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Learning from the best: Garstang Pre-School Nursery

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Brief description

Highly trained staff at Garstang Pre-School Nursery constantly reflect on their practice through training and links with other providers and professionals. This improves their teaching, the environment and the curriculum, and helps children become successful, independent learners. This example is one of a set of 10 that have been published to support the survey report: *Getting it right first time*.

Overview – the provider's message

'In the past, practice was overly adult-led, with too few opportunities for children to initiate activities, follow their interests and become truly engaged, active learners. Even when children were deeply involved in their learning, sticking to playgroup routines meant that learning was often interrupted because, for example, all children played outside at the same time, or had their snack together.

Children did not have enough time to investigate, complete tasks and activities, or consolidate their learning by repeating particular activities. I wanted staff to share my belief that children make sense of the world by having the time to genuinely engage with it, through activities and resources worth exploring, with staff knowing when and how to intervene to extend what children are learning, and when to hold back.

I knew I couldn't do this alone, I needed a team who shared my aspirations for what children can achieve, and how best to support their learning. We began by honestly evaluating our strengths and weaknesses. Not everyone believed that the pre-school was there to support good learning and development, seeing themselves more as care-givers than educators.

Initially, following close support and challenge in the supervision sessions, some staff chose to move to other settings. Other staff, including some who came as parents, have committed wholeheartedly to the changes. There has been very little change in the staff since then because we share a common aim - to give children the best start we can.'

The good practice in detail

The journey to good or better provision is one of hard work, a commitment to improving practice and openness to new ideas. It is fuelled by a shared passion to improve the life chances of children.

Knowing where you are now, and where you want to go

At Garstang, this started with the manager sharing her vision for improvement with staff. Sandra persuaded her team that the key to good or better provision is consistently high-quality teaching, with every activity an opportunity to learn through play.

Through joint evaluation, the team identified that the most sustainable way to improve their teaching and its impact on children's learning was to improve their own level of skills and pedagogical knowledge. This was achieved by a two-pronged approach: ongoing staff training and development, both vocational and professional; and visits to other settings to learn from outstanding practitioners.

Staff willingly committed to both at significant personal cost in terms of finance, time and energy. Five of the team now hold Early Years degrees and two also have Early Years Professional status. All staff attend courses covering a wide range of issues in early years practice. Wherever possible, staff attend training sessions together, even if this means attending at weekends, as experience has shown that this helps them to reflect on what they do that works, and discuss what they could do better.

Simple changes improved the children's learning quickly, for example, introducing a child-led café style snack time and continuous free-flow learning and play between all rooms, and outside. The routines now support rather than interrupt children's concentration and engagement. There is a better balance of adult and child-initiated activity, with focused activities clearly linked to assessments of individual and groups. Flexibility ensures all staff have both time to lead group work and time to reflect, plan and prepare activities and resources.

Learning from the best

An essential aspect of the manager's leadership of staff development is to encourage return visits to other outstanding settings, locally and further afield. Staff appreciate the opportunity to see and share good practice with local practitioners and national early years professionals who visit their setting. Having to explain and justify their approach encourages them to review their practice, and to check if it is still the best way to meet the needs of the current cohort of children. Visitors praise the high levels of involvement and well-being demonstrated by the children.

Sandra is also keen that she and her staff learn from successful programmes and research. For example, she wants everyone to commit to work together to foster children's communication and language skills. So she has shared her experiences with the [ECAT](#) programme and her participation in the [Elklan](#) speech and language development training courses with the team and with the children's parents and carers. As a result of learning about '[Communication Friendly Spaces](#)' and other approaches, staff evaluate each area of the setting from a child's view point, often by lying on the floor to see the room and resources from a child's perspective. This helps to create an environment that stimulates

children's speaking and listening skills; and further enhanced by providing interesting resources for children to investigate and discuss.

Talking to the staff it is clearly evident that they are a reflective, analytical team who know the children's needs well. They share a belief in capitalising on children's interests, and this encourages the critical thinking and creativity of children who grow up feeling their ideas and choices are valued.

As a result, children in this setting are making outstanding progress towards the early learning goals. The busy but calm environment is marked by a happy hum of children's conversations with adults and peers and exceptionally high levels of engagement, concentration and a sense of well-being. Low, gentle staff voices interject at intervals to develop and extend the learning. The overwhelming impression is of active, independent learners completely engrossed in learning through play.

Provider background

Garstang Pre-school Nursery operates from within the Rural and Over Wyre Children's Centre building adjacent to St. Thomas Primary School in Garstang, Lancashire. It is run by a management committee, and is open for 51 weeks each year. The pre-school employs 11 childcare staff, and children attend from a wide catchment area, including the Children's Centre reach area, which is ranked within the top 30% of most deprived communities nationally.

Other examples published in this set

[Blagdon Nursery School and Children's Centre](#)
[Boldon Nursery School](#)
[Childminder 510228](#)
[Highters Heath Nursery School](#)
[Southwater Village Hall Pre-School](#)
[Newstead Children's Centre](#)
[Our Lady Star of the Sea Nursery](#)
[Witton Gilbert Nursery](#)
[Wheatley Hill Community Nursery](#)

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