

Team players

Staffed by enthusiastic and knowledgeable practitioners, given the opportunity to work to their strengths, Training Depot Day Nursery is offering children in a deprived area of Luton the perfect start to life...

There's no one reason any nursery is successful; success, be it financial, educational or a happy combination of the two, is invariably down to a number of factors – from strong leadership and good training, to creativity and simple hard work. Staff at the Training Depot Day Nursery can point to each of these factors as having played a role in their setting's success, but press them to pick a single reason why they're 'outstanding' in every area and they'll give you a one-word answer: 'teamwork'.

Situated in a deprived area of Luton, the Training Depot occupies what was once a detached home, its two storeys and attic room, packed with opportunities for learning and play, offering early years education for 46 children from one year of age. Its owner, David Reavell, took the reins of what was at the time a struggling business in 2006, having previously operated a nursery in the USA. Despite the challenges they had faced, former owner, now staff coordinator, Sandhya Godhania; long-time manager, Michelle Baldock; and deputy manager, Fiona McCowen chose to remain with the business, and what on the face of it might seem an unlikely partnership has flourished, collectively transforming the nursery into a setting whose good practice is being held up by the local council as an example to others in the area.

For David, the goal was clear from the outset: "It took me about eight or nine months to find a nursery that I felt I could do something with," he remembers. "I wasn't looking for an 'outstanding' nursery – and what I found was not 'outstanding'. When I arrived it had a different name, and had had a difficult history. It'd had several inspections, and needed improvement. But that was what I was really looking for, because if you buy a really good nursery, what can you do beside just keep it going?"

"During one of the first conversations I had with Michelle, we agreed that we were going to be 'outstanding'; that's what we're here for, so that was the objective right from the start," he adds. "Of course, we didn't know exactly how we were going to achieve that!"

Speaking to the team, it's clear that the Training Depot benefited immensely from





We have a **great** team ethos: regardless of your level of responsibility in the **nursery**, you can have an input because we're always **communicating**

SANDHYA GODHANIA, STAFF COORDINATOR

the combination of continuity and change that resulted from David's takeover: while Sandhya, Michelle and Fiona stayed on, they were amongst only eight from the original team to remain. "When I bought the nursery, the quality of staff in place wasn't good and

trying to implement the changes I wanted as an owner while trying to support Michelle was a tough job," admits Sandhya, "which is why I made the decision to sell the business.

"A few of the staff left over time following David's arrival because they weren't happy at



1. **New roles**

Although the nursery has a well-established team, there is plenty of scope for staff to progress and take on new responsibilities. "There are always opportunities when staff take maternity leave," says Sandhya, "but we also create roles, so everyone has a part to play. We have a student coordinator, we change our key-holders, and when we have different projects running we put different people in charge. We try to give staff a level of responsibility where they can make their own choices, which I think gives them a lot of satisfaction."

the changes that were being made – but they needed to happen, in the interests of everyone. It meant we took on new staff, which was really good as we could ensure they were trained to the standards we wanted.

"From a personal point of view, I wanted to stay on to finish my own qualifications and to see how things would go," Sandhya explains. "We agreed we'd give it six months or so, to see how it worked. But having that knowledge of the setting and being able to support David worked really well – and that's how our management system came about really; we feel the way we work is really different."

Said management system sees Michelle fulfilling a primarily office-based role with responsibility for completing all of the main documentation required by the setting, from policies to operational planning, as well as interacting with parents as they arrive and



2. Making progress



leave the nursery, whilst Sandhya works across the nursery's rooms, supporting and observing staff and coordinating training. David is also on site most days to support them.

"Our success has been about working to what are strengths are," David explains. "For example, what Michelle does, she's good at. She will be in the rooms from time to time because there needs to be interaction there to ensure that the policies and practices that we write down are being implemented. But most of the time she's out of the rooms, because that's where she's most effective."

Establishing a system that takes advantage of staff members' strengths is only part of the Training Depot's success story, though. As important has been the team's ability to communicate and support each other in making improvements. "From the outset, we set in place very clear channels of communication – between myself and the managers, between the managers and the staff, and then between the staff and parents and outside agencies," says David. "It's a rigid system, we stick to it and it works."

"Because Michelle has the role she has, I have the time to float between rooms and support staff," Sandhya explains when asked how this works in practice. "It means if they do have any issues they can come to me straight away – 'How do I deal with this?', 'This is what I'm going to do, what do you think about it' – and they feel comfortable doing that. I also carry out staff appraisals every six months, so I can sit down and discuss with everyone how they're getting on and find out if they're having any difficulties.

"It's also part of a process of continual self-assessment," she continues, "as it allows me

2. If you think you're 'outstanding' and just want to stay 'outstanding', you're not going to move forward," says Sandhya. "Since our inspection we've made so many changes, we're constantly moving and trying new things, and we make sure everyone is on board with whatever we do. I think that's one of the dangers for successful settings: if you don't keep moving, staff get bored; they can lose motivation."



to set everyone objectives – they could be something as simple as just improving observations, or running room meetings; or for room leaders, it could be 'manage this project', or looking at time management. If anyone needs some extra help, I can ask the room leaders to mentor them, and in turn I can mentor the room leaders, so it works as a chain. At the beginning it was just me mentoring, but now everybody will be helping

3. Leading from a focus on the importance of traditional values – please and thank yous, no pushing and shoving and the like – the Training Depot made the decision to host parenting classes. The sessions, delivered by staff from the local children's centre, take place for 10–12 weeks once a year during nursery hours, allowing parents to discuss different issues whilst their children are in practitioners' capable hands. "It can be a challenge to get parents to attend, but even if we're helping one or two we think it's worthwhile," says Sandhya.



3. A helping hand

4. Great outdoors

Whilst money has been spent in significantly improving the Training Depot's outdoor area, the nursery was lacking a place for children to dig and grow, so staff approached local care home St Anne's. Blessed with a secure grassy area, the home has given children a patch of earth to call their own – now they're regular visitors, and even put on a Christmas concert for the home's residents.

somebody at some point, depending on their appraisals and the objectives they've been set.

"The reality is that we're reflecting all the time, even through meetings," she adds. "Recently, for example, we did a 'strengths and weaknesses' exercise; staff had to do it for each other. You have to be brutally honest, and it can be hard at the time when you're reading the feedback, but as you talk it through and discuss everything it's fine – and it helps everyone to fill out their appraisals honestly. The support and communication really is ongoing, and it really works – you can see the improvement," Sandhya concludes. "The staff have all grown in confidence, and their knowledge base has grown as we've grown as a setting."

With such a clear focus on self-

Staff are **successful** at motivating children and capture their interest and arouse their **curiosity** because they are **enthusiastic** themselves



5. Healthy attitude

5 As well as supporting their children's learning and development, staff at the Training Depot are committed to keeping them healthy. The nursery is signed up to the Healthy Under 5s scheme and believe it has had a positive impact. "Before we signed up we used to have children

coming in with crisps and chocolates for their breakfasts," says Sandhya. "It didn't matter how you explained it to parents. But the scheme has helped us to explain why healthy food is important and parents have really taken it on board."

assessment it comes as no surprise to learn that the Training Depot's team place equal emphasis on training – both of existing staff, and those taking their first steps on a career path in early years childcare. "It's a major part of what we do," David says of the latter. "Instead of having staff come in from other nurseries with the good or bad habits they've picked up, we're teaching people from an early age. We're in the apprentices scheme and are just finishing off apprentice three and four, and while Sandhya isn't responsible for delivering all their training, she is watching, interacting and supporting the outside agency that is."

"We do a number of outside courses, but I do a lot of in-house training as well depending on what's needed," adds Sandhya. "And that usually comes out through appraisals or staff meetings. Before

our Ofsted, for example, we offered support and asked them questions to get an idea of their knowledge base and find out what needed improving."

After the wholesale changes in personnel that occurred following David's takeover of the business, the Training Depot's team is today very well-established, as you might expect given the support systems in place. "We don't really have a turnover at all," confirms Michelle, "the only time they leave is to have babies! But that's been an important factor in allowing us to become 'outstanding', as it means consistency for the parents as well as the children. We all work well together, and we all know what we expect of each other because we've been together for so long."

"We've got a super staff here now," agrees David. "We work as a team and we go out

6 The nursery's multi-cultural intake includes a number of children with English as a second language. "It was really challenging to begin with, as we had a large number of Polish children starting at once," says Michelle. "But we're lucky in that we have a huge number of staff who are bilingual, which helps settle the children in. We also use picture communication and sign language, so there's a number of things we've put in place to stop language being a barrier." The nursery also offers English classes to parents and the wider community.



6. No barriers

as a team, and the fact that we have a number of staff members on zero-hour contracts – without the guarantee of regular hours – and there's very little complaint, tells me this management team do things properly."

The story of the Training Depot Day Nursery is many ways a lesson in the importance of strong management, but whilst it's clear that much thought has gone into ensuring the nursery works as it should, its underlying philosophy is very simple. "We have something like a hundred kids come in every week," says David, "and they all come here to have fun. I've always believed that if we can't have fun with them, there's something wrong with us, so I take the things that stop or spoil the fun very seriously."

Spending a day at the Training Depot, seeing happy children interacting with enthusiastic adults, and the range of play and learning opportunities on offer – everything from an interactive whiteboard to the clutch of newly hatched chicks welcoming small groups of excited visitors upstairs – it's impossible to miss the sense of fun, or the staff's commitment to delivering the best early years experience they can.