

“Our children thrive and learn”

Staff at The Gardens Daycare & Nursery take the business of nurturing those in their care very seriously, but, principal Sarah Bokaie tells *TN*, the secret to their success is enjoying what they do...



I've always worked with children - even as a teenager I started a playgroup in a room at home," Sarah Bokaie tells us. We're sitting in the office of The Gardens Daycare & Nursery in Southfields, London - one half of Sarah's business, The Gardens Childcare. With its calm and welcoming entrance hall, bright and engaging rooms and a lack-of-outdoor-space-defying rooftop garden, the setting is a far cry from those early days, and even, we learn, from the various other incarnations the nursery has adopted over the course of its near-30-year development. What hasn't changed over the years is Sarah's enthusiasm for her role and her belief in what children need to flourish in the early years.

Like its sister setting, the Park Gardens Nursery (located just a mile away), the Gardens has two consecutive 'outstanding' grades under its belt, not to mention parents queuing up in search of a place - so much so that the waiting list has had to be closed in recent times. It offers those in its care a broad range of experiences, including many beyond the traditional remit of a day nursery, and a carefully sourced and particularly generous menu. Its skilled and diverse staff team strike the fine balance between supporting learning through play and preparing children for the challenges of Reception, and, Sarah, manager Nicky Steiner and deputy manager Daniela Riccio insist, have great fun doing it.

Above all, there's a definite sense that Sarah and her team are doing things their way...

MEET THE TEAM



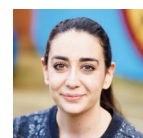
Sarah Bokaie, Principal

"Children here enjoy learning through play within a structured environment, and I think that's the key. Not so long ago 'play' wasn't fashionable, but it's how everybody learns - if we don't enjoy what we do, we're not going to learn, even as adults."



Nicky Steiner, Manager

"The staff here are very engaged - they love what they do. It's a great team. We had a girl in for an interview the other day and she didn't want to go because the nursery had such a nice feeling about it."



Daniela Riccio, Deputy Manager

"We're not fantastic on the paperwork side of things - we're not, I'm being honest! - but if you were to ask me for any strength or weakness of a child in my room, I'd be able to tell you like that."



Staff **allow** children to **wallow** in experiences and offer **depth** to be able to **explore** themes fully

OFSTED, 2013

Training and coaching for staff is a priority and results in highly knowledgeable and dedicated staff who are able to deliver exceptionally high-quality care and education

OFSTED, 2013



1. A varied career

"I was one of Doctor Jolly's play girls!"

For Sarah, the road to nursery ownership was a circuitous one. "I went to a nursery training college, St Christopher's, and from there it just snowballed," she tells us. "I did maternity nursing, then worked in special schools in London, then in Charing Cross under Doctor Jolly, who was a very well-known paediatrician in those days: we were pioneering play in hospitals, as children used to just sit in their beds but he believed they needed to get out and enjoy themselves. So they set up play rooms, and I was one of Doctor Jolly's play girls, as we used to be called!"

"When I got married we moved to Iran and I set up a nursery out there, in Tehran. That was 1975-1978. It wasn't a fully formed business as such - it was in the basement of our flat, and I was looking after around 20 children, but I really enjoyed it.

"When I came back I did various other jobs for a while, including catering for children's birthday parties (long before the Jane Asher cakes!), as well as childminding at home. But then we moved to a house in Southfields that backed onto a tennis club, and there was tennis clubhouse there. My daughter Leila [*who now has responsibility for finance and admin at The Gardens*] had gone to school, and I thought, 'Actually, I'll start a nursery...'. And I did!"

2. Growing The Gardens

"We've really evolved over the last three years."

It was 1987 when Sarah first opened The Gardens' doors to local children, initially as a traditional nursery school offering morning sessions only, 9-12. "That was the norm then," Sarah explains. "It wasn't until much later, in 1997, that we started to offer term-time daycare. I originally went to 9-4, trying to fill afternoon places, because I was paying rent for the whole day. Our parents didn't really want to bring their children in the afternoons at first, but today 80 per cent of our children have full daycare."

In 2000 a move to new premises became a necessity when the owners of the setting's clubhouse home opted to let it to a new tenant at short notice. "We were chucked out, evicted, and I didn't know



where to go," Sarah explains. "It was July and we were starting again in September. So we quickly found the upstairs here, which I then rented for about eight years. It was very different when we arrived - this was all a working men's club. Eventually I got a long lease on the upstairs and revamped it all, and then the club approached me and asked if I'd like to buy part of downstairs, to which I said yes. As a result, the nursery has really evolved over the last three or four years."

At the heart of this evolution was a major (and expensive) refurbishment in 2012. This transformed the downstairs area, creating 33 places for 0-2-year-olds, as well as the aforementioned rooftop garden, which, Sarah explains, had taken a decade to be approved by a local council fearful of its impact on the nursery's neighbours.

Aside from taking The Gardens to in excess of 80 places, these alterations have, Sarah believes, played a significant role both in impressing the inspectors and attracting parents: "I think improving our premises helped to get us to 'outstanding'," she says. "That's where we fell down, while we were renting, and when we were just upstairs here. Ofsted shouldn't look at a setting's cosmetics, but they do. Now I think people walk in here and think 'It's got such a nice atmosphere...' even as they're coming through the door. That's what we've tried to achieve."

3. Team building

"I like staff who are willing to learn."

The Gardens' latest Ofsted report sings the praises of its staff team, and Sarah points to a well-established core of practitioners who have been with her for many years, including Nicky (20 years) and Daniela (nine years). She also has strong views on the training of those working in the early years sector, and her own criteria when it comes to recruitment.

Anyone noting her Ofsted report's mention of five members of staff with Qualified Teaching Status might surmise that only highly qualified applicants need apply for work at The Gardens; in fact, Sarah is far more concerned with attitude, and dismissive of the value of some qualifications. "We have 32 members of staff working with children. In terms of how many are qualified and unqualified, it's probably about 50-50," she explains, "though some of the unqualified staff are in the process of training. I like staff who are willing to learn, and some of the girls we've trained ourselves have been the best we've had. We know when a new member of staff has got what it takes - they love it, and loving your job is the most important thing. I'm interested in how they are with the children, parents, other members of staff... I'm generalising, of course, but we've had so many people with all sorts of qualifications coming in and those at the higher levels often just seem to want to do paperwork - they don't want to get their hands dirty and play with the children."

Walk around the nursery and you'll hear a variety of European accents, and there are a high number of Poles in particular working at The Gardens. Sarah highlights her team's work ethos and their pride in what they do, a point echoed by Nicky, who also stresses the role Sarah herself plays in communicating the setting's high standards: "It has a lot to do with Mrs B - she's very much involved, she has a lot of experience, and she's very passionate





Talking points

about what we're doing," she says.

"I'm hands on when I want to be," Sarah tells us. "I wander around - I pop up all over the place! Yesterday afternoon I sat for an hour and a half on the sofa upstairs, chatting with the children and watching the staff. I am still involved even though I'm no longer manager - and my way is still the only way!"

4. Rich experiences

"The children absorb everything."

Two things in particular stand out as we discuss the opportunities staff at The Gardens are providing children with. The first is the sheer breadth of experiences those attending enjoy. "We offer tennis, Mandarin, French, music, drama, cooking - and the only one we charge parents extra for is the tennis," Sarah says. "We have the minibus so we can go out on trips to museums and galleries; they do really exciting stuff upstairs - for example, we have an art teacher who comes in once a month, and a ballet teacher who's been with us for years - and we have lots of other visitors. Until the end of last year, one of our deputy managers was an opera singer. He was fantastic, and the children learnt all about classical music, rhythm and tempo.

"I think the extras are one of the reasons the nursery is so popular. A lot of our parents work five days a week and don't always have time to take their children to ballet classes or music, or whatever. So I think they're really pleased we offer all these things. The children are like sponges - they absorb it all. They're so enthusiastic, and creative. But the key objective is that they have fun."

At the same time Sarah and her team pay a great deal of consideration to preparing their charges for life after nursery. "We have one afternoon a week where the older children bring a packed lunch and we do preschool reading and writing activities," she says. "It's something I started donkey's years ago and also involves little things like having the register in their rooms and them having to put their hands up and say 'Yes, whoever', which children can find quite daunting. There's lots of standing up and singing songs, and reciting poems and answering questions. It's important that they go on to 'big school' well prepared and confident."



Eating well

Sarah spares no expense providing a menu that stretches from the likes of porridge in the morning and the delicious pork casserole we're treated to at lunch, to mackerel paté and oat cakes at snack-time and spaghetti Bolognese at supper: "Wherever possible we provide free-range or organic meat, fruit, vegetables and fish. We make our own bread and cream cheese; there's not a frozen thing in sight. If the children are fed well, they perform better."



Log off

On a tour of The Gardens you won't spot a computer or tablet screen outside of the office. It's a subject Sarah and her team have strong views about: "I just don't think that computers should be part of the early years," Sarah explains. "Occasionally the children can look something up, but coming to nursery is about social interaction, not looking at a screen."



Striking a balance

"We have a good balance of toys and activities to keep the children constantly stimulated," Daniela says. "When I hear from parents whose children have moved on, they're always grateful that we've introduced things like phonics to them too, because the children aren't daunted by it in Reception. We're also quite strict, especially with the preschool group because they won't get away with it at school. It's emotional preparation, mental preparation, everything."



Warm & welcoming

"When I show people around, the main feedback I get is about the warm atmosphere there is here; maybe because the rooms are so brightly displayed, maybe because we're so friendly with each other and the parents," Daniela reflects. "It definitely has an effect on the children. I think of us as a family - the children almost become our children."