

**Summary for Parents and Governors of Report of Review, January to
June 2007, of St Stephen's Children's Centre Newham
services for children aged up to 3 years**
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1. The review Senior managers invited us do the review. This report is based on 3 meetings with managers, 20 visits, informal talking with children and adults, and recorded interviews with 8 staff and 14 mothers. An IOE research ethics committee approved the review plan and information leaflet.

Our main questions were about what mattered most to the children, parents and staff on:

- 1 The quality of the nursery setting and care and possible ways to improve services;
- 2 Links between play, care and learning;
- 3 Continuity between home and nursery care;
- 4 Caring for individual children and for the whole group;
- 5 Staff training;
- 6 Respecting children's different backgrounds.

2. The yellow room is a fee-paying day nursery for children aged under 5 years. In the **extension room** for round 26 children aged under 3 years, 10 are fulltime and on the busiest days 16 children attend. There are 8 to 9 staff, supported by 4 senior managers (although this is a difficult time for managers, with staff changes, sickness, part time study and setting up new children's centre services). Staff shifts are 7.45 am to 3.45 pm and 10.00 am to 6.00 pm, except for the play worker who does an early and late shift.

We were impressed with the bright attractive room, the gardens and resources, the good food and safety, the warm affectionate relationships between the staff and children, and the hard work of the caring staff. Parents valued: 'the range of the toys, resources, the garden and the range of activities'; 'The surroundings are *amazing*, I just think the resources are fantastic'; 'They do more challenging activities, more adventurous, dirty, messy play than we'd do at home, though I have taken up some ideas, I do baking with her.'

We have discussed the report with staff in July, and hope to talk with parents in September. Some of these points will be out of date, as the staff are always keen to keep trying out new ideas.

3. What are the 'best' kinds of group care for children aged under 3 years? There are debates about 'better' or 'worse' care, types of play, learning and stimulation, the different needs of babies and of 1- and 2-year olds, and discipline. We have based meanings of 'best care' on our observations and interviews, and on current research evidence.

The generally agreed aims are:

- * to provide care that is affectionate, gentle and safe, continuing and consistent, personal and attentive, confident, and that encourages the children's rapid learning;
- * to encourage the children to be happy, active, attentive, kind and inter-dependent.

4. Affectionate, gentle and safe care was everyone's priority. Several parents said St Stephen's is better than other nurseries they had visited or heard about. They valued the quality of relationships between staff and children. As we observed, the staff are generally kind and affectionate, hard working and very motivated to see that the children are safe and happy. There is a friendly, relaxed, tolerant ethos. All later comments are made in the context of the good relationships between the care staff and the children.

Parents said: *'it's like a ready-made village, a good place for children to grow up in'; 'they learn to socialise, be with their peers, it's a good preparation for later on'; 'I like the diversity of ages and life experience', 'the amount of spontaneous affection, lots of good relationships, cuddles and kisses.'* Some mothers worried about leaving young children at a nursery, but considered that was safer than a little known childminder's care. The generally happy atmosphere seemed to be linked to good relationships between the care staff when they felt valued and respected: *'I worked very hard in another nursery but I feel I was not appreciated and I feel more welcome here.'*

The rest of this report summarises our recommendations. We know that the staff keep working to raise standards, and that some of our points are already out of date as changes have been made.

5. Continuing and consistent, personal and attentive care.

It is best practice for one or two **key workers** to provide most of the child's care: to be a stable comforting presence for the child; liaise closely and personally with the parents, especially at the start and end of each day; know the home and family and know the child very well; follow the children's experiences, and be responsible for their welfare and learning through the whole day, and also over weeks and months; serve their meals and do their nappy care and toilet training; be alert to any little problems and work to resolve them; encourage the children to be a close supportive key group for one another; meet at times with their group in their own key corner decorated with family photographs.

We recommend that key workers are enabled to ensure:

- more personal, consistent and continuing care for each key child;**
- more mutual support between children in their key group;**

more time to talk with parents at the beginning and end of each day instead of using written sheets.

6. Yellow room. Parents very much liked the bright well-lit room and attractive equipment and toys, and the garden. Children benefited from using both yellow rooms and knowing all the staff, but the younger children's room lacked vital things, which the other room had, such as toilets, and activities for 2 year olds. The times when all the children were in one room, such as sometimes for meals and at the end of the day, could be noisy, crowded, tiring and potentially stressful, especially for the babies.

We recommend that:

**The two yellow rooms should have different names;
They should have clearly different staff, managers and resources;
There should be more care about when and how children meet in one room, and about the needs of the different age groups.**

7. Settling in and inclusion. Parents and staff were generally pleased with the settling in time. Parents and children could visit for as long and as often as they wanted before the child started formally. This helped children to transfer into nursery care, reassured parents, and aided continuity of care, such as with the child's sleeping patterns. One key worker described: *'asking mother if there are any concerns...comfort toys...How they sleep, do they get rocked, do you cradle them in your arms and sit on a rocking chair and rock them? Do you stand and put them over the shoulder and just pat them to sleep?...So that key worker will settle that child in, change that child's nappy, feed that child, as long as that child is unsettled.'* Parents were very pleased with the inclusive equal care for children from different ethnic and cultural groups but, for Newham, it was strange to see no disabled children.

While supporting the view that children should be able to feel confident with every adult, **we recommend that:**

**the initial personal key worker care continues throughout the child's time in the nursery;
key workers check regularly with parents about any changes in home routines;
key workers are ready to give extra care whenever a child seems to need it;
more access for disabled/special needs children is considered, actively looking to bring them in so that they feel comfortable and no one is excluded.**

8. Mealtimes. Menus are varied with plenty of healthy food, servings of fruit and regular drinks. The school kitchen provides a different ethnic menu each day. Some parents and staff saw meals as a vital time for face-to-face personal care. Almost every child had some kind of special diet, because of religion, culture or allergies, and some parents were very distressed when their child had the wrong food and had an allergic reaction. Great care was taken by staff, with children's photographs on their place mats, and also posted beside their diet sheets in the kitchen.

We recommend that:

key workers serve and eat with their key children.

9. Activities, 'messy play' and waiting times.

We recommend that the staff plan more for:

The different needs of babies and the older children;

Time and safe spaces for babies to crawl, play and explore;

Indoor and outdoor areas for older ones to play more adventurously and vigorously;

Much shorter meal preparation and tidying up times, during and at the end of the day, while the children can continue to play;

A permanent sandpit that children can walk and sit in, in one corner of the room, and permanent water activities, climbing and book areas;

Ways to ensure that there are always interesting things for the children to do so that they do not need to wait about.

10. Clothes pegs and buzzers. To save time for staff and parents,

We recommend that:

named pegs and boxes are fitted for each child, as in the older children's yellow room;

office staff ensure that entrance buzzers are answered quickly.

11. Hygiene and toilets.

We recommend that:

One or two toilets are installed, as a priority, in the utility room, backing on to the other children's toilets;

Key workers spend more time on ensuring that children wash their hands;

There are clear agreed plans for helping children to learn to use the toilet as soon as they are ready and as a central part of their care;

There is always respect for children's privacy and dignity with toilet care and when writing records.

12. Space. There might seem to be too little space to follow some of our ideas, although the new covered area is already helping. It is a nice idea to have homelike furniture like a big safe and table, but homes do not have up to 16 children playing in them. Some larger items could be moved out to make space, perhaps for two small sofas for resting and story areas, more alcoves for key group bases, and for different kinds of play, at little or no extra cost. The babies might use the sleeping room more often to crawl and play. Plastic aprons for wet and messy play, bibs for babies at meal times, and waterproof crawlers for babies in the garden, could save many changes of wet clothes. The garden could have more open spaces for the older children's vigorous play, climbing, running and riding and rushing around on wheeled toys..

We recommend that:

the staff use ideas from other nurseries to re-plan the room and garden layout;
more areas could be set up for different key groups and age groups, for quiet and noisy play.

13. Imaginative play and exploring to encourage learning and friendship. Children learn more in their first four years than at any other time of life. They learn mainly through free play, although the 10-hour nursery day has to balance busy and quiet times. We saw how the children greatly enjoyed fun and friendships together, and sometimes comforted and supported other children.

The staff were keen to provide varied activities, and some reported exciting courses they had attended on play, and how they wanted to use the ideas. A nursery officer said: *'Let them be adventurous, let them climb, don't stop them, let them splash water, get wet, it's easy too mop up, have a treasure box, bring in natural things'*. She passed round some plastic jars she had filled with unusual and beautiful objects. *'Children are researchers and scientists, let them explore and allow them to experiment with toys. Allow children to take risks as long as an adult is nearby, find a recycling centre and make treasure baskets.'* As some staff and parents said, there could be more varied and challenging toys, games, materials, puzzles, crayons, jigsaws, fitting toys, and a toy farm, garage and dolls house. A manager praised another nursery she had seen that 'flowed' with continuing play instead of being broken up into organised sections, and where staff wrote few records. Yet using new ideas and changing routines can often be hard at first.

Most mothers we interviewed were happy for their children 'just to play, they'll have to do enough formal learning later on, and anyway they learn so much when they play freely.' Some mothers, mainly of older children, wanted rather more formal learning play.

We recommend that there is more support for the work that the staff already do on:

bringing in new ideas from courses and visits;
encouraging children's friendships, imaginative play, exploring, learning and talking.

14. Watchful waiting. The care of babies and young children is the most important activity. Some of the staff are very skilful, ensuring that children are safe and content, but holding back until their help is really needed. One example is a staff member who crouched down with a boy watching a spider and only talking in response to draw out his ideas. We saw many such good examples, such as a play worker reading with a baby, both pointing to the pictures, the adult closely watching the baby's face and comprehension. Sometimes there could be more care over watching the children but not hurrying in too quickly if they seem to need help, and waiting to see if they can manage on their own, for example: after they fall over; when they take cautious risks while running and climbing; when they try new things such as pouring a jug of water, or setting a car on a race track.

A nursery officer described a course about careful watching: *'If the child is climbing on top of a chair as long as you are there to supervise them you shouldn't really say, "no you can't do that"...children need to learn that, different risks and broaden their physical movements and try new things'*. Another spoke of a course: *'about letting the child lead their activity, letting the child do it the way they want to do it and us only to interact when the child wants us to interact. If they are asking us a question then we can engage with the child.'* Another experienced person said she aimed more to *'sit and watch' children...You follow the child, you take the child's lead... as long as they are not doing anything silly...* Watchful waiting is perhaps the hardest part of good childcare and we can always go on learning how to do it.

We recommend that there is more training and support from skilled staff for other staff on watchful waiting.

15. Happy, active, attentive, kind and inter-dependent children. The staff and parents wanted to encourage these qualities (unlike their opposites: depression, anxiety, ADHD, bullying and antisocial behaviour, helpless over-dependence and selfish irresponsibility). New national policies and (under-funding) of early years care can put great pressures on staff, parents and children. We saw many examples of good practice. Someone picked up a crying 2-year old, hugged him and spoke very kindly and gently about how his mother loves him, she is at work today like the other mummies. He became quieter and leaned against her; she offered him ideas for playing with sand and water, sang and rocked him. Another care worker started a chanting game with streamers and six boys soon joined in together, all very concentrated and coordinated, pretending to fly. Someone set out wooden bricks and quietly helped a boy to build a tower, although the bricks fell down but he persisted cheerfully.

Parents and carers are advised to be consistent, to praise positive behaviours, to ignore or divert attention from negative ones, and to give few orders/commands but insist firmly that these are followed. It is very hard for parents and for any staff team to be very consistent and to balance praise and firmness. One mother very much liked the gentle care but added, *'a very small [criticism] is that they are too gentle and soft and nurturing. [They] tend to talk very nicely to the children...I don't think they are firm enough...'* She is pleased that they do not use punishments, but thinks, *'Sometimes they need to toughen up a bit, clearer messages about boundaries, and what is and is not acceptable.'*

We recommend that as far as possible, the staff:
give very few orders, gently and firmly;
see that these are enforced;
leave the key worker to give and enforce orders;
talk about children's emotional needs and how to meet them;
share with parents ideas for helping children who are extra upset or difficult.

16. Confident care. There seemed to be good relationships between the yellow room staff. Most said they enjoyed working together, and had useful meetings about improving their work. The friendly ethos is a great asset.

We recommend that the staff team could build on their good relationships and feel more able to talk together about challenges and problems that face them.

17. Records and sharing information with parents. Staff wrote daily record sheets for parents. Some parents valued these, others wanted different kinds of information, and parents very much valued being able to talk briefly with staff. *'...On balance, I'd rather they spent time with my child than writing in a book...[At the end of the day] It's important to find out what your child's been doing...Has she been fine? Or a bit grumpy? Has she been well? I'd rather they took two minutes to tell me, because if there's anything I'm anxious about I can probe...as they get older [children] can tell you themselves.'*

Another mother said how pleased she was: *'if a member of staff seeks you out and tells you something about your child without being asked - what they did.'* Some staff also valued this contact and liked: *'knowing that [parents] trust you to look after their children, and I think that's a good feeling. Some of the parents are very very grateful...and I think it helps if they trust you because they know how you work with their children... I really like it talking to the parents...it's really nice, they ask you what their child has been doing today, what they have liked, what they haven't liked, and you can...say if you have seen their child play with a certain toy.'*

We often saw staff and parents talking and laughing happily together and, for example, switching between English and Punjabi. One mother had offered to edit a short newsletter 'a sheet about birthdays, celebrations, volunteer opportunities,' and changes of rooms and of staff. On the evening meetings about parenting, some thought there could be less lecturing and more discussions between parents, using them as resources of good ideas and possible solutions to problems. Some working parents did not want the Centre to be closed for the day for parent conferences.

We recommend that:

staff replace writing daily sheets with key workers being able to talk to parents briefly in the evening;

if some parents have extra concerns, a named senior manager should respond to them and support the care staff;

parents could be involved in discussing forms of staff-parent contact and in producing a short newsletter.

18. Senior managers.

We recommend that a specific senior manager:

Is responsible for each yellow room and spends some hours in her room each day to know the children, parents and staff well;

Works with the staff to increase their understanding and skills in watchful waiting, key worker care, introducing ideas from courses and visits, and informal learning aspects of all the daily care;

Supports staff and parents during any disagreements;

Is present, as much as possible, during the last hours of the day, to care for children while staff and parents talk briefly, or to talk with parents.

19. Climate change There is debate about how quickly climate change threatens future life and what should be done about it. It is certain that the youngest children's futures will be most affected, and we all urgently need to reduce our use and waste of energy and other resources. Any report will soon look very out of date if it ignores climate change.

We recommend that:

The staff teach the children, and set an example, about not wasting energy, food (for play), and other resources;

Lights automatically switch off during bright daylight;

Thermostats are set at 20° maximum;

Staff use blinds, open doors and windows, or sit under shady trees to avoid using air conditioning;

The gardens are partly covered with removable canopies.

Thank you

We are very grateful to the staff, parents and children for their help with the review and we hope that our recommendations are useful.

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