

Are your staff

Putting wellbeing on the agenda

Our sector now appreciates the importance of child wellbeing as an integral part of the curriculum, but, says Linda Baston-Pitt, we need to ensure that our staff are also on board if we want them and our nurseries to truly flourish

Nurseries throughout the country are now actively promoting health and wellbeing to the children and families in their care, and we all can see the benefits that accrue, both immediately and in the long term, as they develop throughout their lives. And there are some really good examples of best practice in this very important area, which professionals in our sector can be proud of.

In writing our CACHE-accredited Level 4 physical and nutritional co-ordinator (PANCo) training programme, for example, we have seen the brilliant effect that structured health and wellbeing education has on our children at the Old School House Nursery.

A good instance is Active Movement, the organisation headed up by Dr Loosemore, a consultant in sport and exercise medicine at the Institute of Sport, Exercise and Health at University College London. Dr Loosemore and his business partner, Peter Savage, came to the Old School House to undertake a programme to support the ingraining of children's understanding and appreciation of health and wellbeing. The results of combining the work of our PANCos and

Active Movement's project were amazing.

The children's initial responses are starting to fall in line with what you would expect from wellbeing-centric activities, while Stand-Up Stan, our fictitious poster-boy for the campaign, has helped to create a subconscious affinity to the project. We're currently rolling out our PANCo education programme to our partner nurseries and local authorities, and the individual PANCos we're coaching are all benefiting - but it is the children who are the real winners.

Just one step further

These developments are so exciting to see, and the prospect of children being more au fait with positive lifestyle choices is something we should continue to promote - and we should be immensely proud of this as a sector. But we owe it to our staff, as well as our children, to go one step further - and the children will ultimately benefit even more.

There's an old adage: happy staff, happy children. We all take this as a given in our sector. But, as early years leaders, we are inclined to

One of Linda's motivational messages



bandy the term around far too easily without genuinely putting it into practice. We must ensure it goes beyond mere words: we are responsible for ensuring that we have embedded a working culture that enables our staff to be happy both at work and beyond.

To achieve that, we need to analyse what exactly 'happy' is. Only once this has been achieved and the constituent parts are made part of the everyday working culture, will our children see the maximum benefit. So, we look to positive psychologist Martin Seligman, whose PERMA Model provided the basis of our wellbeing model in our PANCo course:

- P:** positive emotions - feeling good
- E:** engagement - feeling absorbed by activities
- R:** relationships - feeling connected to others
- M:** purposeful existence - feeling that one's existence is purposeful
- A:** achievement - feeling a sense of accomplishment and success.

Using this framework, we can start to think about goals and the essential elements that enable our staff to feel happy: what it comes down to is that

happy?



we need to promote wellbeing at the workplace in the same way that our staff to promote it to our children. Only once we have had this discussion with our staff can we unlock this.

So, pivotal to the PANCo role is the ability to look at the needs of both our children and our staff.

Significantly, it was only once our journey with Active Movement had started to progress that we truly started to appreciate this. We have now developed a mixture of targeted personal learning and development, alongside visual aids and reminders to make gradual behavioural changes that generate a culture of wellbeing, rather than an intensive short-term initiative that fails to deliver in the long term.

Making a difference

Simple things have made such a difference. Our staff, who, before the programme, would largely flit between hardcore boot-camps and comfort eating in a vain attempt to achieve a healthy lifestyle, were coached through the full spectrum of wellbeing.

Small changes, such as standing to rock babies in the baby room, making gentle lifestyle changes built around their practices at nursery, and better defined development plans in line with our PERMA framework, have had untold benefits.

Our staff have fed back their responses to the Active Movement research team about the benefits they feel. For example, greater engagement, supported by

achievement plans, has given them a genuine sense of progression, which has increased their positive emotions so that they now genuinely want to put the effort into being healthier.

'Consistency is the key'

We have demonstrated that consistency is the key, and removing the peaks-and-troughs approach to wellbeing is central to this new mindset. So, the gradual, all-encompassing nature of the programmes our PANCos have put together has provided a broader focus to our staff's wellbeing, something that fad diets and uninspiring directives from leadership teams cannot achieve.

Having begun the process last year, our staff are now beginning to make concerted changes, which are steadily becoming the norm, while our children are even more encouraged to absorb and replicate the health and wellbeing values that we are trying to impart to the staff and throughout the nursery.

The programmes will continue throughout this year, and, as we build our database of quantitative results, we will be able to put numbers to it, track patterns and even set a monetary value to it. Of course, the end result is worth far more than money, but we have seen tangible, financial benefits in terms of staffing, such as improved staff retention and greater motivation that all nurseries would benefit from.

Linda (centre) and current PANCo trainees going for it

Creativity, innovation, commitment

The work we have done to develop our training programme has drawn on many sources of knowledge and expertise: Active Movement, The All Parliamentary Group on Fit and Healthy Childhood, positive psychology, as well as some brilliant instances of best practice that colleagues have shared with us. It has taken a great deal of dedication to change our culture, starting with our work within the Old School House. We are now helping and imploring others in our sector to look at the wellbeing of both children and staff.

So, where can you start if you want to introduce this new focus in your nursery? The criteria for becoming a health promoting nursery or achieving health-at-work awards or the Children's Food Trust awards will help you plan your time and resourcing. And you will certainly start to see the commercial benefits of achieving that recognition.

But, having achieved these awards at the Old School House, we had to take it further by being more creative and innovative in our approach to achieving wellbeing. And we are delighted with the results both in our nursery and in our partners' nurseries. ■

- Linda Baston-Pitt is managing director of the Old School House Nursery, director of EduVivre Training for early years professionals, and is a voluntary campaigner contributing to projects on education, research and health and wellbeing.

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To download the All Parliamentary Group on Fit and Healthy Childhood report, *Healthy Patterns for Healthy Families: removing the hurdles to a healthy family*, click on the Links button on the home page at nmt-magazine.co.uk