



Sue Churchill looks at a double winner in the NMT Nursery Awards, a nursery that caters for 'little people' but thinks big



Little big nursery

Twenty three years old and pregnant with her eldest child, Debbie Gunn opened a nursery in 1996 in a small village between Faversham and Canterbury in Kent. None of that sounds good. Would it even survive?

Now an Ofsted 'outstanding' 40-place nursery, D-Dee's has achieved much more than mere survival, culminating in wins in two categories of the NMT Nursery Awards 2017: for the individual nursery and, tellingly, for the nursery team.

Not only that, but business-performance over the past three years has consistently improved with routinely high occupancy levels and an average three enquiries a week. With 23 children leaving last summer for school, they could have been facing a serious deficit, as is common in the sector, but effective marketing zapped that.

"Our children could not have been better prepared for their life after nursery, and nearly five years after she left, our eldest daughter still remembers key activities held at the nursery, the staff and the fun she had. Her strong sense of fairness, fun and education come directly from Debbie and her team."

Matt Cloke, parent of Meredith (10 years old), Oswald (eight years old) and Cordelia (four years old).



Small is beautiful

This too has been endorsed by a win, this time in the Swale Business Awards 2017, where D-Dee's won the judges' special award for a business deserving recognition for its exceptional achievements.

First things first

So, where did the range of skills needed for success at this level come from? Yes, there's a lot of serious research underpinning their practice and their business and management skills. But first and foremost, Debbie has always loved children: when she was in hospital at three years old, the only way they could stop her crying was to put her in with the babies. There's the explanation for her empathy with children, which lies

behind the nursery's success with children and parents.

An illustration of this: parents will often encourage children to leave their special things behind when they go off to nursery or anywhere new. As Debbie says, "How would you as an adult feel if we took your handbag off you with all your 'invaluables' inside?" So, all the children – known as 'little people' in recognition of their status – are encouraged to bring in whatever they want - from teddy to blanket. There's a basket at nursery where they can safely leave them when they're ready and get them later if they want.

"Everyone is unique"

Empathy is, indeed, the key. Tellingly, Debbie doesn't say that every child is unique, but, "Everyone is unique." That includes her staff, who are immensely loyal and who provide the skills base a successful nursery demands, and the parents.

For example, deputy manager, Dawn Scott-Elvey has been with her 18 years. Another colleague has stayed 16 years. Her Senco has been there for 11 years in different guises. D-Dee's actively chooses to have more staff than the statutory minimum.

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"I have seen the nursery get involved in the community in so many ways. At Christmas the nursery run a reverse advent calendar and children / families were encouraged to bring in items to help local people associated with the charity Porchlight, helping those people who are homeless."

Jane O'Neill, parent of Hilary
(three years old)



Bonding in the countryside

This wealth of qualified, enthusiastic staff in itself presents a problem - limited scope for promotion. But, as Debbie says, "We work on our staff, celebrating their interests and talents, with our SEN advocates, two-year-old advocates, music makers and cooks working together to give our little people the best start."

So, as interests emerge among her team, she sets up the requisite training and then create a role to include the newly acquired skill. This, in turn, benefits the children. All this emerges organically as they all know each other very well.

Sometimes, a specific training need might surface in response to a condition like autism. Debbie will know whose box autism might tick and so on. In the same way, she has a Senco star, who can only work part time, but there are two other staff ready and willing to take over when the Senco isn't there. It's all about making it work.

The beneficiaries of this mix-and-match approach, which is led by practical needs and research, are the children. One piece of research resulted in a project where they took all the toys out of the nursery for a week, and gave the children instead cardboard and boxes.

Communication and creativity improved. Now they only have manufactured toys as they need them. Thus, an animal theme might require a basket of dinosaurs and a shelf of African elephants, while bits and pieces from junk shops can become spurs to creativity and learning.

Coming home

The ethos behind D-Dee's is that it is a real place, a home. So, it isn't just the little ones who can have a sleep when they're tired. This is their home, their other home - they can go to bed whenever they want, whatever their age, and when they go to bed, it's to the bedroom they go, just like home.

Ask the parents

And do the parents like it? Well, as parent Jane O'Neill says: "The nursery are constantly looking for new ways to engage parents and build strong partnerships. They want parents to feel that they are part of their child's education." One way in which Debbie facilitates this is by providing parents with an electronic key fob, which enables them to let themselves into the nursery whenever they choose, maybe pop in to see their child, at any time within opening hours. This is introduced to parents as a privilege and is respected as such with no security consequences.

Innovations like this are embedded in D-Dee's can-do culture. They are constantly looking to improve, welcoming new ideas with "So, how can we do this?"

When they wanted to set up a joint project with a nearby residential home, they hit a problem: the care home said 11.00am was the best time, but the children's lunch was midday. What to do? Sit down and resolve it. The upshot was that the home said, "Eat with us." Result: more time for the two age groups to socialise and get to know each other.

So, what makes for a really successful nursery? In a word: relationships. Dawn sings the song 'Proud' when a child, staff member or parent does something really well: 'What have you done today to make you feel proud?' Everyone is learning and achieving together. Dawn sang the same song at the NMT Awards judging day. ■

"I have to mention the staff. I cannot praise them enough. They go to work, they get sand in their hair, glue up their arms, spaghetti in the toes; you name it! They are a wonderful bunch of people and my son loves every one of them."

Ali Barrett, parent.

- Debbie Gunn is the owner manager of the multi-award-winning D-Dee's Day Nursery in Kent, which combines a home-from-home environment with a love for exploring the local community and countryside.

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