LEADERSHIP

Forget the tick lists

When it comes to measuring children's readiness for school, some parents can have unrealistically formal expectations, says nursery manager Kathryn Peckham

I held our monthly PTA meeting with our very active, very vocal committee this week. Over tea and biscuits I was once again challenged to explain why our children, when leaving us for school, were not as able to perform as our competitors'. When those ones leave for school, apparently they are all able to write their name, the letters of the alphabet, numbers up to 20 – my parents know this as they have seen all the worksheets!

As I sat there emphatically defending the development of the child from within, to become a confident learner ready and eager to embrace the experiences school will bring, I began to get the feeling I was the only sane person in an insane world.

In the cool light of day, I decided there was one way to solve this issue – I needed reinforcements! Clearly parents have concerns with their child's readiness for school, just as with the 'correct' time to walk, to talk or any other of the developmental milestones. And they will compare, and judge and worry. They do not have the benefits of years of training to give them the sense of security that comes from knowing there are more important things than these mental tick lists of milestones achieved.

So I have decided to hold an evening for the parents with reception heads from all of our feeder schools. They will be invited to detail the areas of development they are looking to see in their new September intake, helping us to demonstrate that from the time children enter the nursery as tiny babies we are preparing them for this important phase in their lives.

The time for conforming will come soon enough to these children. We are so privileged, working in the early years, to have the opportunity of working with their imaginations as they discover the world around them.

In such an emotive sector where everyone has an opinion, it is easy to have moments of doubt. But when all the research points you in one direction, stay true to what you know to be right.

MANAGEMENT: LEADERSHIP

Where all staff can follow their dreams

An award-winning manager who started out as nursery assistant tells *Karen Faux* how she promotes staff members' development

At Hopes and Dreams Montessori Nursery in Islington, London, manager Cornelia Harrison seeks to give her staff the same opportunities that she has had to progress. That means supporting them to discover their talents, undertake training and be part of a management structure which is focused and forward-looking.

Ms Harrison, who was the recipient of *Nursery World*'s Nursery Manager of the Year 2010 award, came to London from Austria on a gap year 15 years ago and fell in love with the city. When she stumbled across the nursery and applied for a nursery assistant's position 13 years ago, it had just celebrated its first birthday. Since then Hopes and Dreams has grown from what was originally a small overnight hotel for babies into a large nursery school, and Ms Harrison herself has journeyed through roles in different rooms, to become manager four years ago.

Among her strengths is an all-round understanding of the business and an ability to step into anyone else's role if absolutely necessary. She is keen that other staff share this ability

With 200 children on roll and 40 staff, the pace of life is hectic, and yet there is always time for individual attention to be given to staff and their needs. Ms Harrison says that over the years she has benefited hugely from colleagues' support – and particularly from that of owner Susan Bingham.

Getting things right from the moment someone starts is vital. Ms Harrison says, 'When staff join us we offer them serious help to get them settled,' she says. 'New staff receive a lot of support outside of their rooms, and over their first ten to 12 weeks we introduce them to our policies and procedures, and make them familiar with weekly procedures, such as staff and parent memos. At the end of their three-month probation we have a meeting with them to discuss how everything is going and get their feedback.

'Everyone enjoys their first three months with us and being introduced to what we do and how we do it. For me personally it is good to get to know new staff members and find out what they are interested in and what their strengths are.'

Ms Harrison is keen to identify opportunities for staff development. 'We currently have a couple of staff undertaking foundation degrees and another two are studying for their Montessori Diploma. We have also restructured for two staff members to move into a senior Montessori teacher role and assisting deputy manager role.'

A lot of the senior staff have been with Hopes and Dreams for a long period of time. 'We rarely recruit outside for a senior position,' she says. 'I am prepared to take on applicants with no qualifications if they demonstrate a natural ability and enthusiasm, or if they have experience. But I always push these staff strongly towards taking their NVQ 2 and 3.'

Dealing with human resources issues is the most time-consuming element of Ms Harrison's job. 'There are a lot of organisational issues and sometimes it can be challenging, but I share this with my deputy manager. We find appraisals are very effective in getting the best out of people. These are carried out every six months, and staff are asked to complete a form asking what they like and what they don't. They are asked to grade themselves across different areas of practice and outline how they see themselves. In order to be useful it has to be a two-way conversation that results in some genuine practical strategies, and often these are to do with training needs. Follow-up appraisals allow us to find out whether targets are being achieved.'

On the subject of training, Ms Harrison concedes that this year the nursery's training budget will inevitably be squeezed. 'We understand from our local authority that all basic, one-day courses will have to be paid for this year,' she says. 'These courses provide important updates in areas such as health and safety, so it is essential that staff attend them. Training is important on a number of fronts, but particularly for the opportunity it gives staff to bring new ideas back to the nursery.'

She adds, 'Rising costs are outside of our control, but we are determined to keep abreast of training. We are liaising with other local nurseries and agencies to share expertise and resources. As part of a programme with Early Years Islington, we have exchanged visits with local settings and had the opportunity to get to know them, and we will be strengthening these links this year.'

Meanwhile, all staff are looking forward to the opening of their garden in the summer. 'Susan had been negotiating for 12 years to acquire the garden next door and finally secured it last year,' says Ms Harrison. 'Since then a lot of work has gone into getting it ready and we are all very excited by its possibilities.' ■

Visit www.hopesanddreams.co.uk

Cornelia Harrison (left) makes sure there is always time to give individual attention to staff

MEHTAB FAZEL, EARLY YEARS PROFESSIONAL AND NURSERY SENCO

'I have worked here for eight years and have had the opportunity to study, first to become a Montessori teacher and then for a foundation degree and EYPS. I am now in charge of the curriculum and recently changed to having no fixed role. Instead, I concentrate on spending time in each of the rooms every day to get a feel for how the whole nursery is performing. My job is to identify any support that is needed, whether it is to do with the environment, budgets, how staff work together or record-keeping.

'The management structure here is flexible, with good lines of communication and a mutual understanding of different roles. Our monthly meetings are one of our more formal ways of bringing everyone in the nursery together and updating them with latest developments. In these meetings we discuss any changes to staff, celebrations and outings, special achievements and new projects.

'A lot of my time is spent supporting staff and helping them to deal with change. We are very lucky in that we have a very good team, and at any one time most are engaged in some kind of training. They bring in so many different ideas and we are always open to following up their suggestions. It is important to get things right from the start, so I ensure that staff get a lot of attention and help during their first few months with us. That time spent is very worthwhile in the long run.'

On course

18 MARCH
ATTACHMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS
This workshop explores the impact of early relationships on the developing child and aims to promote understanding of the emotional well-being of young children, and the practitioner's role in facilitating this.
- *Bristol. Cost: £35. Visit www.peytu.co.uk or call 0117 908 0601*

29 MARCH
LETTERS AND SOUNDS
Participants will learn how to build and adapt the best approach for all pupils using key guidance on outstanding Ofsted level 1 Letters and Sounds. They can take away a full bank of resources to use immediately.
- *London. Cost: £259 plus VAT. Visit www.osiriseducational.co.uk or email dlynch@osiriseducational.co.uk*

29 MARCH
ATTACHMENT AND TRAUMA
In this half-day workshop, participants will explore how to develop their skills to help support looked-after and adopted children who are struggling in educational environments.
- *West Midlands. Cost: £25. E-mail nicola@braveheartadoptionsupport.co.uk or call 07843 559 760*

30 MARCH
FACILITATE AND DEVELOP EFFECTIVE LEARNING THROUGH PLAY
This Nursery World conference will cover how to make the most of your outside space, getting the balance right between adult-led and child-initiated play, engaging parents and how to resource your indoor environment to encourage independent learning and play indoors as well as out.
- *London. Cost: from £324 plus VAT. Visit www.earlyyearsplayconference.com, email enquiries@haymarket.com or call Ash Khan on 0208 267 4011*

21 JUNE
BARNARDO'S BIG TODDLE IN SWANSEA
The Barnardo's Big Toddle is a fun, short sponsored walk for the under-fives. Around 500,000 children take part every year at events held across the country. This year's fancy dress theme is animals.
- *Swansea. Cost: free. Visit www.bigtoddle.co.uk or call 0845 270 9900*