

parents' views of

pre
-school

quality matters

Caroline Sharp
and
Claudia Davis

nfer

PARENTS' VIEWS OF PRE-SCHOOL QUALITY MATTERS

Caroline Sharp and Claudia Davis

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

The research

- ◆ This research is based on the responses of 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending 37 pre-school settings based in six areas of England. The survey was backed up with visits to 12 pre-schools and interviews with parents, staff and others involved in pre-school education.
- ◆ The research included six different types of pre-school setting. The settings were nominated as examples of good practice.

Parental involvement in their child's pre-school

- ◆ On average, 23 per cent of parents said they helped out with activities at their child's pre-school. This may be an underestimate due to the timing of the survey: several parents said they would be willing to help later in the school year, once their child had settled into the pre-school.
- ◆ There were significant differences in parents' participation according to the type of pre-school their child attended.
- ◆ From the descriptions given by parents who helped at a pre-school, it was possible to group parents' activities into four main categories: fund-raising and financial support; practical assistance in maintaining the pre-school; helping staff; and involvement with children.

Parents' ratings of their child's pre-school

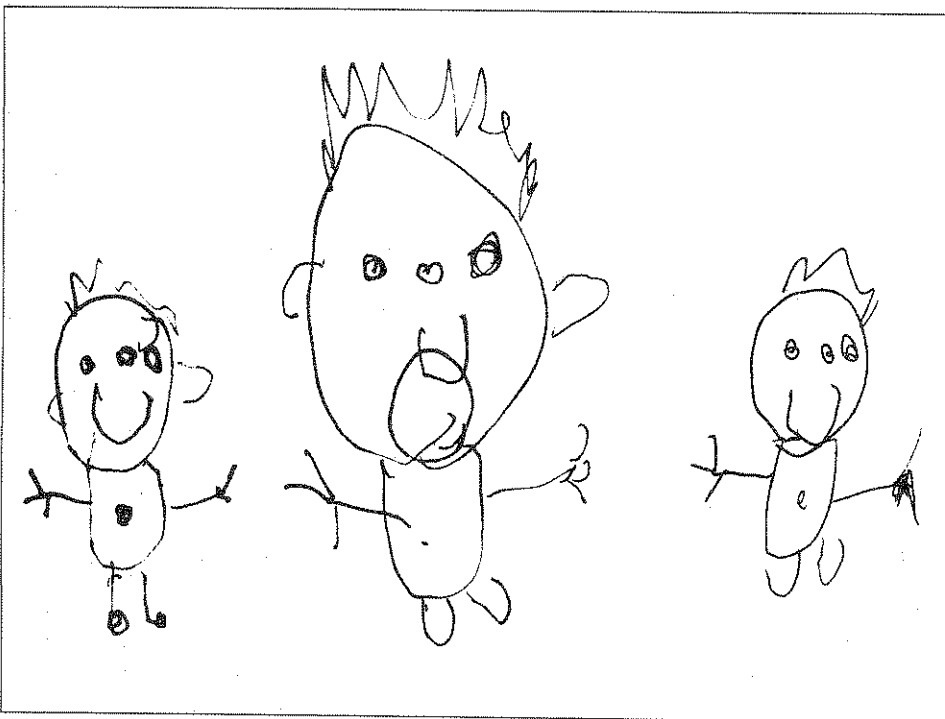
- ◆ Parents rated their child's pre-school very highly in response to a set of 19 attitude statements. This confirmed that these settings, which were nominated as examples of good practice, were achieving a high level of parental satisfaction.
- ◆ The aspect of the pre-school that received the highest ratings from parents was their child's happiness at the pre-school. Parents were also very satisfied with the management of the pre-school and with the training, attitudes and behaviour of the staff.
- ◆ Although very few parents disagreed with any of the attitude statements, there were lower levels of satisfaction with certain aspects, including: their child's opportunity to demonstrate success and focus on areas for development; the behaviour of the children attending the setting; and the usefulness of information about their child's progress.
- ◆ Further analysis identified four distinct factors underlying parents' ratings of the attitude statements. These related to the quality of the staff; the behaviour of children attending the setting; parents' judgements of their child's progress; and parents' judgements of their child's happiness at pre-school.
- ◆ There were significant differences in parents' ratings of the four factors in relation to the child's sex, ethnicity and type of pre-school setting.

Suggested improvements

- ◆ When asked whether there was anything about their child's pre-school they thought should be improved, 28 per cent of parents said yes.
- ◆ The percentages of parents who felt that something should be improved differed significantly according to their child's age and the type of pre-school their child attended.
- ◆ Issues parents wanted addressed included: low adult-child ratios; poor security arrangements; inconvenient opening hours; insufficient emphasis on basic skills; and inadequate information for parents.

Examples of highly rated pre-schools

- ◆ The information from visits to three pre-schools that parents rated particularly highly showed that parents were interested in some common dimensions (for example, good staff-child relationships; guidance on acceptable behaviour; teaching of basic skills) but differed on others (such as children's freedom to choose their own activities).



Me and my parents by Ben

Introduction

This is a report about parents' views of pre-school. It looks at what parents think of their child's pre-school, and what pre-schools provide. How and why parents choose a particular pre-school for their child is examined in a separate publication, also available from the NFER.

Issues of parental choice, liaison and involvement have always been important in pre-school education. However, our research took place at a time when parental choice of pre-school came under the spotlight, with the introduction of the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*. The scheme had two main aims: to ensure high standards of education for four-year-olds; and to promote parental choice by giving vouchers to parents, providing them with information and by causing the pre-school 'market' to expand.

It was these themes of information, choice, diversity and quality of pre-school provision that we followed up in our survey of parents' views and in our visits to pre-school settings. Although the change of government in May 1997 brought about the ending of the voucher scheme, these themes remain of key importance in the creation of a strong partnership between parents and pre-school providers.

Scope of the study

This report is based on the following sources of information.

- A survey of 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending 37 pre-

school settings based in six areas of England.

- Visits to 12 pre-schools that parents rated highly, including: interviews with 28 members of staff and 34 parents; and observation of activities.
- Interviews with people responsible for state pre-school provision in the six local authority areas and with representatives of national pre-school organisations.

For further details of the research see the Appendix, page 49.

We were interested in parents' views of the pre-schools attended by their three- and four-year-old children. There are many different types of pre-school for children of this age-group, and we focused on six of the most common.

- Local education authority (LEA) nursery schools.
- Nursery classes in LEA primary schools.
- Reception classes in LEA primary schools.
- Local authority day nurseries.
- Private day nurseries (including workplace nurseries).
- Pre-school playgroups.

Some of the key characteristics of these different types of pre-school are described in the Appendix.

The pre-schools studied were selected from recommendations by local authority officers and pre-school organisations. We sent questionnaires to parents in October 1996. The 953 parents who sent back their completed questionnaires comprised 52 per cent of the parents of three- and four-year-olds included in the survey.

Parental involvement

We wanted to know whether and how parents were involved in the work of their child's pre-school, so we asked parents who completed the questionnaire to indicate whether they or their partner helped out with pre-school activities. This question was not included on the questionnaire designed for parents of children attending a local authority day nursery, because during our trialling of the questionnaire we were advised that it would be inappropriate to ask this question of parents who may have been allocated a nursery place for their child because of a stressful family situation. Therefore the following analysis is based on the sample of 777 parents in the other five types of setting who answered this question.

Our results showed that 23 per cent of parents helped out at pre-school. Because the questionnaire was sent out early in the autumn term, this may be an underestimate: some of those who did not yet help out indicated their willingness to do so when their children had settled in.

We checked whether there were any differences between parents of children attending the five different types of pre-school, using a chi square test. (Throughout this report, differences described as 'significant' are significant at the .05 level.)

- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** or a **school reception class** were least likely to help with activities (13 per cent of private nursery parents and 15 per cent of reception class parents said they helped with activities).
- It not surprising that playgroups had the highest level of parental involvement, because most playgroups rely on parents to help with activities. It is interesting that parents of children attending private nurseries were less likely to help out. This may reflect the working patterns of these parents. Parents of children in a school reception class were also less likely to be involved, perhaps because parents do not expect to help out to the same extent once their children start school.
- The questionnaire asked parents who helped at their child's pre-school to give brief details of their activities. The answers to this open-ended question showed that parents were involved in a wide range of activities. These could be categorised into four main groups: fund-raising and financial support; practical assistance in maintaining the pre-school; helping staff; and involvement with children. Some parents were involved in more than one type of activity.
- Many of the parents who said they helped out were involved in fund-raising activities, often through organising events such as summer fêtes and Christmas fairs. Several of the parents who answered the questionnaire were members of a parents' group or committee. Other forms of financial support were mentioned by a minority of parents. These included: making a donation to the running of the pre-school; providing food and drink for the

class; or providing materials for children's activities.

A few of the parents said that they had been involved in maintaining or improving the fabric of the pre-school. This included: washing laundry; providing materials to repair a ceiling, painting corridors; decorating a playground and helping to lay paving.

It was fairly common for parents to help staff by taking on a supervisory or assistant role. This included such tasks as: accompanying staff when they took the children on outings; supervising children during meal times; helping with preparation and clearing up; and meeting children's physical needs. As one parent explained:

I have to do three mornings a term. I help with the children, make drinks for them, help them go to the toilet and with their coats.

Some parents were more directly involved in working with the children. The most common types of involvement were helping children with reading, art and craft work and cooking. Less frequently, parents mentioned helping children with other activities, such as table-top games and jigsaws, computers and 'dressing up'. There were a few examples where parents had been invited to lead a specific activity with children. Several parents had been involved in showing children how to cook, one parent taught the children French, a mother brought her baby to the pre-school to let the children see him being bathed, and a parent who was a potter had offered to do clay work with the children.

Parents' ratings of their child's pre-school

A key question for the research was the level of parental satisfaction with specific aspects of their child's pre-school. In order to find this out, the questionnaire invited parents to rate their agreement with 19 statements. In devising the statements, we were influenced by some of the literature on important aspects of pre-school education (see Bibliography for further details). We therefore included questions about children's emotional security, their progress at the pre-school, the activities offered, the ability of staff to respond to individual needs and to foster children's independence, equal opportunities, staff training and communication with parents.

We trialled the draft questionnaires with parents, representatives from pre-school organisations and local authority staff responsible for early childhood. The final version included 19 statements covering a range of issues about a child's pre-school. Parents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a five-point scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree).

Again, it is important to note that the questionnaire was sent out in October, close to the beginning of the autumn term, when some of the children had only just started at their pre-schools. In these cases, parents were giving us their initial impressions of the pre-school, rather than a considered opinion based on their experiences over time.

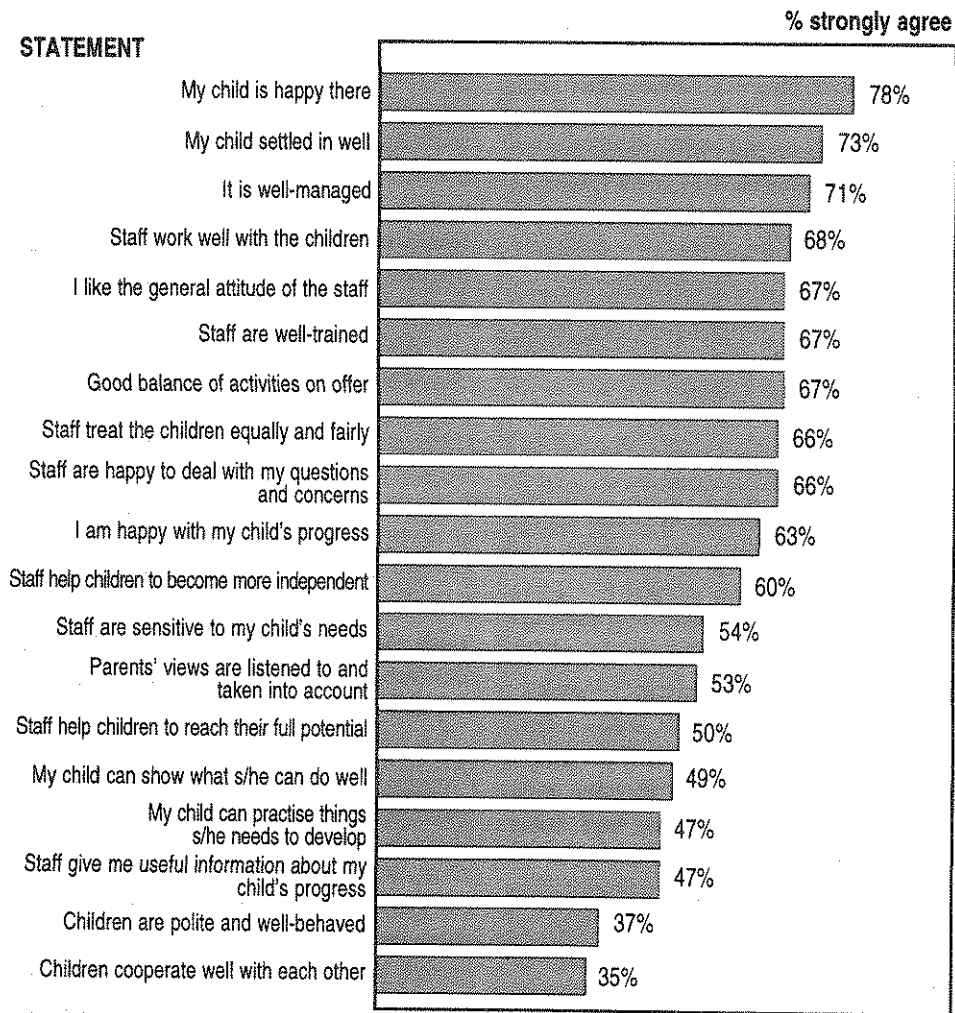
The majority of parents rated the 19 positively worded statements using

either the 'agree' or the 'strongly agree' categories. The following diagram lists the statements in order of the percentage of parents indicating 'strongly agree'.

The diagram shows that parents were overwhelmingly supportive of their child's pre-school: the majority of the

statements were given 'strongly agree' ratings by over half of the parents. This is not surprising, given that the settings in our study had been selected on the basis of recommendations from local authority staff and pre-school organisations. These ratings indicate that the settings in our sample were

Parents' attitudes towards their child's pre-school



Based on the responses of 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending: LEA nursery schools, nursery classes and reception classes; local authority day nurseries; private day nurseries; and pre-school playgroups.

providing a service which was greatly appreciated by the parents who responded to the questionnaire.

The diagram also shows that around three-quarters of the parents thought their children were happy at pre-school and had settled in well. They were very satisfied with the management of the pre-school and with the training, attitudes and behaviour of the staff. Most parents were also satisfied with the balance of activities on offer, the way in which staff dealt with parents' questions and concerns and the progress of their own child.

Although this was a very positive picture overall, there was less satisfaction with certain aspects of the pre-schools. Five statements received a 'strongly agree' rating from under half of the parents (although very few parents actually disagreed with any of the statements). Parents were less likely to rate the following aspects of the pre-school very highly: their child's opportunity to demonstrate what they could do well and to practise what they needed to develop; the politeness and cooperation of the children attending the setting; and the usefulness of the information given to parents about their child's progress.

Factors underlying parents' ratings of pre-school

We decided to see whether parents had rated certain groups of statements in a similar way (i.e. whether there were a number of 'factors' underlying parents' responses to the statements). We used factor analysis for this purpose, and this helped us to identify four distinct factors. In total, 944 parents had given a rating

for all or almost all of the 19 statements. The remaining nine parents were excluded from this stage of the analysis.

The four factors and the statements most strongly associated with them are described below. Full details of the statements which have the largest influence on each factor and the correlations (loadings) between individual statements and factors are provided in the Appendix.

- **Staff quality** was most strongly influenced by eight statements about the pre-school, including: 'Staff are well-trained'; 'It [i.e. the setting] is well-managed'; 'Staff treat the children equally and fairly'; and 'Parents' views are listened to and taken into account'.
- Two statements were the main contributors to a factor concerning **children's behaviour** at the setting: 'Children are polite and well-behaved'; and 'Children cooperate well with each other'.
- **My child's progress** was largely made up of five statements, including: 'I am happy with my child's progress'; 'My child can practise things s/he needs to develop'; and 'Staff give me useful information about my child's progress'.
- The final factor on **my child's happiness** was dominated by two statements: 'My child settled in well'; and 'My child is happy there'.

The discovery of these factors is interesting, because it enabled us to identify four distinct aspects of pre-school settings that were of interest to the parents we surveyed. In the first two factors, parents were rating aspects of

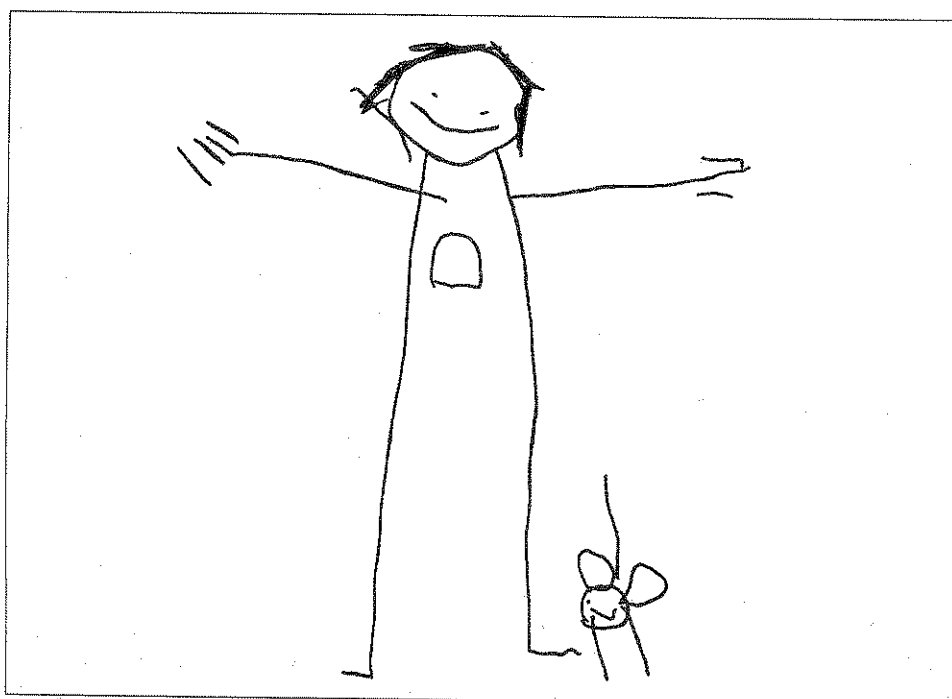
the setting as a whole, while the other two factors focused on the responses of their own child to the pre-school.

The first factor is made up of a range of statements touching on aspects of management, staff training, staff attitudes and relationships with both children and parents. The second factor concerns the politeness and cooperation shown by the children in the setting. Parents' perceptions of the progress of their own child, the sensitivity of staff to the needs of their child and the usefulness of information provided by staff about their child's progress make up a third factor. Their child's happiness at the setting is a separate issue for parents, and makes up the final factor.

Having identified the four factors, we wanted to see whether there were any differences in parents' ratings of the factors in relation to the pre-school's geographical location, the particular pre-

school their child attended or the child's background. We used a method of analysis called 'multilevel modelling' which enabled us to account for the fact that our sample does not only comprise individual parents, but there are also distinct groups of parents within the sample (i.e. 37 groups of parents of children attending the same pre-school and six groups of parents whose children attended pre-schools in the same local authority area).

The results showed that the individual setting and its location were not significantly related to any differences in parents' ratings of the four factors. However, the multilevel model took account of the (albeit small) effects of the individual setting and its location on parents' ratings, before investigating relationships between other characteristics of the sample and parents' ratings of their child's pre-school.



My teacher and her cat by Edmund

Relationships between factor ratings and information about each child

Parents provided us with several pieces of information about their child, including the child's sex, the child's age in years, their ethnic group and whether the parents considered their child to have any special needs (including health or development problems). Information on ethnicity was collected by asking parents to indicate which of 12 categories best described their child's ethnic group. Although the majority of parents described their child's ethnicity as 'White European' the sample also contained a number of other ethnic groups (see the Appendix for more details). In order to provide reasonably large samples for the analysis, we formed three groups from the 944 parents who answered this question: White European (74 per cent of the sample), Pakistani (11 per cent) and 'other ethnic group' (15 per cent).

These characteristics were entered into the multilevel model and the results are given below.

- There were no significant differences between parents of three- and four-year-olds in their ratings of the four factors.
- Parents of girls rated their pre-schools significantly higher on *my child's progress*. There were no significant differences between parents of boys and girls on the other three factors.
- Parents who described their child's ethnic group as **White European** were more satisfied with both the *children's behaviour* at the pre-school and with *my child's happiness*, than were parents of

Pakistani origins. There were no significant differences between parents of children of different ethnicity in relation to the other two factors.

- There were no significant differences between parents' factor ratings according to whether they considered their child to have special needs.

These analyses provided us with a variety of significant and non-significant relationships. It is interesting to see that parents of three- and four-year-olds did not differ in their ratings of their child's pre-school, nor did the views of parents who considered their child to have special needs differ significantly from those of other parents.

The significant differences are difficult to explain. For example, we do not know why parents of White European origins should be more likely to give higher ratings for the behaviour of the children at the setting and for their child's happiness than parents of Pakistani origins. Similarly, we cannot account for the fact that parents of girls rated their child's progress at the pre-school more positively than parents of boys, although we can speculate that this may be related to the tendency for girls to show greater progress in language and social development than boys in the early years.

Relationships between factor ratings and type of setting

We wanted to know whether there were any differences between parents' ratings of different types of pre-school setting. The multilevel model indicated that there were several significant differences. However, with six different types of setting it was not always easy to

pinpoint which types of pre-school were getting significantly higher ratings than others. We used a further analysis (least significant difference test) to confirm which of the six types of setting were rated significantly higher than others for each of the factors. The results are given below.

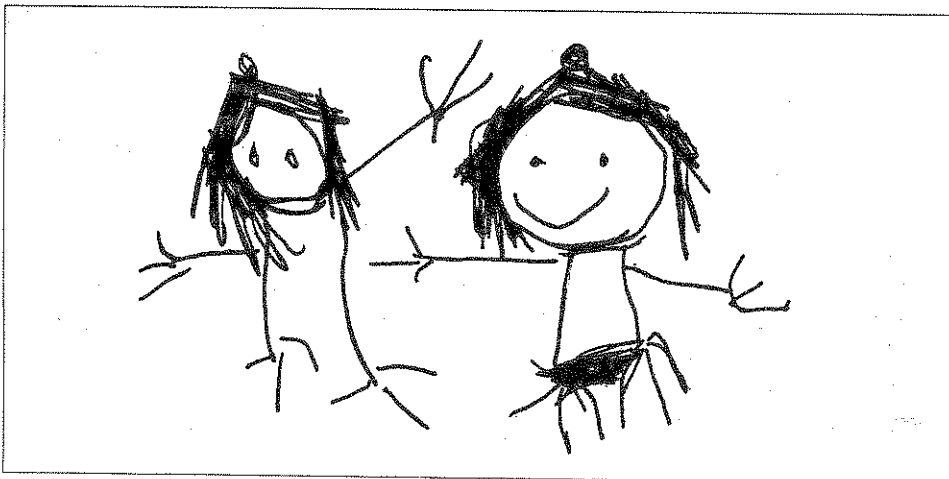
- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery** were more satisfied with the *children's behaviour* at the pre-school than parents of children attending a playgroup.
- Parents of children attending a **private day nursery**, a **local authority day nursery** or an **LEA nursery school** were more satisfied with *my child's progress* than parents of children attending a playgroup or an LEA nursery class.
- Parents of children attending an **LEA nursery school** were more satisfied with *my child's happiness* than parents of children attending a local authority day nursery, a playgroup, or a school reception class.
- The differences between types of setting for the first factor, *staff quality*, approached significance ($p < .06$). Parents of children attending

an **LEA nursery school** rated their settings somewhat higher for this factor than parents of children attending a private day nursery or a playgroup.

In interpreting these results, it is important to bear in mind that while some types of setting were rated higher than others, this is in the context of very positive ratings overall. In other words, types of settings rated less highly did not actually receive low ratings from parents on any of the factors. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that different types of settings received the highest ratings in each case.

LEA nursery schools were rated particularly highly by parents on the two child-level factors ('my child's progress' and 'my child's happiness'). There was also a non-significant trend in favour of LEA nursery schools in parents' ratings of staff quality.

Private day nurseries were rated particularly highly by parents in relation to the behaviour of the children at the setting and 'my child's progress'. Local authority day nurseries also scored very highly on parents' ratings of 'my child's progress'.



Me and my teacher by Eliza

What parents wanted to see improved

We invited parents to indicate whether or not they felt there was anything about their child's pre-school that should be improved. Over a quarter (28 per cent) of parents felt there was something that should be improved. We used a statistical analysis (chi square test) to see whether there were any differences in parents' answers to this question in relation to the age, sex, and ethnic background of the child or the type of setting they attended. The results are given below.

- Parents of children attending a **school reception class** were most likely to say that there was something that should be improved.
- Parents of children attending a **local authority day nursery** or an **LEA nursery school** were least likely to say that there was something that should be improved.
- Parents of **four-year-olds** were more likely than parents of three-year-olds to say that there was something about their child's pre-school that should be improved.
- There were no significant differences between parents of boys and girls, or of children from different ethnic backgrounds, in their answers to this question.

These results show a significant difference in the level of satisfaction of parents whose children attended different types of setting. The difference between parents of older and younger children may indicate a lower level of satisfaction with pre-school as children get older, but it may also reflect the fact that more of the parents whose children

attend school reception classes (which cater solely for four-year-olds) felt there was something that should be improved.

The questionnaire asked parents who said there was something about their pre-school they felt should be improved to give further information. By analysing the answers to this open-ended question, we were able to identify certain issues that particularly concerned the parents responding to our survey. These included: the security of the pre-school; staff-child ratios; the length of sessions; teaching basic skills; and providing information for parents.

Security

The issue of greatest concern to parents was the security of the pre-school. Understandably, the threat of an attack on their children by an intruder was an emotive issue for many of our respondents. One parent wrote:

There is very little security. The main door is always unlocked and anyone can walk in. After the recent events at Dunblane, I think this should be top priority.

Another said:

I think the nursery my child attends is a good nursery but it should have better security. It is very easy for a member of the public to snatch a child when it is playtime. They need to tighten this aspect up.

Parents pointed out that doors were not always locked and that outdoor play areas were not sufficiently protected. Some parents wanted their pre-schools to fit locks and buzzer systems, fence off areas and even to fit security cameras. In other cases, parents commented that security systems (such as locking doors)

were in place, but were not being enforced adequately. For example, one parent commented:

I feel that one of the staff should be covering the entrance until all the children are in and the door is shut.

A parent of a child attending another pre-school said:

The entrance door is a push-bar type. To get in you ring a bell, which is fine, but some parents/carers fail to shut the door properly when they leave.

Staff-child ratios

The ratio of staff to children was an important issue for parents, some of whom were concerned that their children did not receive enough individual attention. This was particularly so in reception classes and, to a lesser extent, in school nursery classes. One parent of a child attending a reception class wrote:

I don't think there should be so many children in the class. At the moment there are 30 children and at such an important time in their schooling I don't feel the teacher can spend enough time with the children when they need it.

Length of pre-school sessions

Some parents used this question to call for the availability of longer sessions at their pre-school. Parents were dissatisfied that their child could only attend on a half-day basis, particularly if other children at the same pre-school were attending for longer hours. In other cases, the pre-school's opening hours were simply inconvenient for parents, who were attempting to fit in their childcare arrangements with work

or picking up other children from school. One parent of a child attending an LEA nursery school said:

Opening times of 9.00 a.m. to 2.45 p.m. are not suitable for working parents. I work from 8.30 to 4.15. Therefore I have to drop off Jamie and pick him up at another (private) nursery which I really can't afford. I wish Jamie didn't have to be juggled, he copes excellently but I worry how it may affect him.

Another parent of a child at a playgroup commented:

Our daughter attends on two mornings and three afternoons a week. I understand that sessions are restricted because the building has to be shared, but this is inconvenient as I still have to pay my childminder full time.

Teaching basic skills

One of the other issues raised related to the pre-school curriculum. Some parents were concerned that their child's pre-school did not give sufficient emphasis to teaching children the 'three Rs'. This was of particular concern to parents of children who were about to transfer to school. One parent of a child attending an LEA nursery class said:

They should start learning the alphabet and doing some written work earlier than their last term.

Similarly, a parent of a child at an LEA nursery school said:

I do feel that my child would benefit from more alphabet and number recognition. Learning to recite letters and numbers is a great benefit come 'school time'.

Providing information for parents

Some parents felt that they were not well enough informed about the pre-school's activities or about the progress of their own child. Although parents of children attending different types of nursery felt poorly informed, this seemed to be a particular issue for parents of children attending private nurseries. One such parent wrote:

I would be interested in a more regular progress report on my child. Parents can discuss their child's progress at any time, but I would prefer to be kept informed in a written report, say twice a year.

Another parent said of her child's playgroup:

There should be more information relayed to parents. At the moment I find out most things out by listening to other mums. Possibly a monthly fact sheet with rota details and other information would be a good idea.

Other suggested improvements

Other issues raised by a minority of parents included: that the pre-school's buildings and equipment were in need of improvement; that they had concerns about aspects of health and safety (e.g. the safety of climbing equipment and the hygiene standards upheld by staff); that children's meal arrangements were unsatisfactory; and that it was difficult to park near the pre-school.

Examples of highly rated settings

We wanted to pursue the issues raised by parents' ratings of the quality of their child's pre-school. We knew from our analysis of the factor scores that LEA nursery schools, private nurseries and local authority day nurseries had achieved significantly higher ratings from parents than some of the other types of pre-school included in the study.

In order to find out how parents had arrived at their judgements and whether the pre-schools parents rated highly were offering a similar type and quality of provision, we examined the factor scores of the 12 settings we visited and selected three examples of different types of setting that were rated particularly highly by parents.

The following descriptions of an LEA nursery school, a private nursery and a local authority nursery are based on a two-day visit to each pre-school by members of the research team. The researchers observed activities, interviewed staff, interviewed parents and collected documents. They also completed a checklist of the activities available to children. The checklist was devised for the research and was based on the findings of the 1990 Rumbold Report into acceptable standards of education for three- and four-year-olds (see Bibliography).

The descriptions given below were sent to the pre-schools concerned for checking and any factual inaccuracies were amended before publication. The names of the pre-schools, and of staff and children, have been changed.

Example 1 Cannons Nursery School

Cannons Nursery School is an LEA nursery school sited in a detached house in a London borough. When we surveyed the parents in October 1996, this nursery school was rated particularly highly by parents for the factor relating to the quality of the staff.

Context

Cannons has places for 70 children. There are two sessions per day: some children come for only one session, while others stay for both. Up to 50 children attend the nursery at any one time. Children start at Cannons at the age of three and stay in the nursery for a year before moving on to a reception class at one of the local primary schools.

The nursery is open five days a week, 39 weeks of the year. The two sessions run from 9.00 to 11.30, and 12.45 to 3.15. There is an after-school care service from 3.30 to 6.00 p.m. This service caters mainly for children attending Cannons, although some children from a neighbouring school also attend.

There are eight members of staff, including the Head and an administrative assistant. The nursery has two classes, each staffed by a qualified teacher with early years training and two nursery nurses with National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) qualifications. There is a ratio of one adult to every eight or nine children.

There are good opportunities for staff to receive in-service training. The

appraisal system helps staff to identify training needs and the school receives an annual budget of £2,000 to pay for staff training. The Head has recently trained as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and one of the teachers we spoke to had attended three LEA courses in the past year (on aspects of reading, the classroom environment and science).

The Head described the population served by the nursery as very mixed in social and ethnic terms. The children come from a range of ethnic backgrounds, including Black African, Afro-Caribbean, White and Pakistani families. There was a high proportion of children with special educational needs. At the time of our visit, 14 per cent of the children attending the nursery had English as an additional language and just under a quarter were on the special needs register.

Parents travel from a radius of two or three miles to attend the nursery. There are several other pre-schools in the immediate area (including four schools with nursery classes, two private nurseries and several playgroups). However, there is not enough provision to meet the demand and the nursery is heavily over-subscribed. The entry criteria give priority to children with special educational needs or medical conditions and to families in social need. All remaining places are allocated on the basis of the distance between the nursery and the child's home.

We wanted to know how much it cost to provide a place at each of the pre-schools we visited, so we asked the Head how the £1,100 nursery voucher compared with the costs of providing a child with

five half-day sessions at their nursery for a year. The Head estimated that the cost of a place was considerably higher than the value of the voucher:

Because we don't have delegated budgets it's difficult to be precise, but the LEA figures are roughly £2,500 for each [half day] nursery place.

The Head pointed out that nursery schools are a relatively expensive form of pre-school provision because of the additional salary costs (for the Head, Deputy and Administrative Officer). However, she argued that, as well as benefiting the children in their care, the additional staffing enables Cannons to function as a centre of excellence in early years education. The nursery has a role in providing specialist advice to other schools in the authority. It offers placements to student teachers, and the Head and Deputy both lecture on an early years course for teachers.

The Head felt that parents want to send their child to the nursery because of its good reputation, the happiness of the children and because staff encourage children to develop pre-reading and writing skills. The teacher we spoke to suggested that the multicultural nature of the nursery and the fact that children's home backgrounds are recognised and valued by the staff attracts certain parents to the nursery.

Buildings and equipment

Cannons Nursery is in a detached house on a residential street. It has a large garden by London standards. Entry to the school is via the front door, which has an entry phone security system. At

the beginning and end of sessions it is possible to gain entry by a side gate, where a member of staff is on hand to let parents in and out. The rest of the time this gate is kept locked.

Once inside the main entrance, a hallway leads to a room equipped as a children's library on the right. There are two main classrooms on the ground floor, which offer different activities.

At the time of our visit (January 1997) both classes had books, equipment for writing, cutting and sticking; and tables for art and craft activities (such as painting and dough). The front class contained a number of distinct areas, including: a 'home corner' (laid out as a kitchen, with toy oven, sink, cooker and shelving); an area for children to use small models; an 'office' and two computers, running language and number programmes.

In the back classroom there were painting easels, a music table (musical instruments, tape recorder); a computer and printer and an area for construction (construction toys, small and large wooden blocks). The ground floor also had an area for water play and a wide passage with seating for children to read books or listen to books on tape. Books were available in children's home languages (the nursery recently purchased some books in the Welsh language to help a boy whose family spoke Welsh at home). Two guinea pigs were housed in this area. The nursery's kitchen, children's cloakroom and toilets were located on the ground floor.

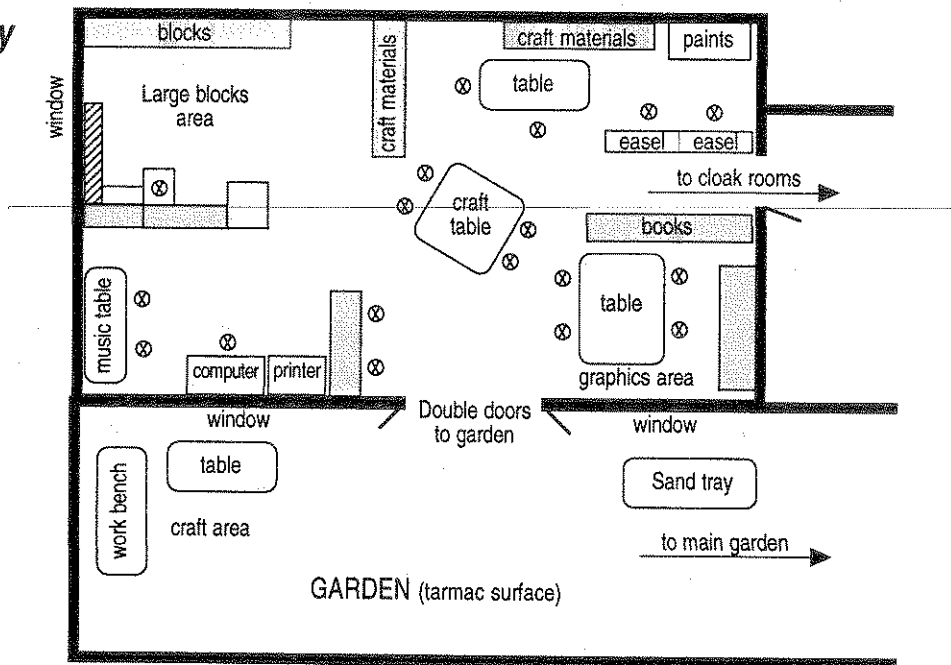
The garden had a climbing frame with slide, a basketball hoop, and two playhouses. Children used a variety of large wheeled toys in the garden area. There were a number of activities set out in the garden, including a work bench, sand tray and a miniature pond. The Head explained that many more activities are available outside during the summer.

The first floor of the nursery accommodated a large family room, the Head's room, an office, a staff kitchen and adult toilets.

The Head said that the nursery's approach is influenced by the work of Froebel. All aspects of the curriculum set out in the DFEE/SCAA document are addressed (namely: personal and social development; language and literacy; mathematics; knowledge and understanding of the world; physical development and creative development).

Children are allocated to one of the two classes. Most of the time children choose their own activities and have free access to the ground floor and garden. Materials and equipment are

Plan of Cannons Nursery School

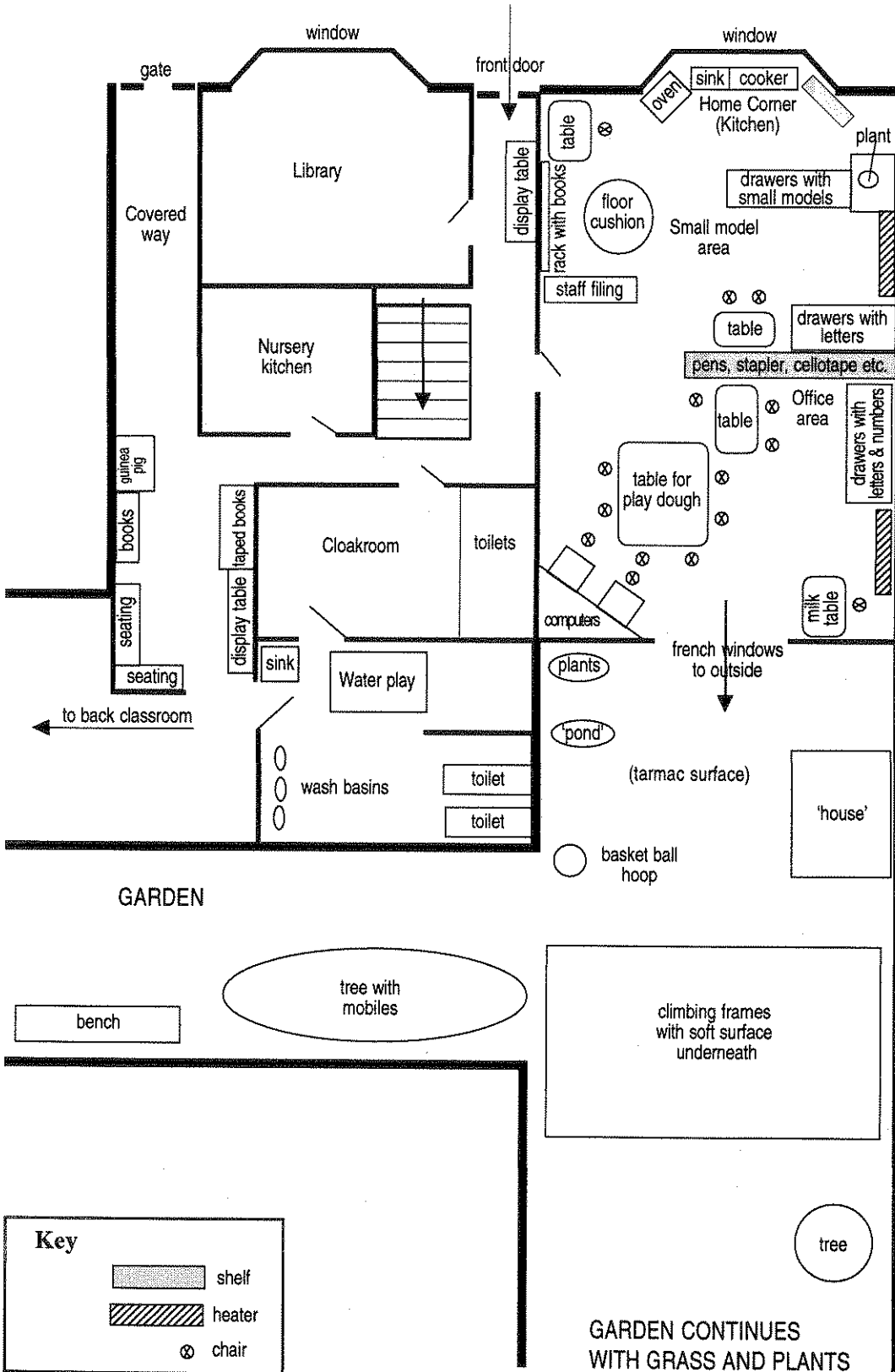


Curriculum approach

The nursery's main aim is to realise the potential social, intellectual, physical and emotional development of each child irrespective of race, gender, class, creed or disability. A second aim is for the nursery to be a centre for excellence and innovation in early childhood education.

kept on low shelving which is accessible to children. Staff vary the activities available each day in relation to their curriculum plans.

During our visit, staff were focusing on teaching mathematical concepts ('more than', 'less than', 'bigger, smaller, smallest'). This was particularly noticeable in the work with play dough



(a parent helper who worked at the dough table was asked to introduce these concepts into her conversation with children) and in the Head's questions to the class during her reading of the story *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

Planning and assessment

When children start at the nursery, parents are asked to fill in a form detailing important information (e.g. the child's health and development, the languages spoken at home and the names of adults who have the parents' authority to collect their child from school). The form asks about each child's family (brothers and sisters, grandparents), the child's preferred name, and their particular likes, hates and achievements. This information is used by staff to plan for each child and to help them to address any areas of difficulty.

After a few weeks in the nursery, staff transfer information from the parents' form to a record for each child. Every Monday and Wednesday staff carry out 'focused observations' when they observe a particular child for a ten-minute period and write notes of their behaviour. During the rest of the time, staff note down anything about a child that they feel to be important (such as incidents indicating a particular child's progress). In order to make this a manageable system, brief comments are written on to post-it notes which are then stuck into a child's records. Staff also take photographs of children at work in the nursery and give a copy to the child's parents.

As well as 'focused observations', staff carry out 'focused activities', where

they check on the progress of children in key areas of the curriculum. They try to ensure that the assessments are a true record of children's abilities. For example, during our visit, staff wanted to assess Daniel's understanding of number. They knew that he preferred to work outside. The teacher took a piece of chalk and went into the garden to where Daniel was playing. She checked Daniel's understanding by drawing numbers on the tarmac surface. Notes of this assessment were then entered into Daniel's record.

Staff meet each day after school to plan activities for the following day. There are specific objectives for each day's meeting. These are outlined below.

Cannons Nursery School: daily staff meetings

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| Mon. | Discussion of particular children and of priorities identified in the school development plan. |
| Tues. | Team meetings (e.g. checking records, planning displays) |
| Weds. | Evaluation of success in meeting objectives set the previous week. |
| Thurs. | Setting the teaching and learning objectives for next week and identifying which children will be the subject of focused observation. |
| Fri. | Tidying up and planning activities for Monday. |

Relationships with children

From our observations of the nursery, children appeared to be happy, confident and fully involved in their activities. Although children spent most of their time on activities of their own choice, staff invited certain children to join them to check their progress. At the end of each session, children were grouped together to share a story and sing songs.

Staff members were based in a particular area of the nursery (including the garden). They worked with individuals, observed a particular child, or circulated to different groups of children. Staff addressed children in a friendly manner, asking them questions and praising their work. They intervened quickly to dispel any conflict between children (for example, by inviting a child involved in an argument to accompany them to

another activity). Good behaviour was reinforced consistently (for example, children were asked to 'play gently' and 'be nice').

Staff responded to children's interests and interacted with the children, attempting to extend their activities by making suggestions or asking questions. Staff were observed to encourage children to be independent and to solve their own problems. The Head explained:

Children need to be encouraged to use their initiative, to have a go and develop their self-confidence. They need to feel good about themselves to allow them to learn from a mistake as well as a success.

The following incident illustrates their approach to fostering independent learning.

A teacher had laid out paints, water, brushes and paper on a table before the afternoon session. When the session began, a girl sat down at the table and began to paint. A boy sat beside her, stroked his dry brush on to the dry cake of paint several times and appeared frustrated that he could not transfer the paint to the paper. He complained to the teacher that his brush wasn't working. Instead of instructing him to dip it in the water, the teacher asked him what he thought was wrong. He picked up another brush and tried again, with no success. The teacher suggested he watch his companion (who was dipping her brush in the water). After a few false starts, he tried dipping his brush in the water before touching the cake of paint. This was successful, although the resulting colour was very pale. The teacher pointed this out to him and encouraged him to think how he could make the colour stronger. With some more encouragement from the teacher he learned to mix the water into the paint with his brush before applying it to the paper. He went on to produce his first representational picture of a zebra, which he had seen on a video at home the day before.

Settling children into the nursery

When children start at the nursery, there is a 'staggered' entry period so that small groups of children begin over a period of days. The children who will be attending all day, including after school care, are settled in first. They start in the afternoon to get them used to having tea away from home. The children staying for both morning and afternoon sessions start next, followed by children attending for only one session a day. Parents are asked to stay in the nursery with children at first. If their child is settling well, parents are invited to withdraw upstairs to the family room for a time, so they can return to their child if necessary. Staff operate the process flexibly: if children settle in without difficulty their parents need not continue to stay at the nursery with them.

Liaison with parents

Parents who want their children to attend Cannons Nursery are invited to open days to view the nursery and talk to staff. When children join, an introductory evening is held for parents. In a recent example, parents were given an opportunity to experience the nursery's activities for themselves. Parents took on the role of a three-year-old and explored the activities available in the nursery. They then discussed the purpose of the activities with members of staff. Other parents' evenings are planned during the rest of the year (in the one following our visit staff organised a crèche, to enable more parents to attend).

The nursery gives a booklet to all new parents. The booklet, entitled *Welcome to Cannons Nursery School*, outlines

the aims of the school and the procedures followed for children starting school. It provides details of the nursery's objectives for children's learning in each area of the curriculum. There is also information on planning and record keeping, the role of the governing body, the policy relating to children with special educational needs and the nursery's complaints procedure.

The links with parents are strong, despite the fact that many parents are working or have younger children to care for, which limits their ability to take part in the nursery's activities. Parents are invited to help with activities when they can, and nursery staff are quick to capitalise on parents with particular areas of knowledge or expertise. Parents have been involved in a variety of activities, including talking about particular religious festivals (such as Ramadan and Eid), demonstrating how to make a sling to carry a baby, reading to children, leading art and craft activities, guiding children's work on the computers, and working in the 'home corner'. Some parents support the nursery in other ways, such as supervising younger children in the family room to enable their parents to work downstairs in the nursery, helping with tidying up and cleaning, or even taking home washing. The nursery has a 'Parent Staff Friends Association' which organises social and fund-raising events.

The nursery runs a home reading scheme. Each week, parents and children choose a book from the school's library for the child to take home and read with their parents. There is a wide range of books available, including versions of the large story books the teachers use to read to their classes. The nursery gives parents a leaflet explaining

the aims of the scheme and advising them how they can help with their child's reading. There is a simple form to complete: parents note the date and book title and they add comments about their child's enjoyment of the book.

Parents are given an appointment each term to discuss their child's progress with staff. These 'conferences' are scheduled at a convenient time for parents (evening appointments are available). At the end of the year, parents are provided with a written report in a format common to all the LEA's nurseries. It covers the child's progress in each of the six curriculum areas identified in the DFEE/SCAA document. A copy of the report is passed on to the child's next school.

In addition to the scheduled meetings and written reports, parents can ask to look at their child's records at any time (children's records are kept in the Head's office). Staff take the opportunity to have a quick chat about any concerns or to report their child's achievements to parents as they drop off and pick up their children.

Parents' views

We spoke to three parents of children attending the nursery. They had a variety of reasons for choosing Cannons Nursery, including its good local reputation, the welcoming attitude of staff, and the fact that it was in a house with a home-like environment. One of the parents was particularly keen to send her son to a nursery where he could choose his own activities:

This place has a lot of space and James has the freedom to choose what he wants to do. I think it helps them think about what they want to do.

One of the parents had attended the meeting held for new parents. She had found this very helpful.

At the parents' evening we were encouraged to go downstairs and pretend to be three-year-olds at the nursery. You could play, while the teachers went round helping and encouraging. The parents were quite good at pretending although I thought they'd be self-conscious. We went back up and talked about the curriculum and how parents could be involved. It was very interesting and well done. It was a very good idea.

The interviews provided evidence of how staff dealt with parents' concerns. In one case, the parents had noted on their child's form that they thought she may be short-sighted. This had been acted on by the teacher, who used story time to check whether the child could see the book. The mother explained:

When Sue is reading the class a story she has her [the child] at the back of the class and holds the book up to see if she's paying attention. They're very aware of a lot of problems the children have; it's amazing what they pick up on really.

The parents we spoke to felt well informed about their child's activities and progress. They liked the home reading scheme and felt they had received detailed information on their child's progress. One said:

We were invited to a parents' conference. They told us how Shannaaz was doing in maths, coordination, getting on with her peers. On the computer they said she knew how to use the space bar, the return key and the equals sign.

In another case, the teacher told the parents that their daughter, Sarah, was settling in well. However, she mentioned that Sarah was not yet able to recognise the letters in her own name. The teacher suggested that the parents could assist their daughter by pointing out letters and helping her to associate letter shapes and sounds. Her father said this had been a successful strategy:

Her mother and I have been picking out letters with her and now she's fantastic at it.

All three parents praised the nursery for the quality of the staff. One said:

It's very friendly and welcoming. The teachers come across as really motivated, keen and interested in what they're doing.

Another said:

They're excellent. I sometimes wonder if they're injected with something in the mornings, because it must drive them mad, but they're always nice and approachable.

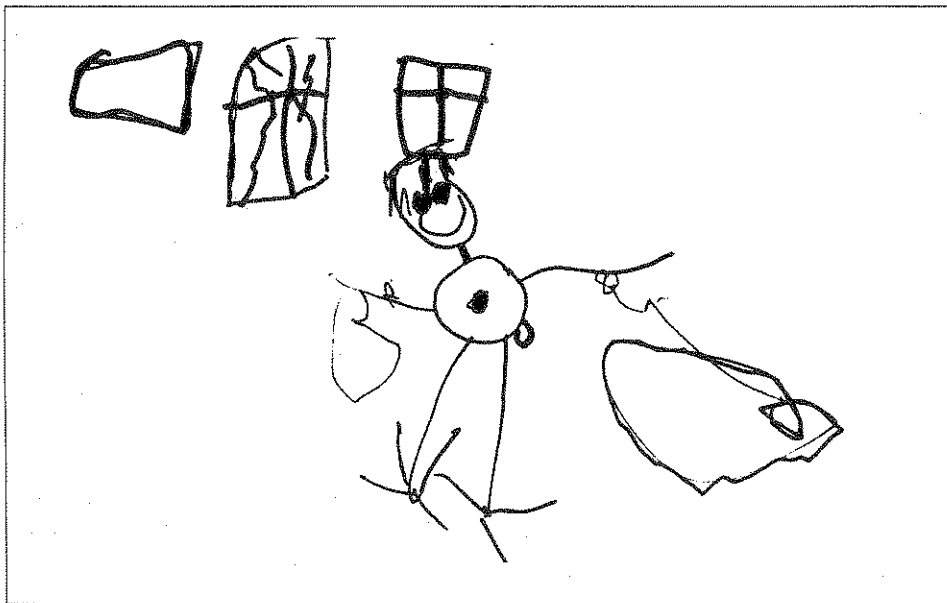
This parent had also been impressed by the way in which activities were planned to support learning:

Before I came to a nursery I didn't realise how everything is geared to teaching them [the children]. You think the children are just playing with toys, but they're not. The staff have structured it so the children build up their learning over time.

When asked if they thought there was anything about the nursery that could be improved, all three parents said they would like to see some upgrading of the buildings. They wanted improvements to the garden (including a cover for part of the area), and new plaster and decoration work.

However, one parent was concerned that the cost of repairs might prove too expensive:

I worry that the council will want the house back to sell it and will move the nursery elsewhere. It should be protected because it's so important.



I like hopping by Sam

Example 2 Eldridge Nursery School

Eldridge Nursery School is a private day nursery located on the ground floor of a detached house in a London borough. This nursery school was rated particularly highly by parents on three of the factors: staff quality, children's behaviour and my child's happiness.

Context

The nursery accommodates 30 children aged from two-and-a-half to five years. The two-year-olds attend for two or three sessions per week, so up to 20 children attend on any one day. Children are allocated to one of two classes, according to their age. The nursery is open from 9.15 to 12.15, five days a week, 33 weeks of the year. There is an extended session for older children on two days a week, when they take a packed lunch and stay until 3.00 p.m.

There are four members of staff, including the Principal, making a ratio of one adult to five children. Two of the staff have NNEB qualifications. The two members of staff working with the younger children are studying for their National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) in Childcare (Level 3). There are opportunities for in-service training, for example one staff member had recently attended a ten-week course on the pre-school curriculum organised by the Pre-school Learning Alliance and a short course in first aid. Both of these courses were paid for by her employer. The Principal was studying for an NVQ Level 3 Assessor's qualification.

In 1996/7, parents paid up to £450 per term for their child's place (which

worked out at around £9.00 per session). Although the Principal stressed that children of all ethnic backgrounds would be welcome, the children attending at the time of our visit were all from White families. There was one child with special needs (speech and language difficulties).

The Principal suggested that parents are attracted to Eldridge Nursery because of its good reputation. Some of the parents who send their child to this nursery do so because they feel it will help their child to gain entrance to a local selective school. The school holds an entrance examination for children when they are four-and-a-half, and there is fierce competition for places. The Nursery Assistant acknowledged that the nursery's reputation for helping children to gain entrance to the selective school was one of the reasons that parents choose Eldridge Nursery:

Some parents want their child to get into the 'right' next school. Others are looking for a structure, but not a hot-house atmosphere. They like the fact that it's a home, not a church hall.

The Principal said that the curriculum, staffing and behaviour policy play a part in parents' decisions:

The children are stimulated and will be taught to read and write. It is well staffed, and parents know that staff keep the children under control.

There are several other pre-schools (including playgroups and LEA nursery schools) in the immediate area. However, the nursery is heavily over-subscribed and parents have to get their children's names down when they are babies in order to secure a place when their child reaches the starting age of

two years six months. At the time of our visit (February 1997), there were no places available for the next 18 months. Apart from giving preference to brothers and sisters of children already at the nursery, places are allocated on a first come, first served basis.

Buildings and equipment

The nursery is on the ground floor of the Principal's family home. There is a locked door with a spyhole and buzzer system. Inside there is a hallway leading to the toilets and two classrooms. The class for older children is set out with a large table and benches. There is a computer and an electronic keyboard, a 'show and tell' table and a rack with some books. A kitchen is accessible from this classroom. The class for younger children (aged from two-and-a-half to three years) has a selection of books and toys and an area for dramatic play with a chest of dressing up clothes.

At the back of the house, there is a large garden with a hutch for rabbits and guinea pigs, wheeled toys and play apparatus (slide, see-saw, tunnel, and trampette).

Curriculum approach

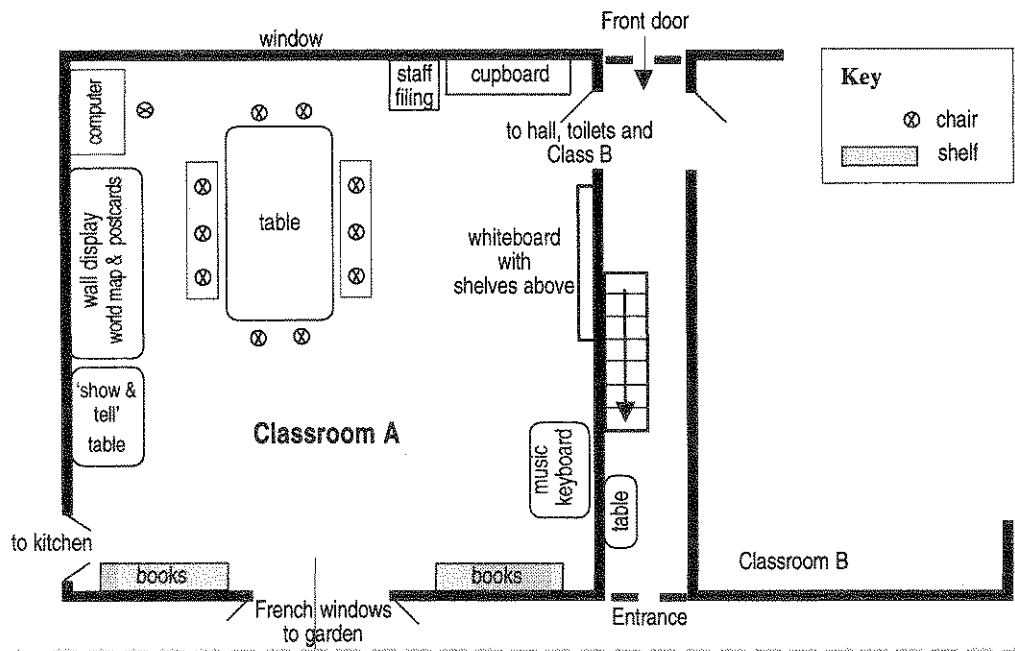
The nursery aims to encourage the development of happy, confident children in a secure and stimulating environment. The curriculum follows the six areas set out in the DFEE/SCAA *Desirable Outcomes* document, with a particular emphasis on reading, writing and mathematics. There is a timetable of activities for each class and all children receive some individual tuition. The Principal described their approach to teaching as: *the old-fashioned, traditional way.*

The timetable shows the activities planned for the older class. These include reading, number work, science, jigsaws,

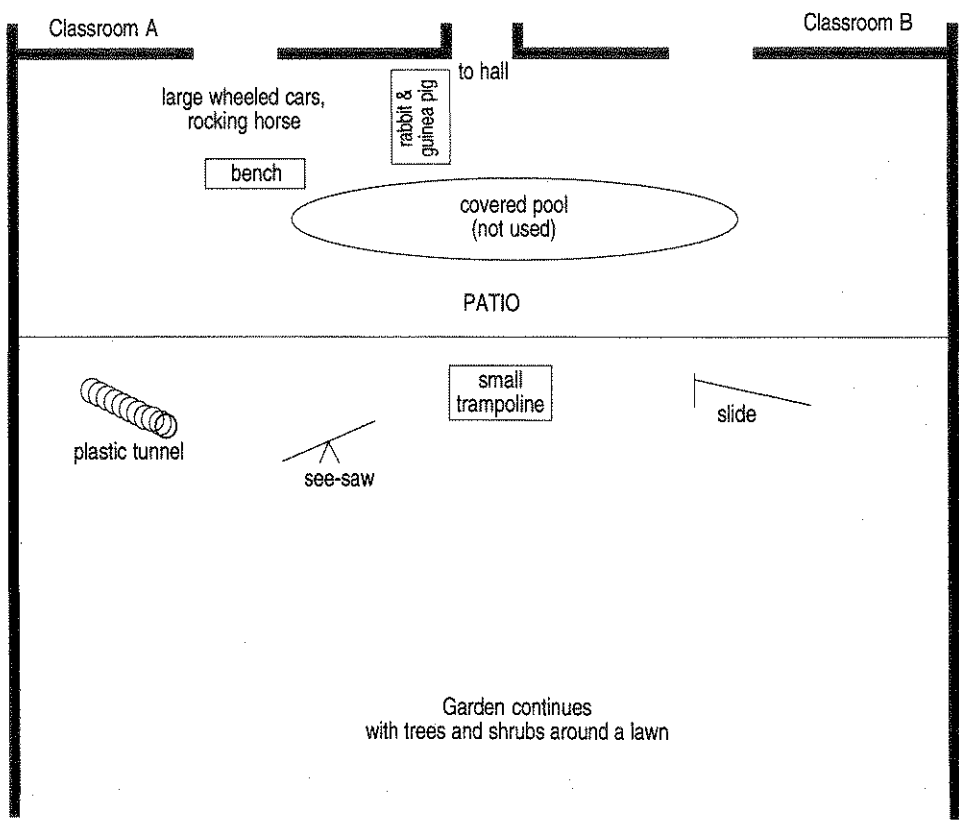
Eldridge Nursery School: Class Timetable (Three- and four-year-olds)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.15	Play-dough	Tap a shape Peg boards	Construction	Jigsaws	Lacing/Sewing
9.30	Reading	Numbers workbooks	Reading workbooks	Numbers	Reading
10.00	French	Science	Music	Cooking/ Still life	Tracing
10.30		Project work (includes painting, sticking, cutting)			
10.45		Breaktime (outdoor play, milk and biscuits)			
11.30	Card games	Art work	Gym	Listening skills	Music & movement
12.00		Singing and story time			
12.15		Home time			

Plan of Eldridge Nursery School (Classroom A)



Garden (smaller scale)



outdoor play, music and movement, tracing and lacing/sewing. There are also some more unusual activities, including French and still-life drawing. Children have opportunities to develop public-speaking skills during 'show and tell' when one child talks to the rest of the class about a recent experience or an item they have brought with them. The younger class has a half-hour period of free play each morning, followed by a timetable including letter and number work, story time, singing and outdoor play.

Planning and assessment

Planning takes place around the timetabled activities. The nursery uses a commercial scheme of work for science, number and language work, and a series of audio tapes for French. There is a written plan of activities for each of the six curriculum areas in the SCAA/DFEE document. Staff hold a general planning meeting once a term: they plan a project for each class and discuss the needs and progress of each child.

During our visit, the older class were doing a project called 'Where in the world?' A large poster of a map of the world was displayed on the wall. Children brought in postcards received by their families. These were stuck on the wall, linked with the map to show the location of the countries visited. There were also several activities connected with pancakes (it was the week of Shrove Tuesday). These included children colouring in a pan and pancake, the Principal reading a story about pancakes to the class, staff helping children to toss a pancake and staff cooking pancakes for the class.

Children have workbooks for literacy and number work and there are worksheets for science. All the work that children do is sent home at the end of the week. Children are given homework at the weekend and, although there is no compulsion for children to complete their homework, most do so. The homework is tailored for each child's age and ability. Examples include a worksheet activity (e.g. matching a word to one of three pictures) and reading a passage from a book.

As well as the class activities, staff work with each child on an individual basis to help them to learn their letters and numbers. The child's progress in these areas is noted on a record card each week. This also contains details of any health problems.

The Nursery Assistant for the older class explained that staff are happy to give parents regular information on their child's progress:

About three-quarters of the parents ask for a verbal report each week. One of us stands outside and we can talk to parents when they collect their child. We never say anything negative in front of the children.

Parents of children leaving the nursery are invited to a meeting with the head in the spring term. They have a 15-minute appointment with the Principal, who discusses their child's progress at the nursery and gives them a written report.

Relationships with children

During our visit, we observed that children spent most of their time on whole-class activities. These were staff-led, with children responding to

questions (such as: 'What day is it?', 'How many weeks are there in a month?', 'What is the weather like today?'). Although many activities required the children to remain seated, there was an opportunity for children to take part in physical activities during outdoor play (riding wheeled toys on the patio) and dressing up (because wet weather prevented outdoor play on one occasion, the two classes swapped rooms and the older class were able to play with the dressing-up clothes and toys kept in the class for younger children).

In most cases, children tackled the same task at the same time, such as completing a worksheet or using colouring pencils to decorate cut out shapes. Children who completed a task early were encouraged to read a book or to do some other work. At particular times, one member of staff supervised a group activity while the other called children out in turns for individual work on numbers and letters.

Staff time was taken up with leading group sessions (e.g. story time); laying out materials and worksheets (for language, number, art and science work); talking to children and supervising the children's activities (e.g. during outdoor play).

There was a quiet, relaxed atmosphere in the nursery. Staff addressed children in a friendly manner, inviting their questions and praising their work. Children appeared happy and were well behaved. Discipline and good manners were reinforced consistently by staff (for example, children were reminded to 'sit nicely', to wait for their turn, and to put their hand in front of their mouths when coughing).

Settling children into the nursery

There is no formal 'settling-in' period for new entrants. Children who will be joining the nursery in the autumn are invited for a half-hour visit at the end of the summer term. During this time they play outside with the nursery children and make a picture to take home.

When children start at the nursery (aged two-and-a-half), the Principal asks the child's mother to stay at home for the morning so staff can contact her by telephone if necessary. In the Principal's experience, few children encounter any difficulty adapting to the nursery:

Children start without any problems. We let them bring their favourite teddy with them.

Liaison with parents

There is no 'hands-on' involvement of parents in the work of the nursery, although parents are invited to events, such as a sports day, a Christmas fair, and to accompany children on outings to the theatre.

As the nursery is so popular, the Principal did not see the need for a glossy brochure. However, she had recently produced a one-page description of the nursery for parents. This included information about the Principal's training and experience; the numbers of children accepted, the staffing and the aims of the nursery.

Parents deciding whether they would like their child to attend the nursery are invited to come and observe the work of the nursery. There is written information available at the nursery (including aims, timetable, detailed curriculum plans)

which parents can ask to see whenever they wish.

Most communication with the children's mothers (or nannies) takes place orally, when children are collected at the end of the morning, although notices are sent home with the children from time to time.

Parents' views

We spoke to two mothers of children attending Eldridge Nursery. They had decided to send their child to the nursery for a variety of reasons, including the friendliness of the staff and the structured curriculum. One mother explained:

We sent her here because neighbours recommended it. They said Fiona [the Principal] was very good with the little ones. When I came to see the nursery, I thought the staff were very nurturing, they gave lots of cuddles and had fun toys.

The other mother said:

Lucy will be here until she's almost five, so the structured day is very important. I don't think children should be allowed to do just what they feel like.

For the first mother, the nursery's ability to help her daughters gain entry to the local selective school was important. This mother had three daughters, the oldest of whom, Melissa, had since left the nursery.

I wanted Melissa to go to [the selective school]. They have an entry test and Fiona knows the system. She taught Melissa to read; she believed she could do it and she did pass the test.

The parents were in agreement with the Principal that it was not necessary for the nursery to provide extensive written information for prospective parents:

There was nothing written, but then there was no need to; it all goes by word of mouth. I don't like glossy brochures anyway because they cost so much money and I think the money could be better spent on something else.

Both mothers said that their children had settled in well:

When she started in September she was fine. They have two teachers to only twelve children, so they notice if anything's wrong and give the children lots of cuddles.

They felt able to talk with the staff about any issues of concern:

Fiona is very approachable, you can ask her anything, she's happy for parents to come in and talk.

When asked about the information provided about their child's progress, these mothers were satisfied with the system of verbal communication:

I always ask how she's doing with her writing and letters. They [the staff] are very communicative. I've had nothing in writing, but they do hold an open day once a year and I expect they'll tell us then.

These two mothers liked the fact that the nursery gave their children 'homework', and felt this helped them to appreciate their child's progress. One explained:

Maria has a reading book every weekend and she has to read a page. She brings home some letters to trace

for pencil control, and a folder of her week's work.

The other commented:

Lucy brings home a sheet with letters on it and she has to pair up the ones that are the same. She's beginning to catch on now; she knows her letters and can recognise them in a word.

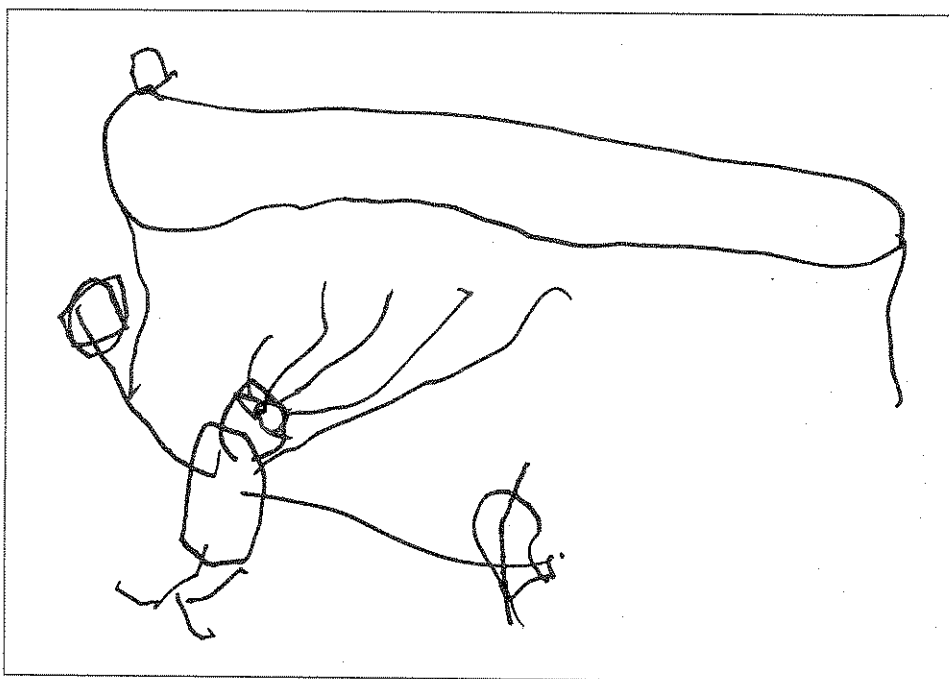
The only criticism made by one of the mothers was that she would like her daughter to have more opportunities for creative work because that was something that particularly interested her child. However, both mothers were

very satisfied with the nursery. They praised the nursery's friendly atmosphere in particular. As one mother said:

It's a really nice and happy atmosphere, the children aren't crying and whingeing, unlike some other places I've seen. Fiona is very approachable and she's very kind. It's a very good school.

The other commented:

The fees are reasonable and they know their stuff. I have complete confidence in them.



I like writing by Alistair

Example 3

Stonebridge Family Nursery

Stonebridge Family Nursery is a local authority day nursery, run by the social services department of a large metropolitan authority in the north of England. Stonebridge was rated particularly highly by parents for the quality of the staff and the children's behaviour at the nursery.

Context

Stonebridge occupies modern, purpose-built accommodation. It is open for two sessions a day from 8.00 to 12.00 and from 12.30 to 4.00, five days a week, 52 weeks a year (excluding bank holidays). In October 1996, 54 children were attending the nursery, aged from two years six months to four years. Children attended for between two and five half-day sessions per week, according to the needs of the children and their families.

Stonebridge has nine members of staff, including a Head and Deputy. There is a ratio of one member of staff to every four children. All staff have NNEB qualifications and six also have an Advanced Diploma in Child Care and Education. Staff regularly attend in-service training courses arranged by the local authority, on such topics as: first aid; food hygiene; health promotion; child protection; and the requirements of the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*.

The nursery caters primarily for families referred by social services as in need of support (e.g. as a result of a court order). These families have a range of problems,

such as violence and neglect of their children, mental disability, depression and drug and alcohol addiction. The remaining places at the nursery are available to local parents who wish their children to attend the nursery. These places are allocated on a 'first come, first served' basis, and parents are asked to make a small donation towards the costs of their sessions.

Parents travel from about a six mile radius to Stonebridge Family Nursery. There are three other pre-schools in the immediate area: a large LEA nursery school; a playgroup; and a nursery class in a Catholic school. Stonebridge accepts children with special educational needs, although children known to have special needs are usually referred to one of the LEA nurseries, which are given specific funding by the local education authority to support such children.

The area has a high Asian (mainly Pakistani) population, but until recently the children attending the nursery were exclusively from White backgrounds. The staff wanted to persuade Asian parents to send their children to the nursery, so they made links with the local Muslim community, taking children to visit the mosque and starting an Asian women's group which meets for classes at the nursery. This initiative has begun to have the desired effect, and six Asian families are now sending their children to the nursery.

When asked how the costs of providing a place at the nursery compared with the £1,100 value of the Nursery Education Voucher, the Head of Stonebridge said:

*It wouldn't come anywhere near.
We're very expensive.*

She went on to explain that the need for highly trained and experienced staff, coupled with the high ratio of staff to children, make this a relatively expensive form of provision (albeit a vital one to help families under stress).

Buildings and equipment

The nursery is modern, spacious and well equipped (see plan overleaf). The internal door to the nursery is overlooked by the staffroom and is kept locked. All visitors must ring a bell to gain entry. Inside the nursery there are separate areas for: sand play; dramatic play (set up as a 'kitchen', 'bedroom' and 'office'); creative activities (construction, painting, collage); a 'wet area' (water trough, dry sand, dough table); a writing area; a quiet area (books and toys for younger children); a 'soft play' room (padded floor and walls, large covered foam shapes for children to move around and climb on); and a construction area (bricks, blocks, construction toys). There is an area for outdoor play (equipped with sandpit, wheeled toys and climbing apparatus). Each of the indoor areas has its own children's toilets, and there is a family room, a kitchen, an office and a staff cloakroom.

Curriculum approach

The Head explained that the main aim for the nursery is to help each child reach his or her fullest potential. This, she felt, can be achieved through staff creating the right environment, providing a varied curriculum, and helping parents to support their child's development. Staff tailor their service to meet the needs of each family. Each child has a 'key worker': a member of

staff who is responsible for the child at the nursery and who liaises with their parents. Children are allocated to one of four groups (red, blue, yellow and green), each of which has a home base in part of the central room.

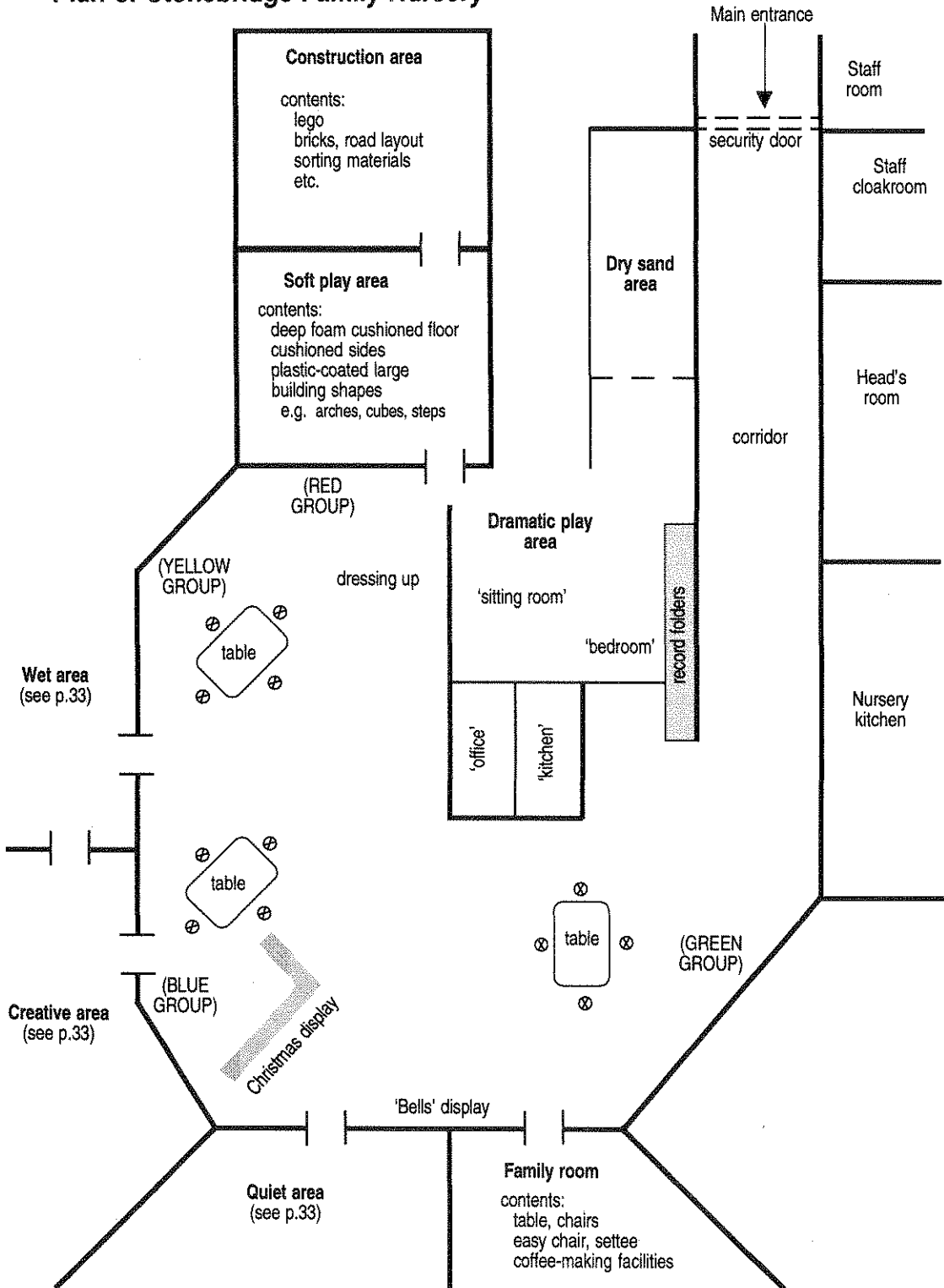
The nursery's curriculum is planned around nine areas. It is similar to the six areas of learning outcome required of settings participating in the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme*. However, the Stonebridge curriculum gives separate recognition to three elements (human and social, scientific, use of technology) which are included under the broader heading of 'knowledge and understanding of the world' in the DFEE/SCAA document.

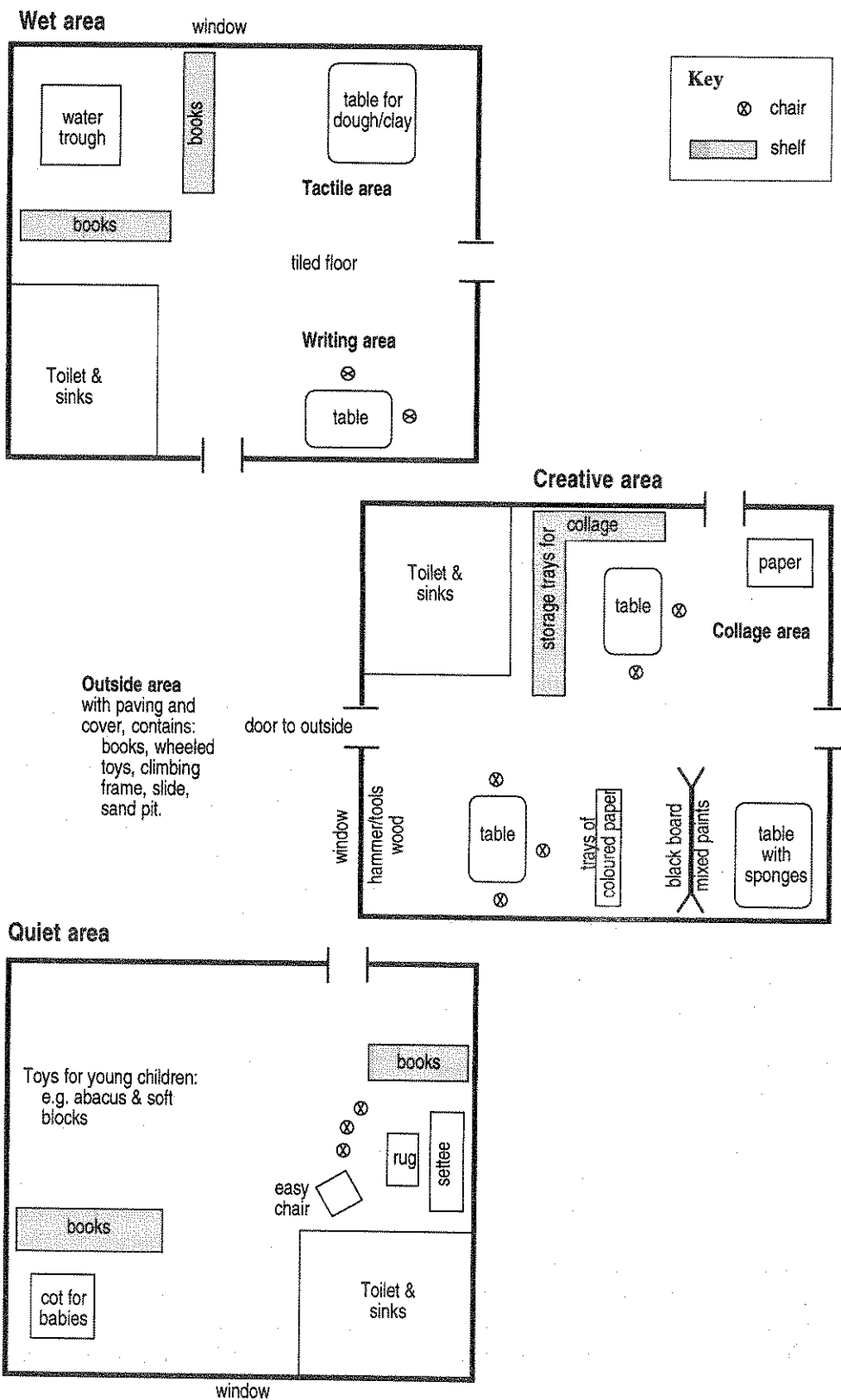
Planning and assessment

Staff meet each Thursday to plan the themes and activities for their group. At the time of our visit (December 1996), activities had been planned around a Christmas theme, including cooking and shopping (emphasising size, weight and measurement) and 'Christmas Past' (language work and history). There was a display of 'Christmas bells' brought in by staff and children, and a party was planned for parents, children and staff.

For all children who are referred to the nursery, staff carry out an initial (baseline) assessment. This covers the six areas of development outlined in the DFEE/SCAA document and is completed through staff observation and discussion with parents. Staff identify areas of concern and agree targets with parents. The assessment is repeated every four months.

Plan of Stonebridge Family Nursery





All children have a record folder which includes a set of statements of achievement in each curriculum area (for example, the statements for language and listening skills include: 'Enjoys talking to other adults and children', 'Able to express ideas or feelings' and 'Can give a concise account of an event/story'). The lists of skills are on display in the nursery and a stock of record forms is on hand in each area of the nursery. Whenever staff observe a child's achievement, they take one of the forms, fill in the child's name and tick the appropriate box, dating their observation. The children's records are updated each week. Staff also take photographs of each child's activities in the nursery and collect examples of his or her work. The record folders are kept in the main room, easily accessible to staff and parents. Parents are encouraged to look at their child's records and to add their own comments. When a child leaves the Stonebridge, the records are passed on to the child's next school.

Relationships with children

Children have a free choice of activity, although there are times when they are called into their groups for specific activities with their key workers. From our observation of staff and children, we noticed that children appeared confident and independent. They made their own choices of activity (apart from during the group activities) and initiated contact with staff when they wanted to discuss something of interest to them.

During free choice time, staff members positioned themselves in one of the areas and were on hand to work with the children. Staff were mainly involved in

supervising the children and responding to children's questions and comments. During group activities, staff took on a more directive/teaching role. For example, a staff member organised a game of dominoes, using large-sized pieces. She reinforced the rules of the game (giving each child an equal number of pieces, turn-taking) and number work (counting the pieces to make sure they all had the same number, helping the children to recognise whether they had a piece with the same number of spots as the one on the table). As well as working with children, staff were also involved in communicating with parents and other adults during the sessions.

There was a pleasant, busy atmosphere, with children appearing to enjoy their activities. Staff encouraged children to develop social skills, such as being aware of the needs of other children, and to experience eating in a group. Discipline was enforced consistently by staff who acted to diffuse potential problems (e.g. by inviting a child engaged in a conflict to take part in another activity) or by giving measured reminders:

We're not playing rough, don't play on top of him.

Settling children into the nursery

When children are given a place in the nursery, parents are invited to visit with their child. The child's key worker shows the parent round, pointing out the activities, children's record books, and where their child's coat peg will be. The key worker explains that there will be a settling in-period, and that parents are expected to stay with their child at first. As the child begins to feel at ease

in the nursery, parents are able to leave their child and go to the family room, so they can return to their child if necessary.

The Head of Stonebridge explained that it is not always easy for staff to convince parents that they need to be present while their child settles into the nursery:

Sometimes parents don't want to settle their children in, and we've had children really upset because mum hasn't come back at the time she was supposed to. It's a case of explaining why we have this system: we want to make it as positive an experience as possible. We appreciate that mums need to get away and we take that into account, but we come down on the side of the child.

The Head is aware that some parents find the nursery daunting at first:

It's a big nursery. You come up that corridor and everybody looks as though they know what they're doing — it's quite traumatic for the most confident of parents.

If a parent lacks the confidence to bring their child to the nursery, staff members often try to build up a relationship with the parent and child by visiting them at home and then accompanying them to the nursery.

Liaison with parents

The nursery puts a strong emphasis on working in partnership with parents. For families who are referred to them, there is an initial assessment period. Families are asked to come in for four sessions, spending about two hours in the nursery with their children. Parents

are then invited to a meeting with nursery and social service staff, at which they are asked what help they would like the nursery to provide, and are offered a specific number of sessions per week.

There is a leaflet explaining what Stonebridge Family Nursery offers, who can use it and when it is open. It is aimed at both parents and professionals, such as health visitors and social workers. The leaflet is brief, clearly set out and uses simple language. In devising it, staff were conscious of the need to communicate with parents who may have low levels of literacy. There is also a set of leaflets available to explain what children learn from different activities (examples include: sand; music; and mark-making).

The staff produce a newsletter that is sent to parents each term. The September issue had a range of short articles, including one about the new themes for the nursery and the ways in which parents could contribute, recipes for a vegetable curry and for 'play-dough' made with flour, and items on practical issues (dates the nursery would be closed at Christmas, information on buying second-hand children's clothes at the nursery, what to bring to the Christmas party). The newsletter also contained comments from parents about their participation in classes and expressions of appreciation of the support they had received from the nursery. An extract from the newsletter is reproduced overleaf.

As well as the newsletter, there are noticeboards in the entrance, the corridor and in every group area. However, the Head stressed that a great deal of their communication with parents is oral. She

A new theme

By the end of September we hope to have set up a supermarket in the nursery. This theme of shopping was chosen in order to help develop the children's mathematical understanding. By playing and working in the supermarket, children will learn about number, counting, sorting, shape, size, matching, etc.

For many parents, shopping with their children is not a pleasant experience. Over the next few weeks, key workers and Ellen (who runs the parents' group) will be arranging shopping trips for parents in order to support parents and give advice when shopping with children. They will be pointing out all the wonderful things children can learn whilst shopping.

We hope you will become involved in this project and we welcome any comments or suggestions you would like to make.

Extract from Stonebridge Family Nursery Newsletter

felt that parents respond well to the relaxed atmosphere:

We're on first name terms, we have a joke with parents — the informal side of it is something parents like.

Staff encourage parents to talk to them about their problems, particularly if it is an issue affecting their children. The Head stressed that the staff are not trained in counselling, so they refer a parent to other sources of help if appropriate. Staff maintain a positive attitude towards parents, as the Head explained:

No matter what their background, I think every parent wants the best for their children; they're just not sure whether a particular situation is best.

The nursery's family room is used by individuals and groups. It has a settee,

table and chairs and there are tea- and coffee-making facilities. During our visit, the room was used by a group of parents making Christmas decorations. The nursery has a parents' group, which is run by Ellen, an Early Years Officer from the local authority. She organises family outings (e.g. strawberry picking, shopping), helps parents to make things for the children and involves them in setting up activities and displays in the nursery (e.g. a group of parents helped set up a 'supermarket' area for children, to link in with the shopping theme).

There is an Asian Women's group, supported by a Community Development Officer. The nursery also runs short courses for parents on a variety of topics, including childcare, parenting skills, literacy and mathematics. These are led by staff from a local college.

Parents' views

We spoke to three parents of children attending Stonebridge Nursery. One of the parents had been referred to the nursery by a health visitor, who felt it could help with her son's developmental needs. The other two mothers had been looking for a pre-school for their children and had found out that there were places available at Stonebridge.

The interviews with mothers provided specific examples of the way in which staff deal with parents' concerns. In one case, the mother had taken up her health visitor's advice to send her son to the nursery because he was exhibiting behavioural problems at his playgroup, due to his delayed speech and short attention span. The nursery arranged speech therapy for him, and he had made good progress, although he was still not speaking at the level expected of a child of his age. This mother felt that her son was now less frustrated, because he had the freedom to choose lots of different activities, and could be involved in each for a short period of time. She was also pleased that he was given opportunities to develop social skills by working with other children in small groups.

One of the other mothers said she had noticed that another child upset her daughter by pulling at her. The staff said they had noticed this too, and were dealing with the situation by trying to keep the two children apart. The mother felt that this was a satisfactory solution to the problem.

All three mothers were able to talk in some detail about their child's activities at the nursery. They felt well-informed about their child's progress. They liked the fact that they could consult their child's records at any time to see which activities their child had been involved in and how well they were progressing.

The only area of concern for two of the mothers was that they would like their children to have had some more direct work on reading and writing. As one mother of a three-year-old said:

I'd like her to be learning some more basic skills.

All three mothers were very happy with the nursery in general, praising it for the friendliness of the staff and the range of activities offered. As one mother said:

They welcome you, they are friendly and make you feel at ease.

Another commented:

The staff are very helpful. If you've got a problem you can call in and talk.

They were also impressed with the activities and organisation of the nursery. One said:

I like the way it's planned, the facilities and the way they (the children) have got free choice ... there's always something new to try out.

All three said that their children were very happy at Stonebridge:

She likes it there — they really have time for the children.

Discussion of the examples

The selected examples show three very different pre-school settings, each of which was rated very highly by parents. The pre-schools had specific aims and were serving populations with very different social, economic and cultural characteristics.

Certain features were shared by all three nurseries. The children appeared happy and confident. There were good relationships between staff and children: staff were friendly and approachable, they took an interest in what children had to say and praised children's work. There was a consistent approach to reinforcing good behaviour in each case. Parents felt able to approach staff with any queries or concerns. Each of the nurseries was addressing the same areas of the early years curriculum, although there were differences in emphasis between them. There were high numbers of adults to children and staff had access to training courses. Each of the nurseries had effective security measures and made good provision for outdoor play.

There were also some striking differences between the nurseries. Eldridge was a private nursery, serving a white, middle-class population. Although it catered for a wide age-range (two-and-a-half to five), it was much smaller than the other two nurseries, and the Principal worked with the children during the day.

The two local authority nurseries shared a similar approach to children's learning, setting out a range of activities and allowing considerable children freedom

of choice. They balanced this with some opportunities for children to work with staff on specific activities (to check children's progress) and with activities in larger groups (such as story time). In contrast, the private nursery had a specific timetable of activities for children to follow. Most activities were carried out by all children at the same time, although some children had differentiated tasks in language and mathematics.

There were some key differences in the role of staff in children's learning. In the private nursery, staff were didactic in their approach. They used mainly 'closed' questions to instil factual learning. Staff in the local authority day nursery were responsive to children's needs and interests during free choice activities, although they took on a more didactic role for specific activities (such as the game of dominoes). In the LEA nursery school, staff used a mixture of a didactic style during whole class activities and a Socratic method of questioning and making suggestions to help children learn for themselves. In this way they were providing what followers of Vygotsky call 'scaffolding' to help children progress in their understanding.

There were differences in the approach used for assessment, planning and record-keeping. The two local authority nurseries used a combination of observation and focused activities to check children's progress in a range of areas. Planning was carried out on a daily (Cannons) or on a weekly basis (Stonebridge) and children's individual records were updated regularly. In contrast, the staff at Eldridge used commercial schemes of work and had a

structured timetable which was followed by the whole class. They therefore knew what aspects of the curriculum had been covered by children at any one time. They carried out individual assessments of children's progress in language and mathematics, and these were the areas (together with information on health) that were addressed in the children's records.

Liaison with parents was another area of contrast between the three nurseries. At Stonebridge, a major purpose of the nursery was to help families under stress. Parental involvement was a condition of obtaining a place for some families. The nursery was assisted by an Early Years Officer who ran a parents' support group. There were activities arranged to help parents understand and respond positively to their children's needs. This nursery provided a range of information for parents about their children's learning, there was a regular newsletter, and parents were encouraged to look at and add to their child's assessment folder.

At Cannons, there was a detailed booklet and parents were invited to meetings where the staff demonstrated their approach to children's learning. Parents were invited to help with the nursery's activities and they did so in a variety of ways. Parents received termly information about their child's progress, and they could ask to see their child's records at any time.

At the time of our visit, the private nursery did not provide new parents with written information about the nursery, nor were parents regularly involved in the work of the nursery. The main form of information exchange

was oral: staff gave a brief report to parents when they collected their children from school. Parents were given a written report on their child's progress towards the end of their time in the nursery.

Although there are clear differences in the aims and provision offered by these nurseries, according to the findings of our research all three were successfully meeting the needs and fulfilling the expectations of the parents they served.

The visits to three pre-schools parents rated particularly highly provided a valuable insight into parents' views. The private nursery had a good adult-child ratio. It was very over-subscribed, and relied on its good reputation to attract new parents. The Principal was clearly appealing to a particular sector of the pre-school 'market'. Parents of children attending this nursery knew that staff would help their child to gain entry to the local selective school, would emphasise discipline and good manners, and that their child would have access to activities (such as French, public speaking and still-life drawing) which are not present in most publicly funded pre-schools. Some parents had chosen this nursery because of the structured, adult-led approach: they did not believe that it was desirable to give young children the freedom to choose their own activities.

It could be argued that in this respect the private nursery complements the children's home environment. Parents who can afford to pay for their child's pre-school are likely to provide their children with a wide range of books, toys and educational experiences. These children's early experiences may have

instilled them with self-confidence, independence and the ability to make choices (aspects that were not emphasised in their experiences at this particular nursery).

The local authority day nursery focused on the needs of families. It worked with families under stress, supporting parents in forming positive relationships with their children. This nursery provided children with a wide range of activities, and the high ratio of staff to children enabled the nursery to meet children's emotional and social, as well as their educational needs.

The LEA nursery school served a mixed social and ethnic population. It also focused on families in need of support but it differed from the other nurseries in accommodating a high proportion of children with special educational needs. Here the emphasis was on supporting children's development in a climate of equal opportunity, rather than on family support. Staff encouraged children to be self-motivated, independent learners. They found out about the needs and preferences of each child, and built this awareness into their assessments of children and their curriculum planning. The nursery also functioned as an educational resource, providing training placements for student teachers and advice to primary school colleagues.

It is interesting to note that the cost of a child's place in each of these nurseries was considerably above the value of the *Nursery Education Voucher*. In order to provide the best quality education and care for young children, pre-schools need to invest in adequate numbers of well-trained staff. Pre-school education of high quality is not a cheap commodity.

Conclusion

This research has shown that parents are aware of particular aspects of their child's pre-school. They are concerned about their child's happiness at pre-school and their child's progress. They are sensitive to the way in which staff relate to children and they notice the politeness and cooperation of the children who attend.

After two well-publicised attacks on children by intruders to schools, parents are understandably anxious if their child's pre-school does not appear to have adequate security. They are also concerned if the class sizes are too large, if their child does not have sufficient opportunities to learn to read and write before starting school, or if they feel poorly informed by pre-school staff.

The research has important implications for parents, national and local government and for pre-school staff. It demonstrates that parents want the best for their children and appreciate the contribution of pre-schools to their child's development. Parents' choices of pre-school and their views about what is best for their child differ according to their family circumstances and system of values. However, all parents want to be reassured that their child is happy and safe at pre-school. They want staff to help their child to make progress and they want to be kept well informed. Staff can use these findings to underpin the ways in which they communicate and work with parents. This will help to strengthen the partnership between a child's home and pre-school, which plays such a crucial role in children's early learning.

Implications and recommendations

The findings of this research have important implications for parents, pre-school staff and policy makers at local and national levels. These are outlined in the following sections. Other issues concerning parents' choice of pre-school, initial visits and entry criteria, are discussed in a separate report: *Parents' Views of Pre-school: Making Choices*.

Implications for parents

Parents of three- and four-year-olds want their child's pre-school experience to be safe, happy, and to help them to learn.

Entry procedures

There are several ways in which you can help your child to make a good start and to settle into their pre-school.

- It will help if your child has had some experience of mixing with other children and adults before starting at pre-school.
- Ask if you and your child can visit the pre-school before your child starts there.
- Let staff have any important information about your child's background and interests so that staff can help your child to feel welcome and secure.
- Find out about the process for settling children into the pre-school. Expect to be asked to stay with your child at first.

- Make sure staff know how to contact you or another close family member in case your child becomes upset when you leave them at the pre-school.
- In some pre-schools you can expect your child to be allocated a particular 'key worker'. This person will have major responsibility for your child.

Information

You need to make sure that you have adequate information about your child's pre-school experience.

- Most pre-schools have a leaflet or booklet which provides information about their aims, entry procedures and the activities (or curriculum) they provide. Do not hesitate to ask staff for any further information you need.
- Expect staff to keep records of your child's progress and to keep you informed on a regular basis.
- If there is something important you need to tell staff about your child, ask whether there is somewhere quiet for you to discuss it. You may need to make an appointment so that you have sufficient time to talk.
- Ask staff for some practical guidance on how you can help your child to learn.

Relationships between staff and children

The quality of the relationships between staff and children is a key element in ensuring that children are happy and able to learn.

- Staff should be kind and caring in their relationships with children. They should welcome children to the pre-school and comfort any child who is upset or unwell.
- Children should be encouraged to be polite, kind and considerate towards one another. Staff should act quickly to prevent or resolve conflict between children.
- Staff should encourage children to develop self-confidence. They should listen to and value what children have to say.
- Staff should encourage children to make their own decisions and to become more independent of adults.

Activities

Young children learn best when they have access to a range of activities which are carefully planned to meet children's needs.

- You can expect your child's pre-school to provide a good range of play-based activities.
- Ask staff whether they change activities regularly to provide variety and to give opportunities for children to progress.
- There should be opportunities for children to work

individually, as part of a small group and as part of a larger group (e.g. during singing activities or story time).

- Children should be given opportunities to develop physical skills. This might include access to large play equipment (e.g. tricycles, and climbing frames) and opportunities to use large and small construction toys.
- The pre-school should have a good range of books, writing materials and toys designed to encourage an awareness of numbers.
- There should be opportunities for creative expression and social play (e.g. dressing up clothes, 'home corner').
- Most pre-schools provide opportunities for children to use new technology (e.g. computers).

Parental involvement

Children, pre-schools and parents all benefit from parents playing an active role in their child's pre-school.

- Think about whether there are any ways you could support the work of the pre-school. This could include: accompanying children on visits; helping maintain the buildings and equipment or serving on a parents' committee.
- Are there any ways in which you could help by assisting staff, supervising children or leading activities?

Security, health and safety

A key concern of any parent is the protection and care of your child.

- You can expect the pre-school to take reasonable measures to protect the young children in their care. This could include locks on entrances to the pre-school, good supervision of children's activities, safe climbing equipment, and clean, accessible toilet facilities.
- Children should have access to healthy drinks, snacks (and meals, if appropriate).
- There should be enough space for children to move freely, and quiet areas for children to withdraw and rest.
- Staff should have clear procedures for dealing with medical emergencies and fire.
- As well as giving staff your contact details, make sure they know who has your permission to collect your child from pre-school.
- If there is anything about security, health or safety that concerns you, take it up with a member of staff.

Implications for pre-school staff

The research identified issues relating to: entry procedures, parents' access to information, parental involvement, and their expectations of their child's pre-school experience.

Entry procedures

Parents need clear information about the procedures for settling children into pre-school. This can be an area of conflict between parents and pre-school staff: some parents expect their child to start as soon as possible and may not understand the reasons behind pre-school entry procedures.

- Keep entry procedures under review. Consider how best to meet children's needs while acknowledging the needs of their parents.
- Have you considered strategies such as inviting children to visit with their parents before they start and 'staggering' the entry so that the whole intake does not start on the same day?
- Do you consider it to be in the child's best interests for a parent to accompany their child to help them settle in? If so, think about how best to explain to parents exactly what will be required of them and why.
- Try to be flexible: it may not be necessary for a parent to continue to stay if their child is settling in well.
- Ask parents for information about the background and interests of their child so that staff can make new entrants feel welcome and secure.

Keeping parents informed

Parents need information about their child's pre-school. They want to know what their child is doing and how their child is progressing. Parents did not always feel that pre-school staff were keeping them well enough informed.

- Does your information for parents cover all the important points? Is the language relatively simple and free from jargon? You could ask parents for their comments on the information you provide.
- If you serve parents whose first language is not English, you need to arrange for information to be translated into other languages.
- Consider how best to keep parents informed about your school's activities. For example, you could display current information on a notice-board. Would it be possible to produce a newsletter?
- How do staff keep track of children's activities and assess their learning? Is there a quick and easy system for staff to note their observations of children's progress? How do you share this information with parents?
- What access do parents have to their child's records? Consider ways in which parents could contribute information about their child's learning at home.
- How often do you invite parents to meet staff to discuss their child's progress? Are parents able to see you at a time which is convenient to them?

Planning activities

There is a need to consider which activities you provide and why.

- Does your pre-school provide children with a good range of activities? Do you change activities regularly to provide variety and to give opportunities for children to progress?
- How does the information you collect on each child's progress contribute to the planning of activities on a daily and weekly basis?
- Are there opportunities for children to work individually, as part of a small group and as part of a larger group?
- Consider how well you provide for all aspects of a child's development (including: emotional; social; intellectual; physical; and cultural).
- How can staff best encourage children to be self-confident and increasingly independent of adults?
- In what ways can staff help children to develop positive attitudes towards learning?
- Parents want their child to have a good preparation for starting school, including opportunities to develop reading, writing and number skills. Is there a need to provide more opportunities for older children? How can you best explain your approach to parents?

Parental involvement

On average, about a quarter of the parents we surveyed said they helped out with activities at their child's pre-school, but there was considerable variation in the percentage of parents who were involved. Parents supported their child's pre-school in a number of ways.

- Consider how many parents help out at your pre-school and what they do. Are there any ways in which you could encourage more parents to become involved?
- Make a list of some of the different ways in which parents could support your work, and invite parents to help. Parents who have particular interests, experiences and expertise could be invited to share their skills and knowledge with children.
- Are there ways in which fathers and working parents could become involved? You could extend an invitation to other relatives, such as grandparents, who may have more time available.

- Many pre-schools successfully involve parents in helping their child to learn, through initiatives such as home reading schemes and toy libraries.

What parents want

Parents' comments on aspects they thought should be improved provide some important messages for pre-school staff.

- Security is a particularly worrying issue for parents. You need to identify any areas of weakness in security and plan appropriate improvements. The local police could offer advice, and parents may be able to help with fund-raising or fitting security devices.
- Make sure you know who has the parents' authority to collect their child.
- Assure parents of your commitment to security and keep parents informed about the ways in which you will protect their children.
- Consider sending a short questionnaire to parents to find out whether they are satisfied with what the pre-school is providing. Ask them to identify areas for improvement and plan to address any issues that parents raise.

Parents as partners

Pre-school staff should consider the practical ways in which they can build an effective partnership with parents.

- Acknowledge the importance of parents' role in their child's learning.
- Give parents some practical guidance on how they can help their child to learn at home.

Implications for local and national government

Central and local government have a strategic role in planning provision, ensuring appropriate standards and supporting pre-school staff. Parents need access to high-quality education and care services for their young children. Parents want to help their child to learn, in partnership with pre-school providers.

Planning provision

- There is evidence that investment in education in the early years has both academic and social benefits for children. Central and local government should develop strategies to invest in early years services for all three- and four-year-olds.
- Central and local government need to consider ways in which the length of pre-school sessions could be extended to offer longer periods of education and care for young children.
- Attention should be focused on quality of provision in school reception classes, particularly in relation to ensuring appropriate staff-pupil ratios.
- Some parents need support to help them with parenting their young children. Models of good practice in providing effective parental support should be documented and shared. Authorities should consider ways in which they can devote more resources to this area of work.

Training

- Strategies should be developed to provide a framework of training opportunities for all pre-school staff, including those from the voluntary and private sectors.
- Training courses for pre-school staff should contain guidance on informing, involving and working with parents.

Ensuring quality

- There is a need for a system to ensure high standards of pre-school provision while allowing sufficient flexibility to provide parents with an effective choice.
- Consideration should be given to bringing together the existing systems of pre-school inspection into a unified system, covering aspects of care, education, health and safety.

Security

- Parents are concerned about the safety of their child's pre-school. National and local government need to address this anxiety and devise practical strategies to help pre-school staff to review and improve their security arrangements.

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Appendix: About the research

Different types of pre-school

There are many different types of group provision for children aged three and four. We chose to focus on six of the most common.

LEA nursery schools have their own headteachers and normally offer part-time places to children aged three to four, although some offer full-time places and may open for extended hours (e.g. from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.). Staff are qualified teachers and assistants. There is a minimum of one staff member for each 13 children.

LEA nursery classes are part of an infant, first or primary school serving a wider age-range (e.g. three to seven, four to eleven). Their opening hours are similar to those of a nursery school, although most do not offer extended day care. Staff qualifications and staffing ratios are the same as for LEA nursery schools.

School reception classes take children aged between four and five. There has been a recent trend towards creating more reception classes and to taking children into school at a younger age, effectively lowering the school entry age so that children can start school at the beginning of the academic year in which they become five. In smaller schools, four-year-olds may be in a mixed-age class (in some cases, accommodating children up to the age of seven). Children usually attend for the whole of the school day (typically 9.00 a.m. to 3.15 p.m.), although some attend part-time at first. Staff are

qualified teachers and assistants. At the time of the research, there were no restrictions on the number of children per adult in school reception classes.

Local authority day nurseries offer mainly full-time and often extended day care (e.g. from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m.). They may accommodate a wide age-range, from babies to four-year-olds. These nurseries commonly allocate places on the basis of family need. Staff are usually qualified (e.g. in teaching, social work or childcare). There must be one adult for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Private day nurseries offer part-time, full-time and/or extended day care to children under five. Typically, private day nurseries are open from 8.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. They may accommodate babies as well as older children. Parents pay a fee for their child's attendance. There is usually a majority of trained staff and there must be one adult for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Pre-school playgroups (also known as pre-schools) offer play-based learning opportunities for young children. Playgroups are commonly attended by children aged three, although some have four-year-olds and some accept two-year-olds. Parents are encouraged to participate in the playgroup's activities. Children normally attend for a session of a few hours up to five times a week. Parents pay a nominal fee for their child's attendance. There is usually a majority of trained staff and there must be one member of staff for every eight children in the three- to five-year-old age-group.

Research methods

The research formed part of the NFER's Membership Programme, which is funded by the local authorities in England and Wales. The project took place from January 1996 to March 1997. We started by identifying local authority areas with a wide range of different types of provision. We selected six areas in different parts of England, covering a range of inner city, urban and rural areas. Because the *Nursery Education Voucher Scheme* was such an important innovation for pre-school provision, we included in our sample one of the four authorities taking part in Phase 1 of the voucher scheme.

We spoke to the people with responsibility for publicly funded pre-school provision in each authority. We asked them a series of questions about the population of their area and how pre-school provision was organised. We also asked them to nominate the pre-schools (nurseries, playgroups and reception classes in schools) that they thought were providing a good service for children and their parents. In some cases, the people we spoke to had strong links with the private and voluntary sector providers and were able to nominate good examples: where this was not the case, we contacted the national and local organisations representing private nurseries and playgroups to ask for nominations.

We wrote to the person in charge of each of the nominated pre-schools to ask if they would be willing to take part in the research. Almost all of them agreed to do so. Our sample was made up of six different types of pre-schools nominated for their good practice and located in six different areas of England

(one of each type in each area). Because we predicted that we might get a lower response from parents of children attending local authority day nurseries, we included an extra example of this type of setting.

We designed a questionnaire for parents of three- and four-year-olds and trialled it with parents and pre-school experts. The questionnaire was redrafted in the light of the comments received

Three versions of the parents' questionnaire were developed: one for reception classes; one for local authority day nurseries; and one for LEA nursery schools, nursery classes, private day nurseries and playgroups. The three versions were similar, although there were slight differences in the wording of the questions (e.g. substituting 'reception class' for 'nursery/playgroup'). Some questions regarding parental choice were not included in the questionnaire sent to parents of children attending local authority day nurseries.

After checking with the pre-schools about the languages spoken by their parents, versions of the questionnaires were translated into four community languages: Urdu, Gujerati, Punjabi and Bengali.

Parcels of questionnaires were sent to 37 pre-schools in October 1996. The person in charge of each pre-school was asked to fill in a short form, giving details of the number of children attending, their opening hours and staffing.

Although the pre-schools handed out the questionnaires, the parents posted them back to the research team using the pre-paid envelopes provided. We

Table A1. Parents' questionnaire sample

	No. of parents	% of sample
LEA nursery schools	305	32
Nursery classes in LEA primary schools	217	23
Reception classes in LEA primary schools	124	13
Local authority day nurseries	115	12
Private day nurseries	91	9
Pre-school playgroups	101	11
Total	953	100

received replies from 953 parents of three- and four-year-olds attending the different types of pre-school (see Table A1).

Replies were received from 52 per cent of the parents we surveyed. There was a similar response rate from parents in the different types of setting, although, as we had predicted, a slightly lower proportion of local authority day nursery parents replied (47 per cent).

The sample had more parents of three-year-olds (62 per cent) than of four-year-olds (38 per cent) and slightly more parents of boys (52 per cent) than of girls (48 per cent). Eleven per cent of the parents reported that their child had some kind of special need (including health and development problems). In terms of ethnic group, 76 per cent of the parents in our sample indicated that their child's ethnic group could be described as 'White European', 12 per cent described their child's background as 'Pakistani' and five per cent as 'Mixed Race'. The remaining seven per cent of the sample was made up of parents of children from a variety of ethnic groups,

including: Indian, Black Caribbean, Bangladeshi and Black African.

Statistical methods of analysis

The questionnaire contained mainly 'closed' questions (i.e. where parents were asked to respond to a range of answers printed on the questionnaire), although we did provide space for parents to add comments on particular issues. Information from answers to the closed questions was entered on to a computer. Several types of analysis were carried out, including chi square test, factor analysis, analysis of variance with least significant difference test and multilevel modelling. The differences reported as 'statistically significant' were significant at the .05 level. This means that there is a less than one-in-20 chance that these results would occur if there was really no difference between the groups.

Factor analysis was carried out on parents' ratings of 19 attitude statements included in the questionnaire. Factor 1 explained 45 per cent of the variation in parents'

responses and the other three factors explained a further 13 per cent of the variation. The internal consistency between the statements was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. Table A2

shows the statements grouped into four factors. The table shows the loading for each statement and the Alpha for each factor.

Table A2. Factor analysis for parents' attitude statements

Statement	Loading
Factor 1: staff quality	
I like the general attitude of the staff	.78
Parents' views are listened to and taken into account	.70
Staff work well with the children	.68
Staff treat the children equally and fairly	.68
It [i.e. the setting] is well-managed	.67
Staff are well-trained	.65
Staff are happy to deal with my questions and concerns	.61
Staff help children to reach their full potential	.55
Internal consistency (Alpha):	.91
Factor 2: children's behaviour	
Children cooperate well with each other	.82
Children are polite and well-behaved	.68
Internal consistency (Alpha):	.82
Factor 3: my child's progress	
My child can show what s/he can do well	.61
My child can practice things s/he needs to develop	.58
Staff give me useful information about my child's progress	.58
I am happy with my child's progress	.55
Staff are sensitive to my child's needs	.54
Internal consistency (Alpha):	.83
Factor 4: my child's happiness	
My child is happy there	.72
My child settled in well	.64
Internal consistency (Alpha):	.73

Two statements did not correlate highly with any of the others, although their strongest relationship was with Factor 1: 'Staff help children to become more independent' (.46) and 'There is a good balance of activities on offer' (.44).

Interpreting the results

Although we did our best to obtain a sample that would reflect the views of parents living in different areas of the country and from a range of backgrounds, we would not wish to claim that it is representative of the views of parents as a whole. There are some important features of the sample that may affect the results.

First, we selected authorities with a wide range of different types of provision (state, private and voluntary funded). These authorities represented both urban and rural areas and had parents from a variety of backgrounds, but they are not necessarily typical of the country as a whole.

Second, we asked local authority staff and pre-school organisations for nominations of pre-schools that they considered to be offering high-quality education and care. This means that the study has a focus on good practice.

Third, our overall sample does not comprise equal numbers of parents from each type of pre-school. Almost a third of the responses to the parents' questionnaire came from nursery schools and just under a quarter were from nursery classes in LEA schools. The rest of the sample is spread fairly evenly between parents of children attending the other types of pre-school. It is important to bear this in mind when

looking at the results from all parents, because the views of parents whose children attend an LEA nursery school or class are over-represented. Also, 24 per cent of the parents in our sample indicated that their children were from ethnic minority backgrounds. This is a much higher proportion than in the general population. In 1991, nine per cent of the under five age group of Great Britain was made up of children from ethnic minority groups (Central Statistical Office, 1994).

Finally, it should be noted that comparisons by type of pre-school setting are based on just six settings of each type (or seven, in the case of local authority day nurseries).

Visits to pre-schools

We arranged to visit the pre-schools that parents rated most highly, to observe activities and talk to parents and staff. Twelve pre-school settings (two of each type) were visited by trained and experienced researchers for a period of two days each between November 1996 and February 1997. Interviews were held with 28 members of staff (heads, teachers and nursery assistants) at the pre-schools. We contacted parents in the 12 settings who had indicated that they were willing to take part in an interview (44 per cent of all parents who returned a questionnaire said they would be willing to be interviewed). In total, 34 parents were interviewed about their child's pre-school. Some interviews were carried out at the pre-schools and some by telephone, to fit in with parents' work patterns and other commitments.





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parents' views of pre-school: quality matters

- * How are parents involved in their child's pre-school education?
- * What do they think of the service they receive?
- * Which aspects would they like to see improved?
- * Which factors do parents think are important in a pre-school?
- * What is provided by pre-schools that parents rate highly?

These are some of the questions addressed in this book, which reports the findings of a major research project. The research entailed a survey of nearly a thousand parents whose children attended pre-school in the state, private and voluntary sectors. The researchers visited 12 pre-schools that parents rated particularly highly to observe activities and to speak to parents and staff.

The book contains a series of practical action points for consideration by parents, pre-school staff and policy-makers. It should be of interest and practical use to all those involved in the education and care of young children.

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