

Maintaining quality while going for growth

Nursery acquisitions are on the increase following the lockdown lull. But it's not a numbers' game for **Family First**, where teamwork takes top priority to ensure that safety and quality are never compromised.



When it comes to growing a business, the Family First children's nursery group has set its sights high, focusing on maintaining quality in the process. By establishing a dedicated team, its approach has been recognised with the NMT Business Development Award 2021.

The organisation now has 47 nurseries, from London to the East coast, the South to the Midlands, with 3,500 full time places, supported by 1,000 staff. All this has been achieved in less than three years – and during a global pandemic! So what's the secret of their success?

Craig Grant, Family First's Corporate Development Director, puts it down to teamwork from day 1, working closely with every individual vendor and nursery to really understand what makes them tick.

"For us, it's all about building relationships. We listen to the nursery owners to find out why they're selling their business and what their plans are. We want to understand everything about their journey, how they reached this point and what works well within their nursery.

"Honesty and transparency throughout the process is so important, being clear and helpful, not using jargon, and keeping in contact so people feel reassured."

As CEO Ollie Humphries says: "We recognise it's a very emotional time for nursery owners when they decide to sell.

Many of them have been running their businesses for decades and the pandemic has made them reassess their priorities.

"Others have personal reasons for wanting to sell, or they just want to do something different and, in many cases, recognise they've taken their business as far as they can.

"With the backing of August Equity, we can give their nurseries the investment they need, maintaining and improving their quality in the process, supporting and developing their team and, importantly, learning from them so we can share best practice across our whole group."

"We're the opposite of a big corporate," adds Chief Childcare Operations Officer Dianne Lumsden-Earle. "The last thing we want to do is come in and tell them what's wrong with their business and make wholesale changes or rebrand.

"Once the acquisition has taken place, I spend time in each nursery to get to know the team and understand their processes. We ensure that safeguarding is everyone's number one priority and, having been in the industry for 34 years, I can spot any immediate issues that need resolving. This could be as straightforward as replacing furniture that I think could be a hazard."

Family First, whose Chairman Andy Morris previously grew Asquith to 92 nurseries before selling to Bright Horizons in 2016, understands the importance of maintaining quality.

Focusing on quality

Nicola Reed, Head of Childcare and Acquisitions, oversees a six-strong highly experienced Quality and Childcare Team, who audit each nursery and undertake pre-Ofsted inspections to get them 'Ofsted ready'. Family First has an aspiration to be outstanding in each of the areas it operates – and many of its nurseries already have Ofsted Outstanding status.

"Working with the managers, we can then establish what support they need, what investment is required in their premises and staff training," said Nicola. "We can help them with their curriculum, get to know the children and carry out observations for parents."

Involving the staff and parents

It can be quite a shock for some staff and parents when they learn a nursery is changing hands so the Family First team meet people face-to-face to explain what is happening and answer any questions.

"Communication is important so there are no surprises," explains Head of Marketing Natalie Hunt. "We're there to reassure people that the staff will be retained but there may also be investment in resources, IT systems, refurbishment or garden improvements.

"We listen to their feedback first and find out what their wishes are and will communicate any big changes before they happen."



One of the changes that parents love is the introduction of eyLog in nurseries where it didn't exist and now parents can see via the app what their children have been getting up to every day.

As CEO Ollie Humphries adds: "I loved the app when my own children were in nursery, knowing they were safe and having fun. Kids don't always tell you what they're doing, but to share these memories is magical. It's part of a culture shift and was particularly critical in the early days of the pandemic.

"For a working parent who doesn't always get time off to do the drop off and collection, when you get a picture with a cheeky smile, it gives you a moment of joy."

Getting involved with the local community

Part of Family First's ethos is to maintain and develop each nursery's links with the wider world – as recognised by the judges of the NMT award, who said that Family First's launch had been outstanding and benefited the children, staff and local communities.

They said: 'In a very closely competed category, we chose Family First as winners on account of the way that it has been able to successfully scale through acquisition in such a short timeframe while genuinely being able to bring the staff along, protect local brands while enhancing the proposition for parents, and drive financial performance.'

Regional Operations Director Emily Burgess says: "Our nurseries all support local foodbanks and parents, visitors and staff have donated thousands of items since Family First launched.

"The nurseries also have their own charities they support and get involved with local schools and churches, singing and doing plays, even carols outside residential homes for older people.

"Poppies Nursery in Buckinghamshire supports a Baby Bank appeal, donating blankets, bottles and toys for mums in shelters who were victims of domestic violence.

"Staff from another nursery are supporting The Bridge Homelessness to Hope charity so we, along with Amazon, have donated rucksacks containing hats and gloves, handwarmers and chocolates, to support them this winter.

"We feel it's vital that nursery children have a relationship with their local community to give them an understanding of how the world works at the start of their educational journey.

"It gives them life skills for the future. It's about showing love and care to the community and the world around them."

Dawn Huckerby, the Operations Director for the 10 recently acquired Footsteps Nurseries in the Midlands, which has added on two more nurseries since acquisition, added their group has just handed over a cheque for £21,000, raised in 2021, for the Acorns Children's Hospice.

"Activities included the nursery staff walking 21 million steps, which had to be logged weekly, a sponsored walk, auctions, babysitting services and even a 'Get me out of here' event."

And Family First loves to keep in touch with vendors once they've moved on. Kaye Wildman, who recently sold her Nursery on the Hill and Nursery on the Green nurseries to Family First was delighted to return with her husband Steve to visit the children.

"Steve was Father Christmas and it was a joyful occasion and lifted everyone's spirits. It was great to return and see the children and staff so happy and positive." ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: www.familyfirstnurseries.com

