordinary culture of openness within the organisation that continues to thrive today. “I’ve been with the company for six years now – as a manager for four,” explains Hayley. “Coming here was quite a change from where I was before. I was used to

management being very sheltered, with decisions made behind closed doors and staff being given instructions, without any explanation or justification. But within the first few weeks of joining Nannas, Carrie [Wiseman, Nannas operations director] and I were given the opportunity to set up the Hazelmere nursery together. We were literally told, ‘here you go – here’s the keys, here’s the paperwork you need, we trust you, so get on and do it.’ We were a bit taken aback at being given such responsibility – but it means that we’ve had a real input into the way the nursery runs, so we have every reason to make it work as effectively as possible, taking into account the needs, wants and interests of every child, the parents and the staff.”

“It’s a nursery for everyone,” adds Carrie. “Rather than restricting leadership to one or two ‘top individuals’ behind closed doors, we’ve always been encouraged to surround ourselves with people, all bringing different specialist experience and awareness. That way, you end up with deep knowledge that can be drip fed and filtered to everyone else – we all share the information, rather than one person having it all and keeping it in the office, where it’s not actually helping anybody. And we’re aware that our staff members are our most valuable resource. For example, when we were rewriting the operational plan for the



1 dedicated staff



EYFS, we gave the forms to the nursery nurses. After all, they're the ones doing the most important job, so why wouldn't we let them make decisions about policy? It's hypocritical to trust people with children's lives but not to come up with a nappy changing plan! We use their skills and strengths; then it's up to us, as managers, to be clever and make their suggestions work within the EYFS, legislation, operational practicality and so on."

"It works," says Hayley, "because it means the staff understand why things happen a certain way – we've made those decisions together. And if they come up with an idea and there's a good reason why it can't be implemented, they don't walk away feeling as though they've been rejected out of hand with a flat 'no' – they know we'll try and work together to find a new way around the problem."

"We're not an easy company to work for," points out Carrie. "We push people hard, and we're very honest from the start about how much we expect from them. But we also make sure that everything they do is appreciated – and we reward them all the time, whether that's with 'doughnut days' at the end of a particularly hard week; our annual Oscars-style award ceremony; flexibility with

1 Every staff member must have or be working towards a level three qualification. Once this is achieved, they are encouraged to take their studies further, be it through an NVQ in management, or an early years degree. There is also ongoing training in anything that interests the team, from child protection to Forest Schools.

2 When children start at Nannas, they have as many free settling in periods as parents and staff feel is needed. They meet the room leader, who puts together a care plan. A key worker is not assigned until the child has clearly started to develop a bond with a particular staff member (with a co-key worker scheme covering any operational problems this may provoke).



2 settling time

example for taking no sick leave over the course of a year). They also get paid extra for every hour they spend on their children's learning journey folders. It takes a while to build a team where 100% of members want to be here, every day, 100% love their job and are all dedicated and enthusiastic. But that's what we've got. We have incredibly low turnover, too – one guy left us about 18 months ago, to go into teaching, but as a general rule, once we

shift patterns; or bonuses on top of their salary (for

3 The rear garden at Nannas NHS was remodelled last year as part of the nursery's transition to a natural environment. Previously, the paved area, with its trikes and scooters, was hugely popular – now, the children prefer to spend time playing in the bark chips, running through trees, and accessing a constantly changing range of intriguing activities, designed to fire young imaginations and develop growing minds and bodies.



3 space to grow

are happy with them, and they know our ways, people tend to stay – they love the autonomy, and are never bored."

One of the most recent and major, staff-inspired, developments at Nannas has been the decision to move to an 'all natural' environment. "We've always had treasure baskets hanging around, and heuristic play sessions, maybe once a week," begins Carrie, "but Keely and I started exploring the idea much further, going on courses, spending time with Sue Gascoyne, of PlaytoZ, and looking at theorists like Elinor Goldschmied – and the more we brought back to the staff, the more they took it on board. We did exercises like walking round the nursery and trying to imagine every colour as a sound. It really was overwhelming – especially thinking how it must feel for a baby – to come from a nicely coordinated living room with maybe a few rugs and pictures, to walls and floors

"It's lovely the way the children play with the treasure baskets. They'll sit and enjoy them for an hour at a time - they don't tend to do that with other toys."

NICOLA GUNFIELD, 25



4. buried treasure



4 "This is my treasure basket, for heuristic play. I put it together myself (mostly with stuff stolen from my mum's cupboards!) – we had a competition to see who could come up with the best one. There are plenty of natural materials, and a mixture of noisy things, different sized containers and so on. Some of the children prefer to get on with playing

by themselves; others like an adult to join in, asking us questions and suggesting things we can do. We often have the baskets out towards the end of the day – it's nice for parents to come in and see what goes on with them (otherwise, they can sometimes have trouble understanding why we've given their son or daughter such odd playthings!)"

5 "The children wanted to make circles with the stones – I did one, and they were copying me. They do like going back to the same patterns over and over again, and circles are quite a natural movement. This kind of play is good for improving hand-eye coordination and also, inspiring discussion. For example, Imogen is going on holiday soon, so she's been making aeroplane trails in the sand and talking about travel. It's just a case of picking up on what they're getting out of the activity, and expanding on it – that's why we also put loads of different things in the box to bury and find, like stones, cotton reels and containers. Anything to spark the imagination."

5. fire imaginations



blaring with reds and greens and blues. So now, each room has chosen a single, muted colour, and the atmosphere is still buzzing – but soothing, too. The 0-1 rooms changed over to a completely heuristic approach towards the end of 2009 – we got rid of all the plastic toys and instead, brought in all kinds of natural materials. It meant that the staff had to get really creative in the ways they were covering the six EYFS learning and development areas; but they soon started coming up with ideas, and sparking off each other's imaginations. It's moving through the rest of the rooms now, and we've noticed a real change in the children's behaviour – they're calmer, more confident, and constantly pushing their curiosity further."

There's a definite Montessori feel about the Nannas environment – soft colours, natural materials, child-sized furniture, accessible, well-organised activities, and free-flow play

with constant access to large outside areas are all key elements. However, the company is not that easily labelled. "We 'borrow' from everyone!" grins Carrie. "For example, we're toying at the moment, now we have a settled team, with getting the staff to move up through the rooms with their key children (which is a Steiner/Waldorf concept). Obviously, that's an operational nightmare – but that's my problem, not anyone else's, and if it's best for the children, we'll go for it. We don't like to make life easy for ourselves – we're always looking for something new to do, gradually putting together a distinctly 'Nannas' ethos, whilst still ticking all those important Ofsted boxes."

Wandering through the Nannas rooms, witnessing the calm, inspiring surroundings first hand, and talking with the creative, passionate and professional young women (both Hayley and Carrie are just 27 years

old) who will be responsible for taking the business forward, full of pride in their collective achievements so far, and ideas for the future, there is a definite sense of being in at the start of something that could be very, very big indeed. As Hayley puts it, "there's a real energy about the company, which I love."

The combination of sound business practice, excellent and innovative staff motivation, intelligent use of theory, and a constant drive for improvement, with the children who are in the company's care as the constant focus – developed, nurtured and loved – is one that is equally attractive to parents, practitioners and entrepreneurs (not to mention Ofsted-approved). The organisation has an active expansion programme, its own accreditation scheme, and is also looking into the possibility of running franchises – could it end up being not so very unusual, after all?