

Welcoming you to the 'Family'



Whenever a children's nursery is put up for sale, vendors are inevitably concerned about the future for their staff and the youngsters in their care. In the third of our features on the new Family First nursery group, we explore how this ambitious organisation works closely with vendors and managers to achieve a win-win situation all round.

With 10 nurseries now under its belt, the Family First nursery group is on the acquisition trail, intending to grow to 80 within a 25-mile radius of London over the next few years.

Led by Andy Morris as Chairman, the group has plenty of experience to draw on as he grew Asquith to 92 nurseries before selling to Bright Horizons at the end of 2016.

Backed by August Equity, the group has already invested more than £1 million in staff, equipment, IT and refurbishment and will be looking to invest even more in 2021.

But what is it that Family First are looking for when choosing nurseries to join their portfolio and how important is the relationship with vendors as they go through the sale process?

Family First's Chief Financial Officer Craig Grant puts it simply: "We are looking for nurseries that share our ethos of providing outstanding childcare, nurseries that we believe in, that we can grow further and that we can add to."

"From the minute we meet vendors, we spend a lot of time with them to understand what's important to them and what they want their legacy to be. We want them to be proud of what we are doing."



Chief Financial Officer, Craig Grant

"We support them through the process as they need the confidence to deal with lawyers and accountants. We want to understand their concerns and questions – and provide the answers."

Staff are understandably a top priority and vendors want reassurance that jobs will be retained. "We explain that we want to build on what's already been built and give staff more autonomy to run the nurseries as they would their own business," added Craig.

"Whenever we acquire a business, it becomes a win-win for both parties."

Emotional wrench for the owners

One of the businesses acquired by Family First is Acorn Montessori, which was owned by Rupa Pathak and her husband Paresh. After 30

years of running the business, first in Leicester and then in Harrow, Rupa decided it was time to rebalance her life and focus on her health.

"We've always had interest from other nurseries and chains over the years but Family First really stood out as they shared the same ethos, with a genuine commitment to children, families, staff and the local community."

"It was a bit stressful because of lockdown, but they were extremely professional throughout and were always on hand to answer our questions. You need to provide a lot of information, from finance and legal matters to Ofsted, any complaints, health and safety, lease issues and so on. I'd say to anyone hesitating about selling, just do it and hang on in there."

"Even though it's been very emotional leaving the business because it's my baby, they've said I'm welcome to come back and visit, once we're through the Covid restrictions. I miss being with the children and giving them a hug but I know it won't be long before I see them again."

Nursery managers welcome new ownership

It's also a worrying time for nursery managers and staff when a business transfers into new hands, but Family



Clapham Manager, Lyn Barallon

First always assures a smooth transition along the way.

The first four nurseries acquired by Family First were Little Garden Nurseries in Brentford, Clapham, Hammersmith and Kentish Town, in June 2019.

Clapham Manager Lyn Barallon said: "From the beginning, everything was clearly explained so we knew what to expect. Importantly, everyone was reassured about their job security, immediately allaying any fears.

"There has been a lot of investment in the buildings themselves, which have been painted and refurbished, as well as technology to make our lives easier, including new ICT equipment, laptops and eyLog to help us communicate better with parents and colleagues.

"We've been empowered to run the nursery as our own and we are able to make changes that we feel are right for us.

"We also get to share our experiences with other managers within the group and feel like we are part of a family. To us, it's not a job, we are working for our family and in this day and age you want to work for someone you really love. It has been a really nice journey so far and I'm really looking forward to the future."

Toni O'Brien shares Lyn's views and has loved the process of becoming part of Family First, having spent 18 years at Prima Montessori in Gillingham, the last eight years as Manager. The business was acquired in January this year.

She said: "I feel very supported and empowered. My team have embraced the new culture, we are excited about the training and development opportunities available and I feel passionate about my staff progressing within their roles.

"We communicate openly as a team, future group plans are shared and we feel we can put our ideas forward freely. It is refreshing to be able to communicate with our other Nursery Managers to share ideas and provide emotional and practical support to one another.

"I am delighted to see three more nurseries join the group recently – Head Start in Barnet, Enfield and Potters Bar – and I'm very much looking forward to more joining us



Gillingham Manager, Toni O'Brien

and being able to share our journey and experience with them."

But what do parents think?

The sale of a business from one owner to another can often go unnoticed by parents, particularly where the new owners are keen to stay below the radar and maintain a feeling of 'business as usual'. But not for Family First, who are proud of the achievements of previous owners but equally keen to stamp their own mark.

As parent Hannah Graves, whose daughter attends Bizzy Bees nursery in Worcester Park, said: "We are very pleased with the takeover of Bizzy Bees. The core strengths of the nursery remain. This is a small environment with a real family feel.

"My daughter has an individual relationship with every single staff member at the nursery, who have been rightfully retained. She has never once been reluctant to attend since starting two years ago at eight months. She looks forward to going in and sharing news with staff and friends. 'Nursery woo hoo!' is a common phrase in our house.

"I know that she feels safe, secure

and nurtured by everyone in the setting. Her development is clear and she has formed wonderful friendships with the other kids. As a parent, I find the management extremely flexible and responsive.

"New additions from the recent investment, like the eyLog app, provide more insight than there was in the past as to what she had eaten and all important milestones with potty training, which makes it easy to be consistent at home. We remain thrilled with everything."

Family First is now looking for other children's nurseries to join their group who share their commitment to providing outstanding childcare and driving up standards within the nursery profession. ■

● If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit:

www.familyfirstnurseries.com

or contact:

andy@familyfirstnurseries.com

T: 0207 622 0484