

Get lucky

How one nursery chain is helping children from deprived households close the gap with their 'lucky' peers. By *Annette Rawstrone*

The cognitive development of children in the early years is largely shaped by their home environment, so what are the life outcomes for children who grow up in chaotic or deprived households? This was the dilemma for staff at Little Rascals Childcare in the West Midlands who have responded by developing their own approach to working with children at risk of underachievement.

'Two of our nurseries are in very deprived areas, one is in the lowest 5 per cent of deprivation in the country. On a daily basis we deal with multiple safeguarding issues,' says owner Debbie Clarke. 'Some children live in violent homes, others in poor housing, our children live in estranged families and a lot of our parents have mental health issues. Sadly, some children live in multiples of the above. If we don't try and close the gap, who will?'

Ms Clarke also identifies the children attending full-time as being at risk of disadvantage because they rarely experience routine home life.

Staff from Little Rascals were inspired to reflect on their practice and question whether they could do more to support the disadvantaged children in their care after attending a workshop run by early years consultant and trainer Penny Tassoni at Nursery World North in Liverpool last

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'Reflect, research and involve the team. Believe in what you want to achieve'

year (see panel). It led to them reflecting on research and developing the Roots to Growth approach to address the children's lack of life experiences – the chance to touch real things, go to different places and experience the world around them.

'A lot of our children don't ever leave the suburb they live in,' says Ms Clarke. Practitioners noted that many of the children, a number of whom have autism, did not have the skills to play freely, such as use their imagination to role play or engage with loose parts, and needed an environment that stimulated their curiosity.

While play is a very important medium, Ms Tassoni says that by itself it's not sufficient to support children at risk of disadvantage. 'They are likely to not have a wide range of experiences beyond their physical homes, whereas "lucky children", as I call them, are more likely to be taken to places of interest, such as art galleries and museums,' she explains. 'This links to their vocabulary, life experience and cognition. The more a child does, the more first-hand experiences and the more they've seen, then they



develop a hinterland of knowledge and vocabulary.'

RICH AND DIVERSE

As part of the new approach, practitioners have rearranged the rooms to make them suitable for different stages of development, not necessarily age, and enable children to experience activities that will challenge and encourage their progress.

Staff uncluttered their settings and sold many toys, using the proceeds to develop rich and diverse play environments. Creating cosy areas and improved play spaces has led to a

STAFF: A LEARNING JOURNEY

Ms Clarke believes the change in approach has also had a big impact on staff across the nursery group. 'They are so enthused by it all,' she says. 'They wanted to go to a car boot sale at 6.30am on a Sunday and sell our toys and then go off and buy exciting resources. We are now one team, not three separate teams.'

They also considered how to support practitioners, leading to a reduction in paperwork. This has

enabled those staff members who previously struggled to write up observations to instead focus on collecting evidence on where their key children are and plan exciting activities for them.

'The new planning has helped support the staff with learning journeys and practice. It has also provided evidence of the incredible things the staff do for the children in our care,' explains Ms Clarke.



Little Rascals now follows the Roots to Growth approach



CASE STUDY: DYLAN

Three-year-old Dylan (not his real name) comes from a very chaotic home background with six other siblings and another on the way. He's on a child protection plan owing to his mum being a victim of domestic violence and his dad in prison.

He was a 'wild child' when he started nursery last September with a limited attention span and a lack of language, which made it difficult for him to express his feelings and resulted in him lashing out in frustration. A lack of rules at home led to him struggling to follow boundaries in the setting.

Dylan's baseline assessment was low when he joined the nursery, but the progress he made in just six months astounded staff. His language has improved and he now uses full sentences and describing words. This language acquisition has helped him to make relationships with adults and peers and enabled him to control his emotions better.

He is now rarely violent and staff have also noted huge progress in his confidence and willingness to participate. He is excited by the new resources and focuses on activities.

Dylan is now ready to progress to the pre-school space. 'We've no doubt of the damage to his future if we hadn't focused on bridging the gap and he'd have started Reception with no language, limited play skills and restricted concentration,' reflects Ms Clarke. 'But with his new skills and experiences, he'll thrive with his peers and will be a confident learner ready for his journey onto Reception.'

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MORE INFORMATION

- *Reducing Educational Disadvantage: A strategic approach in the early years* by Penny Tassoni

change in children's behaviour, with them becoming calmer and more focused (see case study). Ms Tassoni comments on how practitioners have made a reception area quiet, neutral and welcoming. 'Immediately you sense it's a good place and it sets the tone for the rest of the nursery,' she says.

Roots to Growth aims to give all children the opportunity to try new things and go to new places by giving practitioners, who may also lack these life experiences, the tools to inspire them. There are planning folders for each age group with multiple ideas for activities, such as songs, rhymes, cooking, gardening and music. 'We feel that we cannot plan just for children's interests. If we don't give them new ideas and inspiration, then how will they know what the world has to offer?' says Ms Clarke.

Staff produce weekly blogs for parents with home activity ideas and they plan to compile home learning packs. 'Our recent reflections look at reading with children. Keyworkers are going to produce videos of them reading specific books to send home so parents can actually see how to do it,' says Ms Clarke. 'As practitioners, we just assume that everyone knows how to read a book, and for our families this isn't the case.'

SUSTAINED INTERACTIONS

The changes have ensured that children, especially the younger ones, have frequent and sustained interactions at nursery to help build their emotional development. Physical and language development is the emphasis for toddlers, and the pre-school group – those who have become confident learners – are supported to enjoy wider experiences. They go on trips at least every fortnight, such as visiting a garden centre or going to a gallery. 'We're exceptionally focused on improving children's individual development,' says Ms Clarke.

She advises other settings wanting to support children at risk of underachievement to keep the children at the heart of everything. 'We don't have multi-million-pound settings, but we have a vision and our own goals. Money can't buy that. As a sector, we go through phases of what is fashionable, but you have to believe in whatever you do,' she says. 'Reflect, research and involve the team. Believe in what you want to achieve.'

Ms Tassoni cautions that some practitioners don't understand the urgency of identifying the divide that is potentially developing between advantaged and disadvantaged children. 'They need to assess children's age and stage milestones, physical development and

speech and language. Assessment is so important because if a child is starting school not fluent in language then their opportunity to learn to read is at risk,' she says.

She adds, 'It's not all doom and gloom. We have the tools to enrich children's lives, but it's a case of seeing the possibilities, thinking more about long-term planning and planning a journey of experience like Little Rascals has.' ■