

Leading the way

Lisa Weston and Gemma Hobson introduce the online mentoring training programme they devised and piloted, which helped The Old School House win the Training category of the NMT Nursery Awards 2017



Lisa Weston

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It is not often that you are given the opportunity to create an award-winning training programme, but working at The Old School House provided us with the perfect platform to build and develop our innovative workplace mentoring course. We have always recognised that our team are at the heart of our success and we continue to listen to them for ways to improve.

Constantly inspired by the staff, we recognise that one of the best ways to learn is from our peers. Our nursery actively supports, nurtures and cultivates strong teams and leaders by offering a blend of different formal and informal learning experiences and resources that have helped to build networks of peer support.

As our staff team have become more confident and self-directed in their learning, it has also become very obvious that they needed more flexible and informal learning approaches that could ideally be embedded into the busy flow of everyday work.

Running a large, busy day nursery, we understand the challenges that

our sector faces day to day. We know that a competent staff team is the key to maintaining outstanding practice, and, as an Ofsted 'outstanding' day nursery, holding the Platinum Investors in People award, we felt it was time to build on and share the practice and techniques that we have developed over the years.

Feedback from our IIP assessment inspired us to build on our existing mentoring programme as we want to provide all children with exceptional opportunities that will support their ongoing learning and development. Having a mentoring system in place enables our people to feel confident and competent within their job roles.

Our staff team were instrumental in the development of the programme as a whole – we now have our own learning designers, content developers, learning coaches and real-life case studies, which have resulted in The Magic of Mentoring blended online accredited Level 3 course.

The start of our journey

Continuing professional development in our modern workplace requires a modern approach. Our nursery director, Linda Baston-Pitt, has always embraced technology, so it made sense for us to leap into the world of e-learning to find the solution.

The key drivers of the mentoring programme included:

- maintaining our strengths-based approach by embedding it into the learning design so that we continue to foster growth, collaboration and wellbeing
- supporting optimal functioning ie bringing our best selves to work, focusing on self-awareness, reflective practice and teamwork
- maximising learning through engaging interactive content, blended learning and multimedia e-learning in an effective learning environment where our staff can truly grow and improve
- enabling better collaboration and communication real time, between early years peers internally and externally (essential for building a strong collaborative workforce)
- ensuring that evaluation is built into the learning process and extends beyond the lifetime of the learning intervention itself.

In order to test and track the programme, we carried out a small-scale pilot project over a period of three months with five early years

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online

Emily Lockwood (left) and Beverley Farmer from Street Farm Day Nursery



settings to evaluate functionality, accessibility and learning outcomes. Ten learners, two from each setting, took part. In addition, we invested in our own learning management system that provided us with the perfect platform for both enhanced communication and innovative staff learning.

The key elements

- All students completed three **Mentoring Milestone Workbooks**, designed to help them keep track of their development. They provided a personal space where they could reflect, upload evidence and check they had completed all the workplace inquiries and online activities required to meet the learning objectives
- Each student was assigned an **online learning coach** who supported them face to face throughout the different stages of the programme. The coach very quickly became a critical friend who listened as they reflected on their practice and the changes they had implemented and asked questions to extend their knowledge and thought processes.
- **Self-diagnostic assessments** enabled the students to identify areas of development, which resulted in a powerful action plan and workplace enquiry to enable each student to reach their stated goals. They shared these with their coach
- We met each of the nursery managers at the start to set the learners up on the learning platform and explain the induction process. And, rather than an end-loaded assignment, the course consisted of five work-based practical assignments that were useful for their organisation as well as for their individual learning.

The coaches' response

"As learning coaches we could really see each learner's progress - solving problems and getting excited when

something went well and they could see its impact on their practice. Through a variety of activities, we encouraged them to try alternative approaches. They were keen to use all of the resources available to develop their practice or to support their existing methods. These included self-diagnostics, quizzes, toolkit activities, case studies, videos and workplace enquiries."

Grassroots feedback

Feedback from the nurseries that took part was incredibly positive and confirmed our belief that what we were doing in embracing the full power of online learning is the way forward, as it provides learners with cost-effective, high-quality learning and an exceptionally rich learning experience:

Lisa Pratt, manager of Street Farm Day Nursery said:

"The learners have embraced the course. The major benefit is that I can see them mentoring every day. They are spending more time with their team members but also understanding why it's important to share knowledge. The team are more confident in their practice, which has led to even better learning opportunities for the children. Mentoring is being embedded into our everyday work flow."

Sarah Long of Ketton Early Birds said:

"It was a great learning opportunity, allowing you to be flexible and move along at your own pace, but with the reassurance of having a learning coach available to 'meet' and discuss your progression and help with any questions that arose. The coaching sessions made me take the time to reflect and share my experiences and I felt reassured knowing I could make contact at any time. I used her as a sounding board, knowing that we were meeting motivated me to complete my tasks."

Lauren Stevens of The Old School House said:

"It was great to be able to discuss challenges and to share practice on the learning platform not only with my team but with practitioners in other nurseries. It really boosted my confidence during the course to know that I wasn't alone" ■

"The Old School House has a great deal of strengths - making use of positive psychology to enhance their supportive leadership practices. Interviews with people at all levels of the organisation highlighted that staff feel motivated to achieve and continually improve, knowing that each individual plays a key role in contributing to the success of the organisation."

IIP assessor

The Old School House have now launched their accredited ILM Level 3 course - *Understanding Good Practice in Workplace Mentoring* on their EduVT training platform: W: eduvt.co.uk. This will soon be followed by an accredited ILM Positive Leadership Course.

● Lisa Weston and Gemma Hobson are early years managers and trainers for the multi-award-winning Old School House Nursery and EduVT Training in Cambridge.

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