

Why apprentices are the future for Family First

Recruiting well trained staff into the nursery profession has long been a challenge. Here, we talk to **Family First Nurseries** to find out what they are doing to tackle the issue.



Many industries are crying out for staff right now. But very few play such a critical role in the success of our country. Without talented, properly trained nursery staff, there is plenty of evidence to suggest the next generation of children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, will have reduced life opportunities.

“Staff recruitment and retention was an issue before Covid,” acknowledges Ollie Humphries, CEO of Family First, which now has 47 nurseries with 3,500 child places across London and the Home Counties and from the Midlands down to the south coast.

“But the pandemic has definitely made things worse. Many people across the industry have re-evaluated their work-life balance and have decided to leave the profession for good.

“Trying to find people with a Level 3 qualification has never been harder and we’re seeing many independent nurseries being offered for sale, partly because their owners cannot get the staff to operate their nurseries safely and effectively.”

With a workforce of more than 1,000 across its group, Family First has poured considerable effort into looking at the best ways in which to recruit and retain staff.

One of the main ways is to home-grow its own talent pipeline using the Government’s apprenticeship scheme, supported by providers across the country.

Nicola Reed, Head of Childcare and Training, said: “The way forward for us is to have a strong apprenticeship programme and to invest in people who want to train and learn. We currently have 27 apprentices in training, and we hope, eventually, to have two apprentices in each of our settings.

“We’re now starting to see our first recruits becoming fully qualified at Level 3. It takes 18 months to two years to achieve this, and we’re keen to ensure that every learner receives plenty of support along the way. We have a mixed age group from young to mature learners, who can support our children with learning and development, as well as life skills.

“The programme combines on the job training with off the job learning, such as assignments in child development. It’s important to give the apprentices time to learn and provide role models and leadership to help them reach their end goal. Plus we pay above average rates, which is important, too.”

One of Family First’s apprenticeship training providers is Realise Training, which works with 550 nurseries and supported more than 1,000 learners last year.

Karen Derbyshire, Head of Early Years and Education at Realise, said: “Our exciting partnership with Family First is giving employees the chance to enhance their skill sets, and leave them well-positioned to progress their careers within the early years’ sector.

“Employees at all levels of the organisation are benefiting from the programmes on offer, as the apprenticeships range from Level 2 up to Level 5. We recruit and train new apprentices who are looking to enter the sector and also support existing employees to gain the skills they need to continue their professional development.”

Nicola added: “Now that restrictions are lifted, we can train face-to-face again, which is paramount to our success.

“I read a lot of Ofsted reports and you can see they are focusing heavily on the teaching and learning for children and how we, as professionals, develop our teams, which is where a lot of nurseries fall down.

“I am so passionate about this as this has been lost over the last couple of years due to Covid and the focus being on Health and Safety, and keeping everyone safe. We have a programme of pre-Ofsted visits and health and safety visits to make sure our nurseries remain outstanding quality.”

Family First now has a seven-strong recruitment and compliance team, led by Regional Operations Director Emily Burgess.

“We’re doing everything we can to encourage people to come into the industry, including using social media, attending recruitment fairs and working very closely with colleges to ensure we establish strong relationships from the start,” she explained.



“We like to do our interviews and recruitment process differently, getting parents and the children involved and obtaining feedback from our teams. We hold regular coffee mornings with all new team members so they can reflect on their journey into Family First and they always say their on-boarding experience is a positive one.”

As well as recruiting great staff, it is also important to hold on to your employees, and Family First has focused considerable effort here too, recognising and appreciating team members for their contribution to Early Years.

Chief Childcare and Operations Officer Dianne Lumsden-Earle explains: “We do this by paying above average salaries, giving plenty of rewards and treats, upskilling and empowering individuals to use their voice and contribute to everything we do.

“It may be tough across the industry right now, but we’re doing everything we can to be the best employer possible. I’m hoping things improve as we come out of the worst of the pandemic but I foresee plenty of challenges ahead and it will be the businesses that really look after their employees well and train them properly that will survive.” ■

If you are interested in finding out more about Family First group, please visit: www.familyfirstnurseries.com

Meet some of Family First’s apprentices



Alisha, Nursery on the Hill

“Firstly, I would like to say I LOVE my job! Starting at Nursery on the Hill in March 2021, this year has been the most enjoyable, fun and life changing experience! I have learned so many new things to do with my role in the baby room where everyone made me feel so welcome and included.”



Ellie, Prima Montessori

“I came here as a child and I absolutely love it. I then came back to do my work experience which then led me on to apply for my apprenticeship. I was very keen to start working here because the opportunities are amazing, the job is rewarding, and I always knew that I wanted to work with children at Prima and give the children the same amazing memories that I have.”



Laura-May, Prima Montessori

“I have been working at Prima Montessori for three years and within that time I have been learning towards my Level 3 childcare qualification. I have full access to computers at work so that I can do my coursework and I have full support from my management team when time is needed for assignments, tutor calls and exams.”



Hayley, Nursery on the Green

“Where do I start? – I love my job! Being an apprentice has taught me a lot of things and I am still learning new things all the time. The team is amazing and if I have any questions they are always there to help.”