

# *Proud* *TO BE* different

Staff at Springlands Nursery and Baby Chalet have a unique and highly effective approach to early years education, as *TN* found out...

**F**or early years settings, being different has its up sides and its potential complications. A unique approach is something that can be shouted proudly from the rooftops, something that can differentiate a nursery from others close by and thus attract parents looking for a genuine alternative for their children. On the other hand, being different is a somewhat riskier strategy than following accepted

wisdom: not only does your unique approach have to warrant its departure from the norm in practice, you have to be able to explain it when prospective users and inspectors alike come calling too.

Springlands Nursery in Colchester, its attendant Baby Chalet and, indeed, the wider Springlands group – which includes The Cherries Nurseries and St Mary's Kindergarten (located in the grounds of a





We've always had the **ethos** that the **children come first. Everything we do is with their needs in mind, but we need to be a strong business to facilitate that**

CATHERINE HOUSE, PRINCIPAL

local primary school and private girls' school respectively) – are proud to be different. Being so has been at the heart of their success, and that the potential pitfalls have been well and truly negotiated is clear from the lengthy list of accolades Springlands has earned: it was the first nursery in Essex to gain Preschool Alliance Accreditation, Investors in People and e-

Quality Counts, and has been judged 'outstanding' by Ofsted twice since 2007.

Principal, Catherine House, also a former Ofsted inspector and NDNA assessor, set up the business in 1985 from her home, and from the outset she was bucking the trend: "We were the first private day nursery in Colchester. Back then children didn't go to



## 1. Investors in people

"Passion and dedication is so much more important than qualifications," Catherine says. "Say there's a young person who doesn't have the literacy skills we'd like them to have – if the children are crawling all over them, then they're giving the children something. Therefore we'll support that person, and help them get over their shortfall, so they can do what they love. In return for the extra support we need to give them in the short term, everybody gets huge benefits in the long term."



nursery to be educated, they went to be cared for, but as far as we're concerned education starts from birth, and that's been the case since we started," she explains.

Whilst this core ethos hasn't changed, the size of the nursery certainly has. Over the years it has moved to dedicated premises – a converted residential property just across the road from where it began – expanded, and gained the aforementioned baby chalet, as well as a dedicated training centre situated in its grounds. Today, 15 0–2-year-olds and 59 2–5-year-olds can attend at any one time, overseen by a team of 36 staff.

Parallel to this growth has been the development of Catherine and her team's approach to early years education, a process which has resulted in a provision they like to call the 'Springlands experience' – the way of doing things and the offering to children that sets Springlands and the other nurseries in the group apart from other settings.

Speaking to Catherine and senior team leader Dee Salmon, it's apparent how much thought goes into every aspect of the nursery's running: from the group's broad, overarching mission statement – "To build a legacy that positively enhances the lives of others: children, teenagers and adults, in the



## 2. Parent partners

Colchester area' – to a focus on even the minutiae of nursery life, nothing is overlooked. "We have to have a reason for everything we do, down to how the tables are laid for lunch," Catherine explains. "I have very strong beliefs about why we do things, and I've always been very confident about what we do."

As you would expect from an 'outstanding' nursery, the emphasis at Springlands is very much on the needs of the children, whatever they might be. Rooms are packed with interesting and easily accessible resources, and a diverse selection of activities are offered by attentive practitioners. "In all but one of our nursery rooms we have extra staff on duty, because it's with staff interaction that children gain the most," says Catherine. "But that doesn't mean that learning isn't led by the child – the members of staff are there to facilitate the outcomes we've identified, in the way the child likes to learn."

"If a child comes in and needs lots of cuddles, lots of one-to-one, that is their need and that's what they'll get," she adds. "We've had primary school teachers come in and say that we're spoiling children because we have a one-to-six ratio in our 3-5s, and that's something they won't have at school. But I believe that if we give children what they need now they're going to more than cope when they step up. We need them to be confident, self-sufficient and independent so that they can benefit from being in a school environment, rather than merely coping because the staff aren't there to support them."

That this philosophy is in practice at Springlands is immediately apparent, from the tactile manner staff interact with those in their care to the Montessori-inspired way in which children serve themselves at meal times,

2. A system of 'parent reps' enables Springlands to quickly address concerns parents have and canvas opinion about new ideas or proposed changes. "They're our parent, ears, eyes and voice," says Dee. "If we ask about a new idea they'll help guide us towards what parents will find most useful."

"We get great feedback from them, they're very supportive," adds Catherine. "We have minuted meetings every other month to allow us to pick their brains."



3. To help parents continue their children's learning outside nursery hours, Springlands offers home learning packs. Existing maths and language & literacy options have been joined recently by 'Limitless Luggage' – an ECaT-funded scheme that will allow children with speech and language problems to take home a suitcase of ICT equipment, books and other resources around four themes. The team are also developing 'Learn a rhyme in a week' packs for younger children.



## 3. Help at home

## 4. Outstanding outdoors

Springlands' fantastic outdoor learning area was made possible by the securing of over £50,000 of funding. Today, it boasts places for plants to grow, sand to be shovelled, water to be splashed, and children to run, climb and hide – not to mention chickens and an authentic WWII air raid shelter, uncovered and made safe for the children to explore with the help of soldiers from the local garrison.

wash up and put things away when they have finished with them. But though it has been 26 years in the making, the 'Springlands approach' is constantly evolving. "New research is really important to us," Catherine explains. "For example, we have big plants in our rooms because we have done a lot of work on the outdoor play environment, in particular how that is our natural learning environment, and how it relaxes us. We play 'inside out' music – outdoor noises that we play indoors – from 7.30am to 10 every day,

and we even have water features for our older age groups to help bring a natural experience inside. All of that came from looking at the latest research."

Underpinning it all is what Ofsted describes as a 'unique planning system' developed by Catherine and her team which helps guide practice and support children's learning: "It takes children through a staged approach," says Catherine, "so they're not, for example, writing their name back to front and forming letters incorrectly only to have to relearn it. They're taking tiny steps to achieve it properly, so that they're ready for the next step. We don't put hoops in front of children to jump through before they're ready. And it's designed in such a way that any practitioner – whatever their experience and training – can know exactly what each child needs to learn next, and can facilitate that learning."

With the various needs of children and staff



**We want parents to invest in their children's future. They don't necessarily understand that 80% of our brains have developed by the time we're four**

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### 5. Raising standards

5. Springlands CACHE-approved training centre opened in 2003. "It's part of Springlands but outsiders can tap into it too," explains Catherine.

at Springlands, and those of the two other settings, to consider, Catherine is kept busy. She describes her own role as that of 'facilitator'. "I used to work with the children as a nursery practitioner," she says. "Then I would do a lot of work with members of staff and students as an NVQ assessor. I used to say that the staff had become my children because I'd had to become a bit more removed. Now, I say the nurseries have become my children. All of our settings run as an extension from here. They each have a team leader for each age group, and we have a group meeting once a week for senior staff."

This centralised way of working, Catherine explains, is fundamental to how Springlands operates as a group: "If I had a manager in each of the different settings, they wouldn't be doing it the 'Springlands way', they'd be doing it their way. I can't do it forever, of course, so we will have to have a manager at

"And because we're training other people, we're always reflecting on our own practice, and that helps us improve for our children."

some point – but it will be a manager or two across the group. The nurseries are individual because they're in separate buildings and they're meeting the individual needs of their children, and so might be doing things differently for those reasons, but it's always to Springlands' standards."

Whilst Catherine takes the lead at Springlands, decisions are arrived at in conjunction with staff to ensure that everybody is on board. "We do everything by consensus," she stresses. "When practitioners join us from another setting they often experience a bit of a culture shock. It's so different, and there's a lot to take on board. Sometimes they're not used to having a voice. But I've been put in positions at other nurseries where I've been forced to do things that I didn't agree with, and that's something I didn't want to happen here."

The support and development staff is a

6. Forging links with local businesses and community is high on Springlands' agenda. Catherine is vice-chair of the local NSPCC business group and is proactive in her efforts to gain the help of local firms – one partner, for example, designing the Springlands website. The nursery holds charity events regularly, too, and runs the crèche during Colchester's military festival.

### 6. Community spirit



facet of Springlands that deserves to be highlighted. "Staff training has always been important to us," confirms Catherine. "There are members of staff who have been here a long time, and those who have left and come back, because we're very family orientated. We have a high-proportion of Level 3 and EYP practitioners, but we also take on unqualified staff to train up. By doing that we're improving what we offer as it means we can afford to have more senior team members – all of whom are working with the children, thanks to our dedicated administration staff."

Above all, what stands out at Springlands is the responsibility Catherine and her team feel for giving the children in their care the best possible start. "We have something that we do regularly as a whole team," Catherine says. "We get everybody in the room to shut their eyes and to think of a childhood experience that has affected them in their adult life. They put a hand on their head when they've thought of one, and then put a hand up if it was a negative experience. The majority of the room will put their hands up."

"Many of us have these memories and come to terms with them in adulthood; but while we don't consciously remember much before the age of six, what happens to us then still affects us later on. That's the responsibility those of us working in the early years have."

"What's important for me," she adds, "is helping practitioners see what their responsibilities are and how what they do will affect children for the rest of their lives, albeit in a way that they won't even be able to appreciate."