

# “Staff need to feel valued and supported...”

In order to create an emotionally positive environment for children, managers must first remember to consider their practitioners' emotional wellbeing, says

**Cath Hunter...**

Working in an early years setting can be a rewarding job, but also a demanding and exhausting one. The morale of staff, and their enjoyment and commitment to good working practice, can have a huge impact on the atmosphere that exists in the setting and, consequently, how happy and settled children are during their time there. In order for staff to give their best to the children, they need to feel valued and supported. It is important that they feel they have a voice and that their thoughts and ideas matter. This can be achieved by providing both formal and informal avenues that enable practitioners to provide feedback to colleagues and senior members of staff. For example, these avenues might include a staff suggestion box for suggestions or comments, which can be anonymous. This can provide a more accessible way for staff to raise issues that may be difficult to express in person, for example, “Could the person on first break ensure they come back promptly so it doesn't affect the other person's break.” Comments such as these can be explored during staff meetings, so staff feel that their concerns are being listened to. They can be acknowledged and responded to in a positive way even if they aren't implemented.

There are many opportunities to recognise and appreciate a staff team. While nurseries are busy places and it's not always easy to make the time or effort to do this, it can be identified and acknowledged throughout the year. You could try introducing a 'colleague of the month' award, identified on a board in the staff room and acknowledging their work, for example, *Julie did a fantastic job rearranging the outdoor store cupboard, thank you.* When staff are encouraged to express their feelings openly and honestly then they are validated in the role they carry out in the nursery. It's essential that staff are able to do



this, feel safe enough to do so, and demonstrate positive ways of managing their feelings to the children. This can be achieved by encouraging staff to say if they feel stressed or overwhelmed, and if they need support. When staff do not feel valued and respected for themselves and their work, this can transmit to the children.

Regular training will allow all staff to keep their skills relevant, and will also boost morale and enthusiasm. One member of staff attending an inspirational training day can have a positive impact across the whole staff team.

## Staff relationships

As touched upon last issue, the quality of the relationships between staff in early years settings impacts on their ability to work together effectively and also to model positive relationships to the children. When

children have experienced living with disharmony and conflict they are more receptive to noticing this in other relationships; thus, if the relationship between staff is one of mistrust, resentment and animosity this will be witnessed by the children through verbal and non-verbal interactions. As such, relationships between staff must be built upon mutual respect and feature open and honest communication. This can be demonstrated in front of the children so they are able to experience the impact of relating to other people in this way.

A level of self-awareness, along with an ability to reflect on your own behaviour, is an essential aspect of working with children. It enables staff to make positive changes to how they work, thus impacting on how they feel about work, which will in turn influence their behaviour.



One member of staff **attending** an **inspirational** training day can have a positive **impact** across the whole staff team

**CATH HUNTER**





## Emotional awareness

### CASE STUDY:

*Sarah, a nursery practitioner, was setting up the room in which she worked. She was looking forward to the day – the team were implementing an idea she had found in a book and making sea creatures from a variety of art materials – when another practitioner appeared at the door with a message from the manager to say that Sarah was needed to cover in the baby room as they were short-staffed.*

*Sarah was upset, frustrated and angry that she would miss the activity she had been preparing and looking forward to. She spent the afternoon feeling like this and thinking about looking for another job. This resulted in her being detached and short-tempered with the children. Her sense of wellbeing and happiness at work, and her ability to manage the children's behaviour, were both affected as a result of her low morale. It was a difficult afternoon for her and the children.*

The outcome of this situation could have been very different if the nursery manager or a senior member of staff had approached Sarah in person, apologised and offered an explanation for the change.

### Staff morale

The manager and senior practitioners play an important role in defining the ethos of any setting and whether the emotional wellbeing

of everyone is a priority. In order for a staff team to look after the children and support their emotional needs it's imperative that they experience this for themselves. Therefore, an effective nursery requires a manager and senior staff who are able to model good working practice themselves, by being visible around the setting and available for staff, children and parents. They need to support the staff on a practical and emotional level, and make time to listen to their thoughts and feelings. It takes a teamwork approach to run an effective setting; this can only be achieved by valuing and supporting the staff. It is useful to be aware of both verbal and non-verbal communication between staff and the atmosphere within each room. Encourage open and honest communication between staff working at all levels, as this can have a big impact on how people feel about coming to work, and staff morale.

All managers require a level of self-awareness and the ability to reflect on their own daily practice and relationships, with staff, children and parents, within the setting. They need to be able to be both nurturing and critical at times. An honest evaluation of the expectations that they have set up within the staff team is also important; some may not turn out to be the most effective way of achieving the best results from a given team. An indicator of how happy practitioners are

### FIVE POINTS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO CONSIDER...

- Express your feelings in a professional manner.
- Reflect on your practice to make positive changes.
- Ensure you access inspirational training.
- Ask for and provide support to your colleagues.
- Remember, children are affected by the atmosphere between staff.

may be the frequency of staff turnover within the team – there is always the potential for the movement of staff within any setting, but if staff are leaving in large numbers, at regular intervals, some honest reflection by the nursery manager and senior staff may help to change this.

Remember, when staff are happy and feel appreciated in their work, this in turn impacts on the likelihood of the children in your care feeling happy, settled and secure. You need to create an emotionally positive environment for everyone and promote a sense of emotional wellbeing within your setting.

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