

# Why investment in nurseries pays off

**W**hen Family First acquired the Head Start nursery in Enfield last October, one of the first things the company did was ask the nursery team about the changes they'd like to make.

Although the nursery isn't particularly large in size, with just 61 places, it does have a large outdoor play area, and it was perfect to transform into a magical space for the children.

Nursery Manager Niyusha Alizadeh explains: "There hadn't been much investment in the outdoor area previously and suddenly we had money to plan a completely new landscape with a campfire and teepee, a picnic area and even a vegetable garden for the pre-school children.

"We've just built a chicken run so the young ones can nurture some chicks that we're going to hatch in our own incubator, and we have fountains, including a 'feeling fountain' where the children write their thoughts on a pebble and throw it into the water. Our practitioners use this area to encourage mindfulness and meditation.



Growing a company, whether organically or through acquisition, requires substantial investment in both time and money. But as the Family First nursery group can testify, if you get it right, it very quickly pays for itself and reaps rewards all round.

"Everything is so much more exciting outside; we also have a beautiful storytelling area where children can escape to for a quiet time or sit with a group of friends to read. It helps foster a love of books."

Deputy Manager Stephanie Moore added: "The areas of the garden, including alfresco dining and wildlife nature areas, have been planned with children's interests in mind so they are instantly inspired by the layout and what has been set up for them.

"The benefits to the children, many of whom live in flats and don't get to experience a lot of outdoor space, are numerous. They are confident when playing, they are continually learning and, more importantly, they're having fun and are really happy – which means their parents are too."

This impressive outdoor space has been shortlisted for the NMT Nursery Outdoor Learning Environment Award, while another of the Family First Nurseries, the Hammersmith Day Nursery and Pre-School, part of Little Garden Nurseries, has been shortlisted for the NMT Nursery Indoor Learning Environment Award. These will be judged in November.

The group has also been shortlisted for two other awards – Nursery Business Development and Nursery Operations/ Area Manager (Operations Manager Emily Burgess) – exceptionally good for an organisation that is just two years old.

Kirsty Rose runs the 72-place Hammersmith Nursery, which was one of the first nurseries to be acquired by Family First in June 2019 and is now part of a 21-strong nursery group, with many more on the horizon.

Kirsty said: "We started by replacing our old carpets with laminate flooring and changing the paint on the walls from dark purple to a calming green. It is laid out with wooden furniture and toys and has led to a complete transformation of the indoor environment, making the different spaces flow much better.

"We offer children invitations to play using natural resources that allow their imaginations to explode with curiosity whilst having a home from home approach. This can also be done in the moment, like when we had a child come in dressed as a pirate and we built activities from there such as making maps, going on a treasure hunt and walking the plank in the garden.

"We have a strong relationship with parents and staff that allows us to adapt to suit the needs of each child and staff member individually. We embed culture and language into the nursery, alongside resources that focus on different family structures and ethnicity, using books, displays and cooking equipment that all celebrates being individual and unique.

"There's also been a real culture change throughout the nursery, whether through introducing eyLog so the parents can see what their



children are getting up to daily, or embracing the use of Facebook to share what we are doing, or continually communicating about wellbeing and Covid. We've been getting such positive feedback from parents."

Commenting on Hammersmith, Dianne Lumsden-Earle, Family First's Director of Operations and Quality, said: "If I was a child, I would love to spend the day in this nursery as the environment for children is amazing. When I visit, I want to stay and play. It's very exciting and mind blowing, with fantastic learning resources and a great, stimulating environment that allows the children to use their imagination."

Head of Childcare for the group, Nicola Reed, added: "We know we've succeeded when we hear children laughing and see them having fun. We want to hear that belly laugh, especially after the last 18 months we've all had with Covid and lockdowns."

"We've developed our own Family First curriculum and nurseries input their own ideas under the various headings. We've just had graduation and the children made their own decisions as to what they wanted to do, which was such fun."

Across the group, major change is under way, with over £1 million being invested in refurbishing the nursery environments, from building improvements to better décor, furnishings, IT infrastructure and outdoor play areas. Each

nursery requires something different, from technology rooms to electric charging points. The nurseries in Central London, for example, are different to the ones in Kent.

Family First CEO Ollie Humphries said: "We're investing a lot of money in improving the experiences of both our children and staff because the two go hand in hand."

"By having the best nursery managers and teams, investing in their training, giving them autonomy to make their own decisions locally and giving them plenty of support, our nurseries continue to perform to an exceptionally high standard, which brings parents through the front door."

"Many of the nurseries we acquired are already OFSTED Outstanding but those that are Good are now receiving an extra helping hand, with a team of seven childcare specialists that are second to none. These are newly created positions, recognising the emphasis we place on the experience the children receive."

"With the backing of our funders, August Equity, we've been able to enhance what has already been achieved by the previous owners of our nurseries, and the managers share our energy and impetus in driving the business forward."

"We work very closely with the owners during the transaction stage as we know it's an emotional time



for them. We share with them how we are going to bring additional resources so the children have an even better time at nursery and there is a smooth transition.

"We know how much care and love the owners have put into their nurseries and we put a lot of effort into communicating so they share our vision with parents and staff and they endorse us."

"Investing in nurseries gives better outcomes for children, staff and parents. Maintaining and building outstanding nurseries, combined with investment in training and people, ensures we have an outstanding future for Family First." ■

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

[www.familyfirstnurseries.com](http://www.familyfirstnurseries.com)