

Nursery dilemma

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With the UK currently topping the list of longest working hours in Europe, parents are under great pressure to perform both professional and parental roles. The struggle to balance job and family leads to a need for day care for their children and this is where nurseries come in.

A parent's decision to enrol their child in nursery can be caused by a desire to return to work, but more usually it is a financial necessity, and perhaps not the preferred choice. Nursery staff will happily relate anecdotes of parents more upset than their child on the first day of nursery, and rightly so – it can feel traumatic.

With more babies and preschool children in day care than ever before, it is important to consider how attending nursery affects a child's development both in positive and negative ways. In addition, what are the elements amongst nurseries that lead to these effects on children? It is essential to ask what makes a good nursery – and how should this be judged: the modernity of the facilities, the staff turn over, the location? Furthermore, with parents juggling employment and parenting responsibilities, how can nurseries help parents and children to succeed in the battle to maintain a work-life balance?

Big or small

Although all nurseries are inspected by Ofsted, parents themselves will be the first to tell how much each establishment differs and how this affected their choice of

where to send their child. Two nurseries who receive similar Ofsted gradings can be wildly different: in size – a small, family run affair with thirty children, or a chain owned facility with two hundred children and fifty staff – and in terms of the facilities available, such as outdoor play areas and computers. Stephanie, whose son Adam is almost two, chose a larger nursery for her son partly because of the facilities it offered: "At other nurseries I've been to, the children don't get as much space to play."

Although staff to child ratios are set by Ofsted, the level of qualifications and experience of staff can differ between nurseries. Some nurseries take on unqualified staff and enrol them on an NVQ course after three months, when they have shown commitment to the role. Margaret, the manager of Kids Unlimited in Didsbury, says she believes that qualities such as a passion for child care coupled with common sense are the most important qualities in prospective nursery staff, and are essential if they are to proceed to an NVQ. For many parents, the most important qualification may be that the people caring for their children are parents themselves.

Together or apart

Another major difference between nurseries is the care of children of different age groups. Early Years, in Withington, takes children aged two to five, and all the children play together in the open plan space. The manager, Janet Morris, believes that in this way the younger children are able to learn from the older children: "They pick up language very quickly from the older children and learn how things are done from them." Any parent with two children will be able to relate an example of a younger child learning through observation or interaction with their older sibling, and how valuable these experiences can be.

However, at larger nurseries of over two hundred children, this may not be practical. At Kids Allowed nursery in West Didsbury, which has places for 150 children, each age group has specific rooms with toys and facilities catering for their particular developmental stage. Babies enjoy a quiet room with cradles and mobiles, whereas the pre school children are using a computer to improve their vocabulary.

For children who do not have family in the immediate area, the opportunity to meet children and carers at a nursery can also form a surrogate 'family' – a network of trusted others with whom to improve social skills. Victoria's daughter Charlotte is 7 months. "All our family is down South. We decided nursery would be best for Charlotte because she can interact with other children. With a nanny she would not have been able to interact with many others."

Support for parents

In addition to the different facilities on offer at each nursery, how do they support parents who work, without compromising the child's development? Richmond House nursery in Hale uses the Montessori teaching technique to foster independence amongst children so that they learn basic tasks such as dressing themselves. The nursery's owner, Alice Apel, believes that the Montessori Method allows children to learn whilst playing, which creates a "safe and secure atmosphere at the nursery – the parents always comment on it". At Early Years, there is, in the words of the manager Janet Morris, "no staff turn over". A dedicated team of fourteen staff (including four qualified teachers) are there everyday to provide stability to a child adjusting to nursery and letting them form a strong bond.

At Kids Allowed, the company's ethos is to support the complexity of the modern family. Manager Jennie Johnson explains: "we try to look at all the issues faced by parents and see what we can do to help." To this end, Kids Allowed runs services alongside its nursery including after school clubs for older children, birthday parties, and a 'parent concierge' service, which deals with laundry, prescriptions, post and repairs. Parents who feel worried about leaving their child to go off to work can observe them through the one-way glass of the windows to check they are settling in, and will be reassured by the finger print scanning technology which allows only staff and parents through the doors.

Nursery or nanny

The reliability of a nursery over other forms of childcare is also a plus point for many parents. Available day in, day out, they enable parents to navigate the work-life balance a little more easily. Ann, whose son Sebastian is three, says she turned to nursery care after the family's child minder became ill. "Nannies are great if they're reliable. But nurseries are great because they are always there."

Nurseries are also using more 'alternative' techniques to appeal to modern, harassed parents – Kids Unlimited burns essential oils to calm children down for afternoon naps, and baby yoga forms part of the weekly routine. Kids Allowed also runs a baby massage class and is equipped with a sensory room including fibre optic lights and projectors and relaxing music.

With all the differences amongst nurseries – size, cost, staff numbers and turn over, play facilities, location and waiting lists – it is difficult to draw any conclusions about which nurseries are 'best' for a child. Certainly, each of the nurseries mentioned here have their distinct plus points, but a choice between them will be as individual as you and your child – after all that's who this is about. **MD**

How nurseries affect children's development – Psychological research

Since the 1950's, when it became more common for both parents to work outside the home, psychologists have sought to understand how nursery care affects a child's development. Some studies at this time concluded that the damage to the mother-infant bond through separation at day care would have long term effects on the child, leaving them less able to maintain healthy relationships in adult life.

Later work by psychologists has found positive benefits to child day care, for both parent and child. The opportunities for rich social interaction and a wider range of toys and facilities on offer at nursery can have distinct developmental benefits. Increases in independence, self-reliance and sociability amongst children who attend nurseries compared to those cared for at home have been found in a number of studies.

Attending day care regularly can also provide a reassuring routine for children whose home life is in turmoil, for example through divorce. The bonds formed with nursery staff can be crucial in helping the child cope with change, and this is why low staff turn over at a nursery is important.

Day care can also have benefits for the parent – returning to work may boost the parent's self esteem, and a happier parent leads to a closer parent-child bond and a more confident child.

However, there are a number of variables which may affect the degree to which nursery care benefits a child. Some studies have found that children who begin attending nursery before they are six months old are less compliant and more aggressive than those who started after their first birthdays, although this has not been found in all studies. Hours per week at day care is also important. Children who spent more than twenty hours a week in day care were also found to be less compliant in some studies, perhaps because naughty behaviour elicits more response than good behaviour from carers sharing their attention between children.

Overall, the results of many studies into the effects of day care on child development show that it is the quality of the nursery care which has the greatest effect on a child's development. Good quality care encompassing confident, long term staff and appropriate facilities will provide an excellent start to a child's life in terms of both its cognitive and emotional development. These benefits will have a positive effect on the parent and child's relationship too, as they are both happier during the time they spend at home together. **MD**