

# Joining forces

Two-year-olds can present a range of challenging behaviours. *Annette Rawstrone* considers how practitioners might work with parents to help both parties better manage this period of development

**A**rise in the numbers of two-year-olds in many early years settings is leading to practitioners working in greater partnership with parents to support them with the range of challenging behaviours that children typically demonstrate at this age.

'Two-year-olds are learning a lot in such a short period of time and developing so much, but they often get frustrated that they physically can't do more. This is combined with the frustrations of language development and often leads to temper tantrums. It can be a testing time for parents,' says Charlene Carey-Reeves, early years professional manager at Little Einsteins Day Nursery, based at Denaby Main and Conisbrough Children's Centre in Doncaster.

The setting, which along with others in Doncaster has been piloting the integrated review for two-year-olds, places an importance on parental involvement to identify issues with behaviour at an early age. The most common problems that she helps parents to address are tantrums, hitting, biting and sleep routines which, while not a direct behaviour issue, is often the cause of many problems.

Michelle Hannan, behaviour co-ordinator at Warren Nursery in Balby,



Doncaster, says that juggling work with raising a two-year-old can lead to a lot of anxiety for parents.

'Their heads can be so full of work and what they need to do at home that dealing with a two-year-old who is constantly trying to push the

**Little Einsteins both monitors children's behaviour and offers support to parents**

boundaries is particularly difficult,' she says. 'We help to give strategies on dealing with children's behaviour and support parents, but as practitioners we must remember that while it is easy to give strategies we're not going home with the child at the end

## CASE STUDY: OVERRULED

A two-year-old boy started to refuse simple instructions in the nursery, such as to wash his hands or put his coat on, and would throw himself onto the floor. The boy's key person spoke to his mother about this and found that he had begun to bang his head on the tile floor at home in frustration.

The practitioner invited the parents and grandmother, who cared for the child three nights a week, to attend the nursery

for a meeting with her and the behaviour co-ordinator.

The mum confided at the meeting that she was frustrated that her son would not listen to her or follow simple instructions. Overall, she was finding his behaviour difficult to cope with and was anxious that, following a difficult delivery, she had not bonded properly with her son.

They discussed the child's home routine and it was found

that while the parents were trying to implement a bedtime routine, the grandmother was overruling them. With her, he was left to fall asleep wherever he got tired.

Practitioners discussed the importance of keeping a consistent routine and identified that he would also benefit from an afternoon nap. They also spoke about using less language and clear, simple words when

giving instructions, along with lots of praise.

The grandmother agreed to support the parents in establishing a routine. They had a couple of follow-up meetings to discuss the child's progress and it was noted that these changes had resulted in the child having fewer temper tantrums. The mother also felt happier that she had opened up and was receiving more support from her family.



**'While it is easy to give strategies, we're not going home with the child at the end of a long day'**

of a long day. A child can behave beautifully all day for us, but they can completely change when their parent arrives.'

She finds that parents often need reassurance that their child's behaviour, such as biting, is a normal stage of development experienced by many children and that their child is not a one-off case.

'If a parent asks for advice in front of other parents then frequently another will join in and say that their child does the same. They then start chatting, which gives both practical and parental support,' she says.

Parents also support each other through the nursery's Facebook page. The nursery has a collection of advice handouts on common behaviour issues to give to parents and Ms Hannan recently organised an 'ask me anything' evening. A member of the local authority's early years team attended the nursery to answer parents' queries, ranging from sleep problems to biting, sharing and potty training. It was such a success that Ms Hannan plans on doing it again.

### FAILING AS A PARENT?

But not all parents are confident at asking for advice, with some worrying that seeking help is a sign that they are failing as a parent.

There is an open-door policy at Little Einsteins Day Nursery and staff work hard to develop strong relationships with parents, starting with an informal chat when they register at the setting, then key person home visits and sharing information at drop-off and collection times.

'Practitioners need to carefully make connections with parents, and

be cautious and reassuring so that if a problem needs to be addressed they can work together, often starting by mentioning it informally and inviting the parents in for a chat. We can then identify what the issue is and discuss different strategies,' says Ms Carey-Reeves.

'We will continue to monitor the child's behaviour and support the parents, often with follow-up meetings to discuss progress and, as is

often the case in behaviour issues, stress the need for consistency and routine.'

The child's key worker will often work with the parents, but the setting's behaviour co-ordinator or an outside agency will be consulted if necessary.

As well as supporting parents who are dealing with their child's challenging behaviour, Ms Carey-Reeves finds it is also important to communicate with the other parents in the setting about the issue.

'With issues such as children swearing or biting, other children can be hurt or affected.

'Parents need reassurance that we are not ignoring the issue but are addressing it and have strategies in place, otherwise they can be aggressive and angry towards the child doing the behaviour,' she says, adding that while the nursery would never disclose a child's name, peers will often name the culprit.

Ms Hannan says that it can be very frustrating when parents do not follow advice or lack consistency with their children, but adds that when behaviour issues are successfully resolved 'it feels brilliant and we often get lovely feedback'. ■

## EXPERT VIEW: HOME AND AWAY

Early years consultant and trainer Kay Mathieson believes that a practitioner's role in supporting parents with their child's behaviour is to try to think from the parents' perspective and work collaboratively.

'Parents are with the child for the majority of the time and have the family context and specialist knowledge of that individual, whereas practitioners are the ones with the specialist child development knowledge. It is really important to get the dialogue between parents and practitioners and bring the two specialisms together. Then you get something really special,' she says.

Ms Mathieson notes that parents can be reluctant to ask for advice, so it is important to build a

relationship. Take the time to share information from the child's current stage of development at handover rather than focusing on eating and toileting, she suggests. Have regular conversations and share observations so that both practitioner and parent can gain a rounder picture of the child.

'Conversations about child behaviour normally focus on what the child is not doing rather than understanding the perspective of the child in terms of thinking and language development. This is an area that a practitioner can help a parent to understand why their child is behaving the way they are,' she says.

Translating behaviour from the childcare setting to the

home environment can be difficult and Ms Mathieson warns against automatically presuming that strategies that work in the setting will have the same results at home.

'I believe that the top priority for practitioners is stopping to understand parents. An adult's behaviour is not the same at work as it is at home, so why should a child's be? Children will often save the worst possible behaviour for mum,' she says.

'They can spend the whole day at the setting, but then break down when their parent, that special person, arrives. Through the day they have held themselves together and that takes effort, whereas at home children are often tired and don't have the tolerance to be good.'