



St Albans Children's Centre (Muriel Green Nursery)

Inspection report for early years provision

Unique Reference Number	EY225164
Inspection date	21 June 2006
Inspector	Jo Stoddart / Jane Mount
Setting Address	Church Crescent, St. Albans, Hertfordshire, AL3 5JB
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Registered person	Hertfordshire County Council
Type of inspection	Integrated
Type of care	Full day care

ABOUT THIS INSPECTION

The purpose of this inspection is to assure government, parents and the public of the quality of childcare and, if applicable, of nursery education. The inspection was carried out under Part XA Children Act 1989 as introduced by the Care Standards Act 2000 and, where nursery education is provided, under Schedule 26 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998.

This report details the main strengths and any areas for improvement identified during the inspection. The judgements included in the report are made in relation to the outcomes for children set out in the Children Act 2004; the National Standards for under 8s day care and childminding; and, where nursery education is provided, the *Curriculum guidance for the foundation stage*.

The report includes information on any complaints about the childcare provision which Ofsted has received since the last inspection or registration or 1 April 2004 whichever is the later.

The key inspection judgements and what they mean

Outstanding: this aspect of the provision is of exceptionally high quality

Good: this aspect of the provision is strong

Satisfactory: this aspect of the provision is sound

Inadequate: this aspect of the provision is not good enough

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THE QUALITY AND STANDARDS OF THE CARE AND NURSERY EDUCATION

On the basis of the evidence collected on this inspection:

The quality and standards of the care are good. The registered person meets the National Standards for under 8s day care and childminding.

The quality and standards of the nursery education are good.

WHAT SORT OF SETTING IS IT?

St Albans Children's Centre is located in the centre of the city of St Albans and serves the local area, with the exception of health services for which children come from a wider catchment. The aim of the centre is to develop and promote high quality integrated services for young children and their families which are individually tailored to the needs of the local community.

As well as integrated nursery education and day care provision St Albans Children's

Centre provides access to: Children's Physiotherapy, Clinical Psychology, Children's Orthoptic Service, Children's Occupational Therapy, Children's Speech and Language Therapy, a Childminding Coordinator, a Specialist Health Visitor, an Opportunity Class and a Parent and Toddler Group.

Day care at the centre is offered from 07:45 to 18:15 each weekday for 49 weeks of the year. There are 150 children from the local community on roll and places are prioritised for children with learning difficulties and or disabilities. The setting supports children who have English as an additional language. The provision is registered for 60 children aged from three months to five years for day care and includes children who receive funding for nursery education for which there are 90 part time places. There are 21 nursery staff in total, the majority of whom hold early years qualifications. The children are integrated throughout the nursery day and supported by the whole nursery team. The nursery accommodation consists of four main rooms, to which children are allocated on an age basis, and an extensive, enclosed outdoor play area.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROVISION

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children benefit from a healthy balanced diet. They enjoy nutritious meals and snacks and menus are displayed for parents to see. All meals are freshly prepared and cooked on the premises and the menu takes account of children's individual dietary needs. Special dietary requirements are met well with good procedures in place to ensure all staff are fully informed. The dietary needs of young babies are met well with individual routines carefully followed. Mealtimes are used as a time for social interaction and a time to encourage good table manners with staff sitting and talking with children while they are eating. Children have opportunities to learn about healthy eating through discussion and play. They talk about fruit and vegetables being good for the body and when asked older children are able to confidently say that fruit and vegetables make them strong and healthy. Children delight in receiving a sticker from the cook if they eat all of their vegetables at lunch time.

Children are cared for in an environment where they learn the importance of good hygiene and personal care. They gain a clear understanding of good hygiene practices through effective guidance and support from staff. Children are beginning to learn simple health and hygiene routines and most children know they must wash their hands after visiting the toilet or after painting and before eating. Children's health is protected because staff implement the nurseries health and hygiene policies and procedures well. For example, there are good routines in place to ensure all toys and equipment are regularly cleaned. Also, staff wear disposable gloves and aprons for nappy changing and washable tabards are worn when handling food or feeding children. Consequently, the risk of cross-infection is minimised and children stay healthy. Children are reminded to flush toilets after use and wash and dry hands properly when visiting the toilet and posters are used as visual reminders. The toilet areas are monitored by staff with regular checks made to ensure they remain clean and this is generally effective.

Children have regular opportunities to take part in a varied range of daily indoor and outdoor activities which contribute significantly to their physical development and promote a positive attitude towards exercise. For example, children confidently practise their climbing, swinging and balancing skills in the large outdoor play area. They competently negotiate obstacles when pedalling bikes and throw and catch balls with ease. Inside, younger children have clear space to practise their crawling and walking skills and delight in rolling large and small soft balls along the ground and crawling quickly after them. Children learn about physical fitness and how it affects their body. For example, after running they talked about being hot and how their heart was beating faster. Children are able to rest and be more active according to their needs and staff ensure individual sleep requirements are met in close consultation with parents.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are cared for in a child friendly environment where opportunities are provided for them to explore with safe limits set. Staff have a sound knowledge of health and safety procedures. They actively ensure proper precautions are taken to reduce potential hazards and to minimise accidents through completing a daily visual check of all areas used by the children. However, this information is not recorded. Informative risk assessments are completed prior to any outings and a comprehensive annual premises risk assessment is completed. For example, regular emergency evacuation practises are organised and there are good security systems and supervising entry to the nursery is well managed. This ensures no unauthorised persons enter and children are not at risk.

Children are able to independently access a varied range of safe, good quality resources. Toys and equipment are developmentally appropriate and sufficiently challenging so children are interested and motivated in their play. Each room is organised to encourage children's independence and to promote their development and learning. For example, low-level storage units are used to encourage children to freely access the toys and equipment. The trays have written labels alongside pictures of the contents. Resources are well maintained and regularly checked by staff to ensure they are clean and safe. Children are beginning to learn about keeping themselves and others safe and staff skilfully explain safe practices. For example, explaining to a young child the correct way to climb down a step so they do not fall and hurt themselves. Also, reminding a child to pick up a dropped toy so that another child does not trip and hurt themselves and older children are taught how to hold scissors safely.

Children are safeguarded because staff have an excellent knowledge of child protection procedures and they give priority to children's safety and welfare. There is a comprehensive child protection policy in place which all staff are fully aware of and know how to implement. This includes recording and reporting procedures and what to do if allegations are made against a member of staff.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

Children are happy and settled. They develop confidence and self-esteem because they receive consistent levels of support from staff and they are at ease in the nursery environment. Close and caring relationships with staff increase children's sense of trust and help them develop a strong sense of self. Staff support children well and give praise and encouragement as appropriate and children are motivated in their play.

Younger children's learning is promoted through the staff's strong knowledge of child development and the 'Birth to three matters' framework. Staff use the framework to plan and organise play opportunities and activities for the under three's and weekly plans are in place and are generally informative. Children's progress is monitored through regular observations of individual children's play and achievements. Each child has an 'All about me' book which is completed by their key worker and shows what achievements they have made. However, information gained from children's assessment records is not used formally to inform future planning to ensure children are progressing and their next steps of learning are catered for.

Younger children are able to participate in a range of activities which provide a balance of free play and more structured play opportunities. Children regularly enjoy sensory play with opportunities to explore paint, water, sand and other mediums. For example, babies delight in playing with shredded paper and become absorbed in trying to get the paper off each others feet. They look in wonder at the bubbles as they appear from the bubble machine and older children try to catch and pop them. Children show an interest in books. They independently look for their favourite story and confidently ask an adult to read it. They listen attentively to the story and discuss the pictures and staff respond to children's questions while looking at the book. Early communication skills are well supported as staff listen and encourage babies to vocalise as they sing and talk to them while playing. They listen to what older children have to say and they are not rushed in their talking.

Nursery Education

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding. All staff have an exceptionally secure knowledge and understanding of the Foundation Stage. They are aware that children learn at different rates and that they need time to explore and practise their learning. Consequently, all children have a rich and varied range of learning opportunities which cover all areas of learning. All staff have seen the new Early Years Foundation Stage consultation document and have discussed it in at least one of their weekly staff meetings.

All the team enthusiastically use assessment procedures which are linked to the stepping stones and early learning goals. These procedures identify children's achievements in a systematic and user friendly way. Detailed plans cover all areas of learning and a recently reviewed target evaluation system now has a more formalised approach to track and monitor each child. Staff sit down together as a team and evaluate the learning of the previous week, look at forthcoming activities and learning

intentions and discuss each child's progress. The senior teacher has recently introduced a new system where group leaders meet her fortnightly to discuss each of the children in their respective groups in order to identify and track the needs of individual children. This means that the needs of each child are met exceedingly well with all the children fully involved in challenging activities and all having excellent levels of achievement given their capability and starting points.

Staff use relevant and varied methods to help all children learn effectively. Consequently, all children are thoroughly engaged in what they are doing and progressing according to their stage of development. They play cooperatively with wooden crates, planks and tyres. The team provides a wide range of 'hands on' activities and 'real' resources such as woodworking with real screws, hammers and saws. Children concentrate and excitedly watch as live chicks hatch from eggs. A poster explaining the life cycle of chickens, discussion between staff and children including appropriate open ended questioning about the colour of chicks and where they came from, encourages and extends the children's learning.

All the adults are highly aware of the individual needs of the children and plan the curriculum to promote progress towards the early learning goals. Some of the nursery education funded children attend the nursery all day and in order to cater for their needs, the staff plan activities with a 'lighter touch' during adult directed time for that group. Each Friday, the children take part in varied and exciting activities such as going for a walk and feeding the ducks, visiting Pizza Express and making their own pizza, baking, and music and movement. This flexible and thoughtful planning contributes to all children playing on their own or with others in an extremely confident and self-assured way.

Children are managed well and high expectations of behaviour by all members of staff enable the children to develop an understanding of a need for consideration for others. This was illustrated when most of the children crowded excitedly round the incubator where a chick was hatching. They responded immediately to the boundaries set by a member of staff so that everybody would be able to see and would have a turn.

All staff are actively making imaginative and extensive use of resources and environment. This results in an inviting learning provision which is organised to encourage children to become confident and self-assured learners. There is an integrated approach to the indoors and outdoors environment enabling children to play freely throughout the setting in all weathers. At the time of the inspection the theme of the week was 'Safety with Water'. All children participated enthusiastically in an activity which started with a Rosie and Jim video about staying safe in water. After which, they confidently sang a song with music and movement called 'One Step Back' with blue material used as a pond. They animatedly discussed the approaching Teddy Bears Picnic in the park and the need for safety when they were there. Learning was extended as the children went outside to draw a poster on safety with water.

Children's gross and fine motor skills are developing through activities such as woodworking where the adult support was exemplary, resulting in children persevering, concentrating and having great pride in their work while others watched

and took turns. They move with confidence and control throughout the setting showing a sense of space as well as travelling around, under and through balancing and climbing equipment. Children recognise the importance of keeping healthy and changes to their bodies when active, with learning opportunities such as story time when the adult invited discussion around hand washing and the heart and spine.

Children are encouraged to explore and satisfy their natural curiosity through first hand experiences as they play purposefully and are fully engaged designing, making and building 'Aliens'. They select their own resources, draw the design, build it with wooden bricks and move around the setting finding blu-tack, paper and crayons in a confident and purposeful manner. They use a number of computers throughout the day and during a story, children ask about the dimensions of a whale and are encouraged to find out afterwards by 'Asking Jeeves' on the computer.

Children show great enthusiasm, confidence and understanding throughout the range of varied activities where mathematical development takes place. Learning opportunities in snack time, story time, building and designing and the chicks hatching involve numbers, shape, measuring, patterns, calculation and problem solving.

Children show excellent levels of achievements according to their stage of development in skills such as using language while they negotiate and interact with each other and staff. They extend language and explore meaning with words like 'author' and 'illustrator'. Children know that print carries meaning through stories 'read' by themselves or by an adult, making their own lists and linking sounds with letters in an adult-directed activity involving writing their own names and forming recognisable letters.

Children are expressing themselves in a wide variety of ways in a secure learning environment where creativity is valued. They are becoming familiar with varied music such as tapes of different types of music playing in the nursery. They use their imagination in role play and stories and respond enthusiastically when exploring colour, texture and shape in painting activities, outdoor play, water play and singing songs.

Children have an excellent attitude to learning and are happy, settled, self-assured and extremely confident learners as a result of their secure learning environment. They are developing a positive sense of themselves through the staff's expert knowledge of child development. They encourage, value and support the children and have high expectations of what each child can achieve. Children are making strong relationships with their peers and adults, becoming independent through managing their self-hygiene and beginning to understand right and wrong.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

Children have regular opportunities to learn about themselves, each other and the world. Recently, they looked at food from around the world and children enjoyed tasting foods such as noodles, unusual fruits and pizza and identifying which country

they came from. Children's awareness of diversity and their understanding of others is promoted through the range of resources and activities they take part in and through discussion. For example, children begin to appreciate the customs and cultures of others through learning about festivals such as Diwali and Chinese New Year. They develop positive attitudes towards others as they are able to select from resources reflecting diversity. Displays and posters reflect positive images and help children become aware of the wider world. Children learn about the local community through outings. For example, regular outings to the local children's park or visits to the local shops. During the topic 'mums and babies' children enjoyed visiting a chemist to experience buying baby products, such as nappies and baby milk.

Children understand responsible behaviour and are beginning to learn right from wrong. They behave considerately and are encouraged by staff to show care and concern, for example, if a child is upset or fallen and hurt themselves. Children play well together and behaviour is dealt with in ways appropriate to the child's level of understanding. Children are taught to be polite to others and staff are good role models. Staff give clear explanations and regularly talk to children about helping each other in their play. Children receive plenty of praise and children can be regularly heard saying 'please' and 'thank-you'. Children with English as an additional language are supported well and there are excellent strategies in place for children with learning difficulties or disabilities and their families. Children are treated as individuals and with equal concern and all children have equal access to resources and activities. Staff ensure they are fully aware of and are able to meet any specific needs a child may have through discussion with parents.

Partnership with parents and carers is good. Children benefit from an effective partnership with parents which significantly contributes to their well-being. Babies settle well because the staff work closely with parents to ensure they follow the home routine. A clear settling in programme is used which ensures children settle well and become secure in their surroundings. Children's achievements are regularly shared with parents and a key worker system ensures children's individual needs are met well. Parents are provided with good quality information about the setting and its provision, including regular newsletters on 'what we're about to do' under the six areas of learning. There is daily feedback with parents and they are encouraged to come in and see their children at play. The senior teacher has a meeting with each parent when their child starts the Foundation Stage in order to explain it in some detail. There are activity plans placed on the parent's notice board each week. On exit, a profile of each child is sent to the parent, and to the follow on school with parent's permission. Parents appeared very pleased with the setting. One parent said that their child was so happy, settled and challenged that she moved her younger child there from another setting.

The nursery tries to develop access and seek the views of parents using the setting, as well as those who might want to take part in any of the services offered in the centre. They work closely with the Health Visitor and had funding, which has now stopped, for a successful 'Parents As First Teachers' project where two members of staff worked jointly with the Opportunity Class going out into the community to work with other parents.

Children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is fostered. Children have

a well developed sense of spiritual development as they show wonder at the chicks hatching and listen avidly to stories. Their moral development is encouraged as they behave considerately towards each other and show caring attitudes towards each other through excellent adult role models. Children relate well with their peers and adults working with different staff and in different sized groups encouraging their social development. They broaden their experiences by visits into the community, such as making their own pizzas at Pizza Express, feeding the ducks and a trip to Verulam Park for a Teddy Bear's Picnic, all of which encourages their cultural development.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children's needs are effectively met by staff who are committed to the continuing improvement of the nursery. They have high regard for the well-being of all children who attend the nursery. Children are positively supported in their care, learning and play because staff organise and plan their time effectively. Staff are supportive of each other and work well together as a strong staff team. Staff meetings regularly take place to evaluate and monitor their practice and are able to implement the settings policies and procedures well.

Clear vetting and recruitment procedures ensure children's safety and well-being are promoted. Children are cared for by staff who have a strong knowledge and understanding of child development. Staff understand the importance of professional development and regularly update their knowledge through attending appropriate courses. All required documentation for the efficient and safe management of the setting are in place and in generally good order.

Leadership and Management of the nursery education are outstanding. The Nursery Head has a clear and focussed vision and an excellent understanding of the setting's strengths and areas for development which she shares with the rest of the Senior Management Team. She has developed close links with the governing body of the nursery and Children's Centre, so that as well as the staff, all are working towards improving the provision and the care and education of the setting. The effectiveness of the management team is reflected in the exceptional way all staff comprehensively understand their roles and responsibilities and are inspired to teach children in a dynamic and enthusiastic way. The Nursery Head and management team are committed to good practice, having worked at the setting together for a number of years. They have a proactive approach and are constantly monitoring and evaluating the quality of care and education in the setting through regular meetings with parents, governors and other agencies within the centre.

Children benefit from experienced and highly qualified staff. Comprehensive induction and appraisal systems ensure that every member of staff is fully informed. Regular meetings are held with staff where training and development needs are discussed. Future plans around staff development include introducing peer assessment. This has already worked successfully with several members of staff who have undertaken this as part of their Early Years Degree.

Rigorous and regular assessments of each child and the information gained, is used very effectively to guide planning and ensure that each child is suitably challenged and progresses at their appropriate stage of development. The senior teacher is continually reviewing and updating assessment and tracking procedures for each child in order to improve and adapt them. This results in the procedures being more user friendly and consequently more informative in identifying the next steps in children's learning. Overall, children's needs are met.

Additional core services

The centre provides access to a broad range of services for children and their parents based on local needs. It is an effective one-stop shop where adults can meet with professionals and advisors from a number of agencies including those which have the most impact on the outcomes for children who attend. These include Health and Voluntary sector family support such as The Baby Café; Parents Support Groups such as Post Natal Mums Group and Lone Parent Network as well as Opportunity Classes, Child Development, Play Therapy, Childminding Groups and Baby Massage.

The Partnership Manager has developed links in primary care within the centre such as support offered to families with children with learning difficulties and or disabilities through the Specialist Health Visitor. Communication is continually evolving within the centre between the different agencies and there is a developing approach with more shared aims and vision than previously. There are now weekly meetings between the Nursery Head, the Senior Teacher and the Partnership Manager.

The centre encourages the parents to access the Parents Resource Room which is well equipped and available to them at any time. A parent's view from the Spring 2006 St. Albans Children's Centre (SACC) Newsletter says the Baby Massage Group has "become increasingly important to all of us and we rely on each other for advice, support, laughs or even just a friendly face and sympathetic ear."

The Nursery Head works hard to forge links and improve connections with the additional services wherever possible. A Nursery Nurse has been seconded to the Specialist Health Visitor for Families of Children with Special Needs in order to offer support such as help with the Baby Massage Group. The Twins Support Group was started by parents of children in the nursery.

It has proved very beneficial for some children with learning difficulties and or disabilities to join activities within the nursery including outside play for two sessions a week. The Special Educational Needs Governor has close links with the nursery. Good, informative links with the Health Visitor result in the requirements of the children with learning disabilities and or difficulties being effectively met.

A parent from the Parent and Toddler Group who had previously been a part of the Post Natal Group, said that the centre and the services had made a positive difference to her and her child. She did not now feel isolated and found it to be "very helpful and fun" and hoped to go on to higher education.

Both the SACC and the Childminding Network were accredited with a Herts Quality

Standards award in early 2006.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last care inspection the provider was asked to ensure medication records are signed by parents and that policies and procedures are accessible to parents. Children benefit from the strong partnership between the nursery and parents because information is shared and parents are fully informed. Parents receive information regarding the settings policies and procedures through the parent information pack which they all receive. Also, a comprehensive file of all policies and procedures relating to the Children's Centre are available in the main office and parents are informed of this. Children's health is protected and parents are fully aware of when medicines are administered. The nursery have reviewed their procedures regarding the administration of medicines and parents sign before and after any medication is given.

The provider was also asked to develop the key worker system to increase the link between children's achievements and the emotional well-being of younger children and babies. The key worker system has been reviewed. Key workers now complete initial home visits to meet parents and children in their home environment prior to them attending the nursery. Also, parents are regularly invited in to discuss their child's progress with their key worker and children's individual interest sheets are completed so staff are aware of particular favourite activities or toys. Children's progress is monitored through the introduction of 'All About Me' books which key workers complete for each of their key children. Also, children are supported in their play with lots of one to one activities and play opportunities which provides continuity in children's care and promotes emotional well-being.

At the last nursery education inspection the provider was asked to strengthen the communication between the Head of the Nursery and the Partnership Manager so that joint projects can be developed more effectively. There are now weekly meetings between the Nursery Head, Senior Teacher and the Partnership Manager where discussions include short term planning, the 'sustaining success' project and evaluating what has gone well take place. This has resulted in further shared vision and aims than previously was the case and the children's needs are now met more effectively. Other 'links' include the Partnership Manager as a governor of the nursery and a member of the Finance/Personnel committee which meets half termly. He also works closely with the Health and Safety representative of the governing body.

Complaints since the last inspection

One complaint has been received by Ofsted since the last inspection. On 13 August 2004, concerns were raised about staffing issues. These concerns related to National Standard 1: Suitable Person. Ofsted conducted an unannounced visit on 18 August 2004 to the provision. Upon investigation, Ofsted were satisfied that the provision was complying with the National Standards, therefore Ofsted took no further action in this matter. The provider remains qualified for registration.

The provider is required to keep a record of complaints made by parents, which they can see on request. The complaints record may contain complaints other than those made to Ofsted.

THE QUALITY AND STANDARDS OF THE CARE AND NURSERY EDUCATION

On the basis of the evidence collected on this inspection:

The quality and standards of the care are good. The registered person meets the National Standards for under 8s day care and childminding.

The quality and standards of the nursery education are good.

WHAT MUST BE DONE TO SECURE FUTURE IMPROVEMENT?

The quality and standards of the care

To improve the quality and standards of care further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- review risk assessment procedures to ensure a daily record is maintained
- ensure that the Under Three's assessment records are used to inform future planning so that children's next steps of learning and development are catered for.

The quality and standards of the nursery education

To improve the quality and standards of nursery education further the registered person should take account of the following recommendation(s):

- further develop ways of seeking and gathering and then acting on parent's views.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the leaflet *Building better childcare: Compliments and concerns about inspectors' judgements* which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk