

Growing your business in uncertain times



With the UK now officially in the grip of a recession and thousands of people losing their jobs, it may not seem like the best of times to start growing your business. Here, we find out how one of the newest nursery groups in the UK has set its sights on expansion.

While many nurseries right now are battenning down the hatches and preparing for the economic storm that is looming, one nursery group is charging full steam ahead with major expansion plans.

The Family First nursery group, led by former Asquith CEO Andy Morris, had already acquired four Little Garden nurseries in London and the Prima Montessori in Gillingham before the country was snared by the Covid-19 pandemic.

With the backing of August Equity, the company is now on the

acquisition trail and plans to double in size before the year is out, with each individual nursery retaining its own identity. It has recently acquired Bizzy Bees in Worcester Park and Acorn Montessori in Harrow and has its sights set on growing to 40 nurseries within a 25-mile radius of London over the next four years – all aspiring to achieve Ofsted's Outstanding status.

"This isn't about growing a business for the sake of it," says Andy, who is Chairman of Family First. "We see this as an amazing opportunity to create a new, sizeable

quality childcare provider, run by managers who are empowered to run their own nurseries.

"We're looking for nurseries to join us that have character and share the same ethos and vision, ones that we can learn from. We want to embrace and enhance them. We want to collectively make a REAL difference to childcare."

Andy, 57, grew the Asquith brand to 92 nurseries – 40 of them Outstanding – before selling the £60 million turnover group in 2016 to Bright Horizons. He then headed out to Australia, to help grow the OAC Childcare Group from 24 nurseries to 79.

"What excited me when I returned was the personal challenge of starting afresh without any infrastructure or support. We've worked hard to create a new culture and to get the people who define that culture, who share the same principles about supporting and caring for others in order to provide outstanding childcare. We are on the same journey together. We don't want to build another Asquith. We want to create something even better."

Putting the family first

A key focus for Family First, as its name suggests, is gearing everything towards the needs of the family, particularly in the current climate.

"This means really understanding how our parents are feeling, what's going on in their lives and how we can help. Many of them may be facing redundancy and unemployment or personal issues, and while we have no intention of intruding, our job is to make their lives easier.

"We saw this during lockdown when we kept our nurseries open for key workers. It was a stressful time for them. Meanwhile, other parents



NURTURE, CARE, INSPIRE.



were at home, many of them holding down full-time jobs while trying to look after nursery-age and pre-school children as well as home school their older ones. But we did everything in our power to support them through the challenges they faced.

"This meant setting up video conferencing sessions online so our nursery staff could keep in touch with all our families at home and keep the children educated and entertained, which made it so much easier when they eventually returned to the nursery at the beginning of June.

"We were only able to do that thanks to a £350,000 investment in our five nurseries – a third of which was on new IT systems and equipment, including software, eyLog and new computers, laptops and phones. We needed to give people the tools to empower them so they could work from home, when necessary. We had 2,000 interactions with parents during lockdown."

Developing a new culture

The big investment, however, has been in the organisation's staff, starting with a blank piece of paper to develop a culture that is one of empowerment. "We don't want a management structure with tiers of staff checking up on our nursery managers and their teams. Instead, our focus is on training and development, instilling in every Nursery Manager a sense of ownership of everything that's happening within their own nursery."

A number of former Asquith employees have filled positions

across the company, including a newly created role of 'Employee Experience Partner', who will work with each member of staff to develop the new culture, understand their ambitions and guide them through personal career growth, at the same time supporting and developing Nursery Managers in their roles.

Andy added: "There's no point in giving people the title of Nursery Manager and not giving them responsibility. It's not just about childcare, they need to support their colleagues and parents, they need to understand how the business operates, about maintenance, marketing and IT and even profit and loss.

"We give them a huge amount of support, we are transparent and open and our 'we' culture is one of consultation, of listening and sharing ideas. Our approach is one of positivity and being kind and, as a thank you, we took some of our team to a designer shopping outlet and gave them £200 each – with the proviso that they could only spend the money on themselves. It's important to show people that you value them.

"In return, we expect our Nursery Managers to act with pride, passion and care, as if it were their own business. It's what makes the difference between Good and Outstanding.

"Nursery care is one of most important and expensive financial commitments a family can make so we need to get it right. They need to be given the best showround, the best customer service; their children

need to be given the best experience, the best food; every part of our business needs to be the best.

"When I look at a business, I believe you need to be the spider that sits on top of the web and you need to feel everything because everyone is sending you a message. The question is are you really listening to parents and staff and matching up the jigsaw puzzle.

"This is the time we need to understand everything; information is critical. Unless we have key measurements we will fail, because the parent will change on us on a daily or weekly basis. We need to know what they are thinking and to have our lines of communication open."

Over the years, Andy has made a difference to over 1.4 million children who have been in his care. "I have my own children and grandchildren but treat every child that comes into one of our nurseries as my own child," he says. "I will work to protect them with everything I have.

"I have the ultimate respect for everyone involved in childcare. It's not just a job. We have a duty of care to every parent, staff member and child – and this duty cannot be taken lightly." ■

● If you are interested in finding out more about Family First, please contact: andy@lgdngroup.com
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