

## **Report of Review of St Stephen's Children's Centre, Newham: services for children aged up to 3 years**

Priscilla Alderson and Liz Brooker July 2007

### **1. The review**

Senior managers invited us in 2006 to review St Stephen's Children's Centre services for children aged up to 3 years. This report is based on 20 visits to observe and talk with staff and children, mainly from January to June 2007, and on recorded interviews with 8 staff and 14 mothers. We have also been informed by our years of childhood research, and our own experiences with young children.

We had two planning meetings with the head teacher and deputies. An Institute of Education research ethics committee approved the review plan. We wrote an information leaflet and consent form for staff and parents, and a poster about the review to display in the nursery. The deputy head, with other staff, helped to give out leaflets and fix interview times. Most interviews were held in an empty office. All the staff were very helpful and informative and parents willingly agreed to be interviewed. Some said they did not have time, not surprisingly given their busy lives.

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.

We asked about extra concerns, but found these fitted under these six headings. 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 hope to discuss this report with staff and parents.**

Some of these points will be out of date, as the staff are keen to keep trying out new ideas.

## **2. Children and staff**

St Stephen's nursery school became a children's centre in April 2007. The state nursery school, the green room has 120 children aged 3-4 years who each attend 2.5 days a week. The yellow room is a fee-paying day nursery for children aged under 5 years, with 24 children aged 3-4 years. The yellow room extension for children aged under 3 years was refurbished in autumn 2006, with 4 places for babies aged under 1 year. There are around 26 children aged under 3 years, 10 are fulltime and on the busiest days 16 children attend.

There have to be at least 1 adult to 3 babies, and 1 adult to 4 children aged 1-2 years. 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. The staff are:

2 managers who also cover the older children's room before 10.00am and after 3.34 pm;

a part time teacher;

4 nursery officers;

a temporary nursery officer (for some weeks);

a play worker;

a breakfast and a lunchtime supervisor.

The senior management team are the head teacher, deputy head and assistant head of the whole nursery and nursery school, and the co-ordinator of all the children's centre services. Some of them attend part time courses.

## **3. What are the 'best' kinds of group care for children aged under 3 years?**

What standards of 'better' or 'worse' care count? How much should the staff or the children direct the play? Should there be formal education? How much should children be stimulated or left to potter about? How can the different needs of babies and of 1- and 2-year olds best be met? How tolerant or firm should discipline be? Answers to these questions, and fashions in childcare, keep changing.<sup>1</sup> So we have based meanings of 'best care' on the general views of the staff and parents we interviewed, our observations of the children, 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. *'And the staff here are much better qualified and much more motivated, I think, than in a private nursery, and the ethos – fully trained teachers, things like that.'* 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.'*

We have added recommendations after points 5-19. Some of our reported observations and quoted examples are not necessarily nursery policy, and we know that the managers and all the other staff are constantly working to raise standards, and that changes are planned to start in September.

### **5. Continuing and consistent, personal and attentive care.**

Personal relationships matter to children from birth, and babies react strongly to people around them.<sup>2</sup> Even premature babies in hospital are clearly calmer with their parents and with certain nurses, but are upset when other nurses care for them, as are their parents.<sup>3 4</sup> From the start, babies engage in personal relationships of trust or anxiety, and even 6-month olds can make meanings and notice cause and effect.<sup>5</sup>

A few of the older children were anxious and unhappy and needed more personal support. Some spent long periods listlessly on their own and not playing, apparently not observed by the staff. One child, for example, coughed through the day, but seemed to eat and drink little or nothing. He was not offered juice, and was not 'allowed' to eat fruit because he had not eaten his first course.

A mother described how one person might change most of the nappies. She believed that continuing care from one or two key workers encourage babies' extra learning, development and security, adding: Some mothers thought that a child should have personal care, like nappy changing, from only one or two staff and not several.

Young children tend to feel anxious and sad when left with strangers. Not only the quality of care, but *who* gives the care matters to children. They have to believe that their parents love and care for them, and if they feel under-cared for, they may believe it is their own fault and feel anxious and guilty.<sup>6</sup>

It is therefore best practice for one or two **key workers** to provide most of the child's care,<sup>7</sup> so that the key worker can:

- 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;

- understand the child's individual needs and routines, babies' subtle cues and body language, their early words, likes and dislikes;
- 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.

However, at St Stephen's:

Key worker groups change frequently. Some key workers have 6 children and, when they cover for each other they have 8 or more children. They cannot know or care for each child well, or have time to welcome them in the morning or talk to parents in the evening.

Some key workers are part time.

Staff told us that key workers 'settled in' new children for 2 or 4 weeks, and then shared their care with all the other staff, apart from being the main person to keep records of that child.

Parents tended to be unhappy that:

- the care was too impersonal and inconsistent;
- they did not always know who was responsible for their child;
- their messages were sometimes lost or ignored;
- they were not always introduced to new staff or warned about staff or key worker changes;
- their child's safety and welfare were less assured when all the adults were vaguely responsible, instead of one or two specific staff;
- they were told not to talk to staff when their child arrived and left;
- the daily written sheets were not always about what they wanted to know.

**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. The staff tended to talk about the two yellow rooms as if they were one, with the same needs and purposes, and as if children could move freely between them and use all the facilities easily.

Younger children often enjoyed seeing friends and siblings, and using activities in the older room.

Knowing staff in both rooms smoothed children's transfer at 3 years.

The younger ones' room was a quiet space where older children could sleep.

However:

The closed door, which children cannot open, often prevented this contact.

Children aged 0 years, 1 year, 2 years and 3-4 years have different needs and the vague crossing between rooms did not ensure the two younger groups were each adequately catered for.

The younger children's room lacked vital things, which the other room had, such as toilets, and activities for 2 year olds.

Moving all the children into the older ones' room for meals and at the end of the day could increase the problems of:

lack of personal key worker care, with uncertainty among staff and children about who is responsible for each child;

bored children waiting around;

big increase in noise, crowding and potential stress, especially for babies;

tired anxious children, who had watched others being collected since mid-afternoon, seeing their own room closed - and even dark on winter evenings.

**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. Once that child settles, then anyone of us can take over that...'*

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, and not only or mainly in the first weeks;**

**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. This system allowed for any staff, including agency ones, to serve any child, but that could make mealtimes rather impersonal, and the staff did not always seem to notice if a child ate little through the day.

Sometimes all the children in both yellow rooms ate together. Even when the younger ones ate in their own room, reheating and serving food to the quite a large number of children kept them sitting around. Some children were impatient or hungry and at times babies anxiously watched others eating and could not understand why they had to wait for food to cool. Older ones often left the table and walked around during the meal. One staff member thought that every child should be served individually at table and not simply be given a full plate of food.

We accept that children often have to wait patiently for their turn, but we question the longer waits linked to impersonal and larger-group methods of care. Meals felt more like family occasions when staff ate with the children. Some staff were carefully attentive, talking and ready to help a child if necessary, but neither intervening too soon nor leaving children to struggle unnoticed. Others were less skilful and did not notice when children needed help. Some older capable children were spoon-fed 'because if they won't eat their parents complain', instead of working this problem out with parents.

**We recommend that:**

**key workers serve and eat with their key children.**

**9. Activities and waiting times.** There were often long waiting times. Babies might sit in a high chair for 20 or 30 minutes while meals were prepared, and they spent hours sitting passively in a high chair or on an adult's knee. Some staff assumed that 30 minutes should be spent tidying up before lunch, before tea, and towards the end of the day, while children hung around. A manager commented: *'It can be all over the shop by the end of the day. We aim to have it calm with dim lights and television and gentle music by 6 pm but the parents disrupt things. Some are quick but others stand around talking while the children charge around. It's a kind of no-man's land. Children have to transfer from staff to parents, and it's a ratty time for everyone, no matter how quiet we make it... Yes I think we try and keep it tidy pretty much closer to the end, we just let them play about and maybe about half five we would make a start on the tidying up ...'*

After comments from parents, the television was stopped. 'Gentle music' can add to the noise. When staff read stories to a group they sometimes had to shout to be heard. Children started playing games but were stopped: 'it's nearly home time'.

**'Messy play'** was often in small quantities: pasta or other foods, or too little sand or water in trays for children really to be able to play and experiment. Instead, children could play more freely if more activities were left out. Less time would be needed for setting up, clearing up, cleaning up - and throwing things away unnecessarily. This would free staff time to attend more to the children and the parents.

There could be a permanent water tray, and a sandpit in one inside corner for children to walk and sit in, with enough sand for them really to explore and play with it. The water and sand toys could be varied regularly. A good range of books could always be displayed beside a sofa and cushions. There could be a small trampoline and slide to encourage active indoor play. A very popular slide had been removed, and we quite often saw children climbing safely on equipment, or even low ledges, but being told not to do so: 'no, you'll fall', and the equipment being removed.

**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;**

**Permanent sand and water activities, climbing and book areas;**

**Ways to ensure that there are always interesting things for the children to do, with less need for them to wait about.**

**10. Clothes pegs and buzzers.** This seems to be a minor point, but it could make a big difference to staff time and to staff-parent relationships. The older children's room has welcoming respectful personal pegs with boxes to contain things to take home. If these were also in the younger ones' room, they would save much staff time spent on sorting piles of clothes and bags and, in winter, hats, scarves, gloves and outdoor shoes. Some staff would lay all the coats and bags in a row and then children would take their coats to go into the garden, so that later the row had to be resorted. The children tended to drop their coats on the floor. Children's paintings and drawings were sometimes screwed up in front of them and thrown away instead of being put into a home box. And parents were left to hunt for their children's clothes and bags, often left all in a heap on the floor under the small peg stand, which could imply, wrongly, that the staff did not care. Parents are often in a great hurry, and in any case sometimes quite long delays before the entrance gate or door buzzers are answered does not promote relaxed respectful staff-parent relationships.

**We recommend that:**

**named pegs and boxes are fitted for each child, on the left side of the door for people entering the room;**

**office staff ensure that entrance buzzers are answered quickly.**

**11. Hygiene and toilets.** Children did not always wash their hands before meals. Smaller key groups could involve staff ensuring that each small group wash their hands in turn, avoiding queues at the two low basins, and then move to their table to be served, before the next group arrives. Meals are served on tables by the kitchen bar, but also just inside the main door blocking the main throughway, with dropped food easily trodden around the room. If the large table were removed, that area could be used for meals and also for pegs.

Toileting is another topic that might seem minor. Yet it is major in its impact on staff time and satisfaction, the children's welfare and confidence, and on staff-parent relationships. There are toilets in the 3- to 4-year yellow room but none in the under-3s room, although this is the main age for toilet training, when children have to be able to reach a toilet quickly.

The children were often unable to remember to ask an adult to open the connecting door, to reach the quite distant toilets, and to remove their clothes on their own in time. There were often cries from children of 'wee wee' and from staff of 'run, run, quick, quick – too late'. Staff could not always go with children into the other room, or help them to keep their clothes dry, wipe themselves or wash their hands. Parents who had spent holidays toilet training their child were not pleased to continue for weeks to be given four or more bags of wet pants and trousers at the end of the day.

Part of toilet training involves children becoming aware, wanting to be dry, and feeling ashamed if they wet themselves. This was made worse when, occasionally, children had only a top and a nappy left to wear by the end of the day, having wet all their spare clothes. Parents and staff described older children being upset and embarrassed, when it was not their fault that they could not reach a toilet. To go home with bags of wet clothes reinforced children's sense of failure. Parents felt angry and frustrated. The lack of toilets puts unfair pressures on everyone and on staff-parent relationships.

Work by the staff on toilet or potty training seemed erratic. Parents told us that not only were there no toilets in the room but no potties either, and parent had to supply these. One mother made laminated half-hourly reminder charts for the staff to tick for her child, but these were clearly not used, and we very rarely saw children being reminded. Occasionally a child was sat on a potty in the middle of the room, in the way of passing children and with babies crawling around, as some mothers mentioned. When toilet training drags out for months, this wastes much time for staff, parents and children. Sometimes a child would say, 'Someone's done a poo in the pot/a wee on the floor,' and staff would run over with cloths, paper towels, spray and rubber gloves. Even if staff managed to go with a child into the next room's toilets, this disrupted their work and contact with their other children far more than if the younger children's room had toilets.

There seemed to be no agreed plan for toilet training and, from their interviews, most staff implied that this was not their concern. When filling in the daily sheets, staff called to one another, 'Has he done a poo yet?' and



other personal comments. The sheets were often inaccurate when no one was sure. If key workers were responsible for their own children, the loud personal comments would be unnecessary, and children's records could be more accurate.

OFSTED inspects for accessible toilets, staff supervision, staff-child ratios if staff have to leave the room to escort a child to the toilet, toilets being clean and safe to reduce infection risks, safe and hygienic use of potties, and respect for children's dignity and privacy.<sup>8</sup> At times the toilets and sinks in the 3-4 year room were not clean, there was no toilet paper and, children sometimes called to be let out of a cubicle but were not heard.

**We recommend that:**

**Two or three 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 more 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. Yet the space could be used better and unnecessary items moved out: the washing machine, nappy changing unit, large sofa, high table and stools, some of the cushions and large soft toys, and babies' high chairs. There could be two small sofas for resting and story areas. More alcoves could be planned for key group bases and for different kinds of play, at little or no extra cost.

The babies could use the sleeping room more often to crawl and play. Quiet doors could replace the noisy folding ones and there could be more care over keeping noisy wakeful children away from the sleeping ones. One mother said of her baby: *'He's shattered when he gets home. If he was full time I couldn't allow that. Sleep is so important to young babies.'* 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.

Everywhere seems cluttered. Children stumble over cushions and toys inside, and stones and planks outside. The one grass area where they could run is blocked with planks. One day the water tray with some plants in it (so the children could not use it) blocked the way on the decking where children liked rushing up and down, and children had to squeeze round it. Staff commented on this, but all day no one moved the tray, illustrating how the older children's need for vigorous play, climbing, running and riding and rushing around on wheeled toys was not fully met.

**We recommend that:**

**the staff visit excellent nurseries and use their ideas to re-plan the room and garden layout;<sup>9</sup>**

**more areas could be set up for different key groups and age groups, for quiet and noisy play;**  
**there could be an audit of everything in the room and garden, is it used enough, does it earn its space?**

**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, while their brains develop billions of neurons and connecting synapses.<sup>10 11</sup> They learn mainly through free play, although the 10 hour nursery day, with the need to balance busy and relaxing times, differs from the busy 2.5 hours at nursery school. One nursery officer said: *'It's just making it an exciting day for them and not a boring day, keeping them active and helping them to learn as well really.'* Another liked the varied flexible days: *'It's just wherever they want to go they can just go and we will be there really.'*

One staff member said, *'they don't make friends under 3'*. Yet early on, babies play with siblings and friends, are excited when they arrive and sad when they leave. We often saw children becoming more lively and happy when they played with other children. An 8 month old drummed his fingers on a box, and a 30 month old joined in, they drummed and laughed alternately, but then the older boy was told to make less noise 'because of the baby'. When a baby was tearful, with a bruise on his forehead, his brother fetched a wet paper towel for him, looking very concerned. Later he comforted another younger child. In another example, children laughed delightedly when, climbing along some stones, one accidentally fell and sat on a stone. The boys following deliberately fell and sat down, and ran round again to play the game several times. One banged his head quite hard but happily carried on, absorbed in the game.

Children would often rather play together than with adults.<sup>12 13 14 15 16</sup> Children are 'rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent, and most of all connected to' other people.<sup>17 18 19</sup> From the early months, through playing with other children, they learn about moral relationships, other people's feelings and needs, sharing, turn taking, care and sympathy, working through conflict and disagreement, managing frustration and anger, and enjoying pleasure and affection. They learn through imitation and, perhaps most vital of all, imaginative play, make-believe, story telling and realising what the other child is imagining, from about 18 months in a 'great leap forward'.<sup>20</sup> They do not simply copy, but they invent games with humour and drama. They also enjoy contributing and being responsible.<sup>21</sup>

The staff were keen to provide varied activities for the children. Some staff 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.'*

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. But this enthusiasm seemed to get lost and was not carried into activity plans. Training for nursery staff over-emphasises safety and control, order and tidiness, important though these are. Freer play can then seem dangerous or chaotic at first. Therefore, adopting new ideas involves re-thinking deep beliefs and routines about nursery care, and to achieve this, the staff need managers' help and support.

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. These could be kept in the baskets on shelves, and also stored in other rooms while toys are rotated. Many materials could be natural objects and low cost items.

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: more reading of books, number games, songs and rhythms, and themes when children who want to can do art, music, stories and games, for example, about animals, seasons or festivals.

Interviewees said that learning about numbers and letters was discouraged, as too formal and rigid. They said that staff should only read to a child who brought a book to them. However, children did not often find books and, if they did, the adult might be too busy. Books were sometimes hidden away in a drawer, or looked rather tatty. Children need encouragement, a good range of well-kept, well-displayed books, and adults who love reading and talking about books, listening and encouraging children's responses.

St Stephen's DVD, made in 2006, shows children having fun with numbers and letters. Some experts say that care and education cannot be separated.<sup>22</sup> There is a wide area between wrongly forcing children into formal learning too early, and avoiding or discouraging their interest in early learning, between leaving everything to the children or helping them to enjoy new activities.

Children talking with their mother at home use much richer language than at nursery.<sup>23</sup> In noisy rooms it is often hard to hear children's early words. Some staff said they were trained to use short phrases and copy children's wording, 'Wanna come garden? Garden? Come garden?' This is not a useful approach.

**We recommend that the staff:**

**Combine care more with children's learning and friendships;**  
**Encourage more imaginative play, exploring, learning and talking;**  
**Listen and talk with the children following their ideas more, especially in key groups;**

## **Work together to put more ideas from courses and visits into practice.**

**14. Watchful waiting.** This point might seem to contradict the previous one, but it really reinforces it. Some staff need to observe and talk with the children more carefully. A few staff were very skilful at this, ensuring children were safe and content, but holding back until their help was 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. However, observation could often be more careful. Two boys played with strings of beads twisted round their necks, unobserved. A baby sucked every piece of fruit on a plate later served to the children. Babies were often left unobserved in high chairs while staff wrote notes. A baby kept reaching for toys, and being pulled back by the adult on whose knee he was sitting but who didn't notice what he was trying to do. Repeatedly, children were stopped from doing some things and over-helped to do other things, and treated as much more helpless than they were. Children climbed quite safely on to equipment or low ledges but were told to get down and the things were removed. To summarise, some staff:

- seemed not to notice children taking risks or needing help;
- sat with their back to children instead of being able quietly to observe them all while they ate meals or wrote records;
- hurried to comfort a child who fell but was not hurt;
- stopped children playing together, saying 'be careful' or 'no, no don't hurt her';
- told children off, and said they were 'naughty' when there was no reason or need;
- did things for children - poured out a jug of water, set a car on a race track - instead of leaving children to try these things;
- did not notice how a few bored children would annoy another child and then watch with amusement as the staff rushed in to sort out an incident that they had not seen.

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.'*

This differed from their training and usual practice: *'we were always chatting to the children...asking them questions, you know, engaging ourselves with them [but now] you just sit there and just watch them.'* Some staff she added, *'act horrified'* and worry that senior staff will criticise them if they *'just sit and watch' children...You follow the child, you take the child's lead... as long as they are not doing anything silly or you know climbing up on the walls or*

*anything.*' To staff used to being very active, this can feel uncomfortable and difficult and it takes time to learn.

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

**15. Happy, active, attentive, kind and inter-dependent children.** These qualities are valued and benefit everyone, unlike their opposites (depression, anxiety, ADHD, bullying and antisocial behaviour, helpless over-dependence and selfish irresponsibility). There is concern that over 35 hours a week in nursery for the youngest children is associated with the negative behaviours,<sup>24</sup> as early relationships set very deep often life long habits and values. There is concern that the UK has the worst records of the 21 richest countries for children's well-being, health, safety, educational achievement, bullying, relationships, trust and friendships.<sup>25</sup> These problems are linked serious poverty and inequality, especially in London,<sup>26</sup> but also to children's personal and early experiences. It is therefore vital to see how children in nursery trust and cooperate with the staff, to prepare them for school and the rest of their lives.

St Stephen's is coping quite well with some unresolved problems raised by new national policies. One interviewee said: *'I think there's been a deterioration of services where children's centres have been set up. They have to expand their specialist knowledge into 50 different services and I think the quality has been very much diluted. It's a nationwide issue and I think the age group that particularly suffers is the youngest...I don't know how much training they have about babyhood – real understanding of babies' development... and the status it deserves or requires.'*

Occasionally the care was unkind, as when someone said: 'Stop crying, you are always doing it, stop!' Later another adult picked up the 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. It was noticeable that children who were ordered in a bossy tone to do things tended to ignore or resist orders, whereas when someone asked enticingly they responded.

Childcare, at nursery or at home, encourages cooperative or difficult behaviour, and 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.

However, most of the staff observed tended:

Not to notice or praise good behaviour or encourage children's offers to help;

Very much praised children for things they could do easily, and didn't link praise or rewards to harder efforts;

Told off children and over-emphasised poor behaviour, even when it was not happening;

Treated children as if they were a danger to one another;

Gave many negative commands;

Gave inconsistent commands which other staff did not help to enforce;

Did not follow up orders to see that they were obeyed, so that children usually walked off and ignored them.

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 and very singsong...I don't think they are firm enough and there's not enough consequence to actions.*' She is pleased that they do not use punishments, but concerned at the lack of firm discipline. '*Sometimes they need to toughen up a bit, clearer messages about boundaries, and what is and is not acceptable.*'

For example, a child told to take off her sleep nappy and put on her pants, and not to play with some soap, was still walking around in her nappy and playing with the soap one hour later. There is the danger of setting up victim-persecutor-rescuer triangles,<sup>27</sup> when children see themselves as helpless victims or inevitable bullies relying on futile adult help instead of learning to sort out their own relationships, as they can do.<sup>28</sup> A child's clumsiness or slightly boisterous play was often treated as if it was naughty. Some staff would notice something, a spilt tray of beads or a crying child, and blame the nearest child when another child, or no one, had caused the problem.

**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. Yet it could raise problems if staff cannot risk questioning or criticising one another. A typical example is when two staff were trying to pat some children to sleep in the sofa area while other staff were talking very loudly and often calling and shouting at the nearby table for over an hour.

**We recommend that the staff team could be more confident about talking about their work critically.**

**17. Records and sharing information with parents.** Staff wrote daily record sheets for parents, but did not always see or remember what happened, so some sheets were inaccurate, and vital details, like children being sad or worried, might be missing. One mother expressed a general view, in wanting daily two-way contact: '*I don't want to know about food or*

*nappies. I'd like to know if she did anything that would be considered naughty, any conflicts? Done anything new today? But hey, on balance, I'd rather they spent time with my child than writing in a book... We've been told that talking with someone individually is an impossible request. We're told not to engage staff at the beginning and end of the day. Absolutely ridiculous. 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 do that better than others and have better people skills and are better at talking to parents than others.'*

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.

The policy was to discourage daily discussion when children were collected, and to have termly parent conferences instead, because some parents *'want to talk for too long in the evening.'* *'We might do one hour of counselling, which is good, but next day they'll want to talk to someone else.'* Some parents did not want the Centre to be closed for the day for parent conferences, and said they had missed formal meetings because they were not clearly advertised.

**We recommend that:**

**staff try for a few weeks to stop writing daily sheets and instead keep simple charts with ticks, and key workers 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 at least four 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 as they are likely to live to 2050, let alone 2100;

most scientists agree that we must learn now how to reduce our use and waste of energy and other resources, to avoid great future suffering;

any report will soon look very out of date if it ignores climate change;

there are huge amounts of waste at St Stephen's.

For example, in winter, thermostats were set at 29° or 32° centigrade. Some children were hot and listless in heavy winter clothes, and the heat increases risks of cross infection of winter colds;

Many routines could avoid wasting staff time and resources, such as having paint in pots instead of on plates.

**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.

Institute of Education University of London  
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AB  
[p.alderson@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:p.alderson@ioe.ac.uk); [e.brooker@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:e.brooker@ioe.ac.uk)



## References

---

- <sup>1</sup> Hardyment, C. (1984) *Dream Babies from Locke to Spock*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- <sup>2</sup> Murray L, Andrews H. (2000) *The Social Baby: Understanding Babies' Communication from Birth*. Richmond: CP Publishing.
- <sup>3</sup> Als, H. (1999) Reading the premature infant. In Goldson E (ed). *Developmental Interventions in the Neonatal Intensive Care Nursery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 18-85.
- <sup>4</sup> Alderson, P., Hawthorne, J., Killen, M. (2005) The participation rights of premature babies. *International Journal of Children's Rights*, 13:31-50.
- <sup>5</sup> Siegal, M. (1997) *Knowing Children: Experiments in Conversation and Cognition*. Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- <sup>6</sup> Miller, A. (1985) *Thou Shalt not be Aware: Society's Betrayal of the Child*. London: Pluto.
- <sup>7</sup> Goldschmeid, S. and Selleck, D. (1996) *Communication Between Babies in their First Year, Video and Pack*. London: National Children's Bureau.
- <sup>8</sup> OFSTED. (2001) *Standards For Early Years*. [www.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.dfes.gov.uk)
- <sup>9</sup> Clark, A. and Moss, P. report how to create early years gardens working with children and parents. (2005) *Spaces To Play*. London: National Children's Bureau
- <sup>10</sup> Fox N, Leavitt L, Warhol J. (1999) *The Role of Early Experience in Infant Development*. Johnson & Johnson Pediatric Institute.
- <sup>11</sup> Gerhardt, S. (2004) *Why Love Matters: How affection Shapes A Baby's Brain*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>12</sup> Burlingham D, Freud A. (1944) *Infants without Families*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- <sup>13</sup> Dunn J. (2004) *Children's Friendships: The Beginnings of Intimacy*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- <sup>14</sup> Dunn J. (1988) *The Beginnings of Social Understanding*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- <sup>15</sup> Penn, H. (2000) *Early Childhood Services*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- <sup>16</sup> Goldschmeid, E. and Jackson. S. (1994) *People Under three: Young Children in Day Care*. London: Routledge.
- <sup>17</sup> Malaguzzi L 1997, quoted in Penn H. *Comparing Nurseries*. London Paul Chapman, p117.
- <sup>18</sup> Edwards C, et al. (1998) *The Hundred Languages of Children*. London: JAI Press for Ablex.
- <sup>19</sup> Abbott L, Nutbrown C. (2001) *Experiencing Reggio Emilia: Implications for Pre-School Provision*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- <sup>20</sup> Dunn. J. (2004) op. cit. p20.
- <sup>21</sup> Miller, J. (2006) *Never too Young: How Young Children Can Take Responsibility and Make Decisions. A Handbook for Early Years Workers*. London: National Early Years Network/SCF.
- <sup>22</sup> Penn H, et al. (2004) What is the impact of out-of-home integrated care and education settings on children aged 0-6 and their parents? In: *Research Evidence in Education Library*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit.
- <sup>23</sup> Tizzard, B. Hughes, M. (1984) *Young Children Learning*. Glasgow: Fontana.
- <sup>24</sup> Machin, S. et al. (2007) *Resources and Standards in Urban Schools*. London: Institute of Fiscal Studies.
- <sup>25</sup> UNICEF. (2007) *An Overview Of Child Well-Being In (21) Rich Countries*. Florence: Innocenti.
- <sup>26</sup> Hood, S. (2004) *State of London's Children*. London: GLA.
- <sup>27</sup> Berne, E. (1964) *Games People Play*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- <sup>28</sup> Danby, S. and Barker, C. (1998) 'What's the problem? Restoring order in the preschool classroom.' In Hutchy, I. Moran, and Ellis, J. (eds) *Children and Social Competence: Arenas of Action*. London: Falmer.