

Nurturing children is one of the most important and rewarding tasks in life, as anyone working in nursery care will attest. But who looks after those doing the nurturing, asks the Family First nursery group, which has set out a commitment to celebrate and support women working in its nurseries every day – and not just on special occasions.

Celebrating women working in childcare

Every year, there are special 'days' to recognise the achievements of women, such as International Women's Day, #March4Women, Women's History Month and feminist festivals. And while these are all to be applauded, raising awareness of how much has been achieved over the past century in terms of women's rights, there is still a long way to go in terms of political, economic and social achievements.

That's why, according to Family First, we need to support and celebrate the achievements of women EVERY single day – and where better to start than in nurseries across the UK, setting a great example to the young children who are nurtured predominantly by women, who play such an important role in giving them a great start in life.

"It shouldn't take a special day of the year to tell people how much you appreciate them," says Family First's Director of Operations and Quality, Dianne Lumsden-Earle. "Every day should be a Woman's Day. Just like we shouldn't wait for Valentine's Day to tell people that we love them!"

Dianne became a nanny when she was 17 before having her two sons. But when her husband sadly died leaving her with two young children, she trained and qualified as a Nursery Nurse. After working first for a local council then a



Dianne Lumsden-Earle

nursery in Beckenham, she worked her way up the ladder to managing nurseries and eventually joining the board at Family First – not as a token gesture because she is a woman but because she has the right skillset. Her management style has been shaped by the way she was treated in her first job.

She said: "I remember going in to my very first job wanting to interact and getting pulled into the manager's office. She gave me a real dressing down and told me that I was too happy in work and not to interact with the children. My role was apparently only to supervise!"

"This stuck with me as I was determined that if I became a manager, I wanted to ensure my staff were always happy in work

and that I didn't want to be the same as that manager. My career journey has taught me to never change who you are for anyone and to always stay authentic to yourself and show kindness and mutual respect to each other.

"Everyone has the right to their opinion and to have their voice heard. No matter who you are in an organisation or whatever rank, you should never forget your roots or where you came from."

Now with 17 Family First nurseries, expecting to rise to 30 by the end of August through acquisitions, it's important to Dianne that their fast-growing team all share the same ethos when it comes to praise and support throughout the business.

She says: "We want to be the best employer for both our female and male employees so we're increasing holidays, supplying free toiletries, holding team events and giving staff one week off for their wedding."

The company has even paid for a staff member to fly abroad to see her dying grandmother and say her goodbyes. "It's important to look after people's wellbeing, especially after the last year that we've all had. Everyone has worked so hard so we've given them a 3% pay rise in recognition," says Dianne.

Equality and diversity throughout the business is key – and there is a recognition that it would be great to have more men working in the



business. As Dianne says: "Children relate differently to male figures as some children do not have male figures at home and therefore this is an important presence for them.

There is no stigma for anyone in the company and we welcome anyone that has a passion for childcare!

"It doesn't matter who you are, if you can do the job, you get the job. We embrace everybody at Family First Nurseries. People are employed for what they can do, not on anything else. We embrace and celebrate diversity in our business as we know diversity enriches the lives of the children we care for as well as our own."

Across the 17 nurseries, staff members speak a total of 23 languages, from Japanese and Azerbaijani to Pashto and Bengali, as well as fluency in Makaton.

Angela Gallagher, who manages the Little Gardens Worcester Park nursery operated by Family First, says: "I make time to get to know my team and understand what is going on at home to ensure they are best supported whilst at work. This creates a relaxed family feel to the nursery and one which people want to be part of. Having a flexible approach to allowing staff to take their children to the doctors or seeing the school play does go a

long way. Staff will be loyal and more committed if they know that their own needs are valued."

Toni O'Brien, who manages the Prima Montessori in Gillingham, adds: "We do risk assessments for all pregnant women, we look after everyone's wellbeing daily and have a wellbeing room for staff to use to have time out if required; we also have mental health boards within our staff rooms and regular supervision for all staff. Our team are like a big family and we offer a home from home environment for everyone."

As Andy Morris, Chairman of Family First says: "We're a nation of complainers, so what message does that send to the young people we look after and educate? We should be praising people instead."

"People are always shocked when I'm travelling and I ask for the supervisor to compliment their team. They're so used to people complaining and then reprimanding their staff when things go wrong and not so fast to compliment their team when something goes really well. We need to change this culture and stop becoming a nation that moans at the smallest things –

particularly on social media.

"Instead, we need to think about small gestures such as sending a thank you card, picking up the phone or sending some chocolates or flowers. This is a lot more powerful than anything else monetary based.

"It's all about having the right culture in place and filtering it down through all your nurseries. At Family First, we have amazing staff who are worthy of our support and praise – and I feel it's a real honour for me to work with them." ■

● 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