

Family First embeds new culture after doubling in size



Andy Morris

Growing a business through acquisitions poses many challenges, not least when the country is gripped by a new wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

But the Chairman of Family First, Andy Morris, remains resolutely focused on moving the business forward, having initially acquired four Little Garden Nurseries and, more recently, three Headstart nurseries in Potters Bar, Enfield and Barnet, along with Bizzy Bees in London, Acorn Montessori in Harrow and Prima Montessori in Gillingham.

"Times may be challenging for business right now, but as our names suggest, we're putting families first and investing in new premises, our people and technology," he said.

"We can't do this unless we empower our teams and provide them with the resources and information they need to drive their nurseries, backed by clear communication and understanding.

"At the same time, the safety and wellbeing of all our children, staff and parents remains our top priority."

With the Family First nursery group growing to 10 nurseries within just six months, we find out how the organisation has set about embedding its new culture within the group, as it moves beyond Covid-19 and back to business as normal.

Taking a different approach

Among those steering the group is Director of Operations and Quality, Dianne Lumsden-Earle, who has been in the industry for 33 years, working her way up from Nursery Assistant to Manager and into senior Director roles.

"It's fantastic to be involved from the start because we are trying to create something that is totally different," she said.

Dianne, whose responsibilities include quality assurance and Ofsted, plus overseeing health and safety, is passionate about giving children the best start in life and that involves ensuring nursery staff understand the planning process for every individual child to help them achieve their milestones. "A key focus right now is keeping everyone safe, with different areas of the country entering new tiers of coronavirus restrictions," she said.

"As a group, we have gone above and beyond the guidelines laid out by the Government by appointing a Wellbeing and Safety Manager and an Infection Control Specialist. At the start of the pandemic, most of our nurseries remained open for children of key workers when others were closing.

"We removed carpets from all the nurseries and gave parents PPE packs with hand sanitiser and face masks and we have adapted to



Dianne Lumsden-Earle

working in a Covid-safe way with resources constantly sanitised. Children now play with water, sand and playdoh that is disposed of daily.

"We have increased the time we spend on health and safety training, moving from 130 measurements to 560 measurements without losing sight of a child's education and wellbeing."

Prioritising health and safety

There to give training and undertake unannounced health and safety audits on each of the



nurseries is Chris West, Director of Health & Safety at MCW Nursery Support Services.

One of Chris' first jobs when a nursery joins Family First is to work initially with the nursery management team to develop them to an outstanding level on health and safety legislation, policies and procedures ensuring they have all the right checklists and documentation to keep everyone safe and secure.

He then returns to train the whole nursery team and will subsequently audit them and conduct random spot checks to ensure they always stay alert. They are awarded either a red or green rating, red for no, green for go. If the nursery requires additional support to reach a solid 'green', Chris will work with the team to achieve this as soon as possible.

"I always look through four sets of eyes: The Health and Safety Executive, Ofsted, prospective parents and Andy Morris," said Chris.

"I've worked with Andy for over 25 years and I can always hear his words ringing in my ears – 'You do not want to be the person sitting in front of a parent having a difficult conversation about the wellbeing of their child'."

Driving up standards

Nursery Director Nicola Reed has been in her current role for a year and worked within the childcare industry for over 30 years, successfully achieving Outstanding status as a Nursery Manager three times and involved in the Ofsted of nine Outstanding inspections.

Nicola's role in the business is to support and guide the Managers, ensuring the highest levels of quality, standards and business acumen are consistently maintained. This is achieved by regularly visiting the nurseries and staff and performing peer-on-peer observations.

"Parent partnerships are essential in ensuring our families are happy and feel part of their child's journey here at Family First," said Nicola.

"With my love of children and being a mother myself, I understand the importance of keeping close communications with a child's nursery team. Having a united connection between home and nursery ensures nurturing togetherness, giving the best start in a child's life."

Continually reviewing and updating company policies forms a large part of Nicola's role. From HR processes and policies to, more recently, a major focus on the Covid-19 pandemic and health and safety across the group.

"I enjoy motivating our nursery teams and feel passionate that the business invests in training and development across all areas so that our people are versatile, we can empower our staff to perform multi-functional roles," she said.

Putting our Families First

The organisation has also recently invested in its Customer Service Team by introducing a Parent

Liaison Advisor and a Digital Marketing Executive, strengthening the support team to four.

Kirsty Miller oversees Sales and Parent Liaison, ensuring that families receive a first-class customer experience, every step of the way.

"Childcare is an important part of our parents' lives; it enables them to do their jobs and is one of the most important decisions a parent makes. It is a privilege that our parents choose us as their provider. We owe it to them to deliver the best customer experience, the best childcare, given by the best people."

Digital Marketing Executive Jody Matthews joined in September, bringing over 20 years' experience of marketing within various industries and sectors.

Jody said: "I joined Family First at a very exciting time. The business is experiencing rapid growth and its success so far is testament to the team and their consistent dedication. My job is to give regular, clear and consistent messaging digitally, ensuring our families are up to date with our news, events, investments and plans.

"This is achieved via our social media platforms, newsletters and regular parent updates. I also manage the company websites, drive change and amends where required; I am looking forward to the exciting future project of a new Family First website, which will encompass who we are as a nursery group, our ethos and our culture."

Despite Covid-19, the nurseries' occupancy continues to grow and whatever happens to the economy over the next six months, Family First is determined to be there for its staff, for the children and for all the families it supports.

In order to succeed, Andy Morris has some simple advice. "Don't keep talking about things – just do them!" Given his successful track record, it is advice worth heeding. ■



Kirsty Miller

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