

# Don't be frightened of communicating with your parents

**T**here's no denying that the Covid-19 pandemic has put intense pressure on children's nurseries and sent many into a tailspin. Even though almost a year has now elapsed since the first lockdown, every week brings a new set of challenges when it comes to staffing levels and opening hours, impacting the level of service delivery.

For the Chairman of the Family First children's nursery group, Andy Morris, it all boiled to a head in the New Year when one in six of his 248 staff were off work because they either had Covid or had been in contact with someone or were shielding.

"We had to put everyone else in the company onto the front line to ensure that children were safely looked after in their bubbles and parents received the service they were paying for," he explained.

"Inevitably this put incredible strain on our workforce as the pandemic was really taking its toll and we needed to do something to reduce hours in some of our nurseries – but in a way that everyone could support.

"One of the first things we did was call all our parents across our 10

The last few months have put incredible pressure on children's nurseries across the UK, with many struggling to keep their doors open as the Coronavirus pandemic took hold. Here, the Family First children's nursery group explains how continually involving parents in their decision-making has paid dividends in terms of customer relationships and helped them keep their doors open.

nurseries and have an honest conversation about the situation we were in and ask them how they would feel about us reducing opening hours so that our staff could cope better. We listened very carefully to their views to understand the impact it would have on them.

"We were so heartened by their response. Everybody we spoke to agreed with the changes. Their biggest worry was what they would do if we closed completely, particularly for key workers. But because we had consulted them and not imposed any changes on them, we were able to collectively agree a reduction in the number of hours offered across the day and different start times, but in a way that suited the parents in each nursery setting.

"We're constantly communicating with parents, whether it's about Covid, or health and safety, or supporting them with the children at home. We let parents know the channels are open so they can contact us any time. We note everything on our IT system, using the eyMan and eyLog software – and don't just jot notes down on a pad.

"When we acquire nurseries, parents often tell us they've never



been communicated with in this way before and they really value our approach. It makes them feel empowered."

## Overwhelming support from parents

By picking up the phone and talking to people, the team was able to properly gauge how families themselves were coping.

Kirsty Miller, who manages Parent Liaison, said: "The response from parents was overwhelmingly heartwarming; they truly could not have been more supportive of the nursery teams and everything they are doing. It was clear that the welfare and wellbeing of the staff was important to them, they were grateful that we are open in our communication and wanted to do what they could to support us."





Social Marketing Executive Jody Matthews added: "Calling our parents was quite an emotional task. It was lovely to talk to people who genuinely cared about our nursery employees' welfare. Our mums and dads also had their own pandemic stories to tell, but most of all wanted to know how they could support us while we stayed open for them."

"We have such lovely, understanding parents and our decision to reduce the hours at some of our nurseries came as a direct result from consulting our families first and working together with full support and kindness for each other."

### Staff appreciate the support, too

For employee Hannah Mulholland, a Nursery Assistant in the pre-school room of Prima Montessori in Gillingham, Kent, the support from families and management has made all the difference during these challenging months.

"I have always felt supported at work, but it's just a little different at the moment as we are working within our bubbles. We are all taking responsibility to keep hygiene and care standards high and I feel that all the policies and procedures that have been put into place really do work."

"As for our relationship with parents, it feels stronger than ever. Even though they aren't coming into nursery at the moment, we're constantly in touch and staying positive and I'd really like to thank them for the support they've given us."

As well as having its own virus testing in place, the group has invested in fogging machines to disinfect the nurseries – and has supported the staff with additional perks and a pay rise.

### Parents praise ongoing communication

There's nothing more important than keeping parents in the loop when changes are being discussed. Mum Ewa Eddy, whose sons Harry and Jack attend the Prima Montessori in Gillingham, Kent, is the deputy head of a secondary school and has to be at work by 8am.

"I was happy with the option of reduced hours and feel the way the nursery has put measures in place to protect the children has been extremely good. The way the nursery communicates change is perfect and all the staff are excellent too."

It's a sentiment echoed by Will Goodwin, whose son Edward attends the Clapham Day Nursery in London. He said: "My son loves the nursery, especially the garden as he's a typical boy and likes to get muddy and dirty! Communications from the nursery have been great, via email, website and social media. We recognise the reduction in hours for the staff was an important step to take."

### Collaborative approach to decision-making

Big plans for growth are on the horizon – with the Family First group expected to double in size to 20 nurseries within a 25-mile radius of London by April. This means communication and customer care will continue to be an integral part of the group's decision making, going forward.

"We've learned a lot about customer relationships over the years," said Andy, who used to run the 92-branch Asquith children's nurseries group until it was sold to Bright Horizons in 2016. "But this pandemic has really underlined

how important it is to involve families and carers when taking any major decisions that have a wider impact for everyone.

"By showing our support to parents, they now act as a voice for us. We only speak to them when it's important to do so and don't overcommunicate, which could have a detrimental effect."

"By empowering our customers, they feel part of our company and the next time we need to make a major decision, we will call them up. If they understand our concerns, they will support us."

"After all, in this new world, if you don't support each other, you've got an even bigger problem on your hands." ■



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

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