

First Steps Playgroup

Inspection report for early years provision

Unique Reference Number	402222
Inspection date	04 May 2007
Inspector	Sandra Daniels
Setting Address	Carters Mead, Harlow, Essex, CM17 9EU
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Registered person	First Steps Playgroup
Type of inspection	Integrated
Type of care	Sessional 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 outstanding.

WHAT SORT OF SETTING IS IT?

First Steps playgroup opened in 1999. It operates from a classroom within Potter Street Primary School, Harlow. The group also has the use of a small adjoining quiet area, toilets and kitchen. There is an enclosed outdoor area adjacent to the classroom, and the group also share usage of the main school playground, hall and library. The playgroup serves the local and wider area.

The playgroup is registered to provide care for no more than 25 children from two years to under five years at any one time. There are currently 67 children on roll. This includes 52 funded three and four-year-old children. Children attend a variety of sessions. The setting supports a small number of children who have special needs. There are also a few children attending who have English as an additional language.

The playgroup opens five days a week during school term time. Sessions run from 09.00 until 11.45 and 12.30 to 15.00.

There are three full-time and three part-time staff working with the children. Over half the staff have early years qualifications to National Vocational Qualification Level 2 or 3. One member of staff is currently working towards a recognised early years qualification.

The setting receives support from the Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) and the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PSLA)

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROVISION

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children learn to understand basic hygiene procedures because practitioners take the time to explain and demonstrate. For example, following a painting activity a member of staff shows a child how to rub her hands together and wash in between her fingers to get all the paint off. The child is very proud of her clean hands and takes delight in drying them thoroughly. Children quickly learn the importance of washing their hands after using the toilet and before they have their snacks as there are visual prompts in the playroom and in the bathroom to remind them. Many children know about germs as this is reinforced through thematic planning and practical activities. For example, during a recent theme about 'people who help us', children were looking at those who help us in the home and enjoyed a washing up activity where they made sure that plates and cups were clean enough for them to use. Children are encouraged to be independent in the bathroom, where they use liquid soap and paper towels to reduce the risk of cross-infection, and before snack times when they use an anti-bacterial hand wash.

Children's good health is well promoted as staff follow very effective procedures, such as cleaning tables before snack times and keeping the premises very clean and hygienic. Children receive good care if they become ill or have an accident. Most of the staff hold current first aid certificates and are confident of their ability to deal with minor accidents and medical emergencies. Practitioners ensure children's welfare is supported as they record relevant information about health and dietary requirements on each child's records.

Children are very well nourished and increase their understanding of healthy living because they enjoy choices of snacks such as rice cakes, pita bread and cream cheese, fresh and dried fruits and vegetables. Drinking water is available to all children at all times and they can independently access it as they play. Snack times are social occasions where children discuss what they are eating, their likes and dislikes. They thoroughly enjoyed a bread tasting activity, where they experience various different tastes. Children also learn about healthy foods as they grow things such as tomatoes, peas and beans in the outside play area. They water the plants and watch them grow, learning that they need sunlight and water.

Children's physical play experiences are extremely well promoted through daily access to the elements and fresh air in the outside play area. They develop positive attitudes towards physical exercise as they learn that it helps to keep you fit and healthy. Children confidently negotiate the wooden adventure playground as they balance, climb and swing. Co-ordination and control is developed as children play with bats, balls and hoops. Inside, children benefit from regular access to the main school hall where they have the space to move in various ways as they exercise. They learn that the heart beats faster after activity and enjoy the warm-up exercises enormously.

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children spend their time in a pleasant, warm, welcoming, bright and cheerful environment. Staff greet each child personally as they arrive, helping them to feel part of the group. This is

reinforced as children see photographs of themselves around the setting and lots of their own work attractively displayed for all to see. The playroom is thoughtfully divided into different areas of play and learning. For example, a quiet area for reading and writing activities, a construction area and imaginative play area. Staff ensure children remain comfortable as they monitor the room temperature and make sure there is adequate ventilation.

Staff provide a well-organised range of toys and equipment relevant to the needs of the children attending. All resources are of very good quality and well maintained. Practitioners give careful consideration to the safety of toys and equipment, ensuring it is appropriate for the ages and stages of development of all children. Toys are stored very safely at child height so that children can easily access everything and make choices and decisions about their play. All toys and equipment are checked regularly by staff to ensure there are no broken parts which could harm a child.

Children are cared for in a very safe and secure environment where practitioners take steps to minimise risks to children. For example, children regularly practise an emergency evacuation procedure with staff. Practitioners explain to children what they should do if they hear the fire alarm and why this is important. This helps children to begin to take responsibility for their safety. Effective risk assessments ensure that children cannot leave the premises unnoticed and practitioners are always aware of exactly who is on site at any given time. Staff know where children are on the premises, for example, they tell one another when they take a child to the bathroom. Visitors sign in and out of the premises and staff are vigilant in their supervision of children.

Children's welfare is very well safeguarded and promoted as all staff are trained in child protection issues. They fully understand the correct procedure to follow should they have any concerns and give high priority to ensuring children remain protected from harm.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

All children are interested in, and stimulated by, the provision of a broad range of quality toys, equipment and activities that are readily available to them. Children settle well and become very happy in this setting because practitioners have empathy for the range of emotions affecting young children and their carers at the time of their first separation. Children are greeted by name and welcomed into the setting warmly, helping them to feel secure and comfortable. The settling in process is flexible and is guided by the needs of the individual child. The first relationship the child builds is with their key worker and this forms the foundation for many new friendships. Children develop confidence and self-esteem through these relationships and staff get to know each child very well and can, therefore, meet their needs ably.

Practitioners interact very well with children, keeping them interested and motivated. This supports children in their play and they respond well to adults who are interested in what they do and say. As children's confidence grows, they begin to ask questions and use their initiative whilst at play. There are many opportunities for children to make choices and decisions about their care and play. For example, children can choose toys and resources independently as they are stored accessibly for them. However, although children can choose what they have for their snack, they do not choose when to have it or when to play outside in the garden. Many children initiate their own play and follow their own interests. They use a good range of creative materials

which encourage them to express their feelings and experiences in a variety of ways. For example, children enjoy investigating jelly, pastry, water and sand.

Staff incorporate and reflect aspects of the 'Birth to three matters' framework in their practice for children under three years. Younger children are interested in what they see and do because staff plan and provide them with suitable activities and experiences based on their excellent understanding of the needs of the younger child. Younger children thrive in this calm and organised environment where they become familiar with the routine.

Nursery Education.

The quality of teaching and learning is outstanding. Staff have an extremely secure knowledge of the Foundation Stage and use this to plan and provide a very wide range of stimulating play and learning opportunities. Practitioners have an excellent appreciation of how children often learn best through practical and 'real life' experiences. For example, the imaginary play area has been transformed into a travel agency. Children know this and understand about the concept of a travel agency because staff demonstrate by acting out scenarios in the various imaginary play settings. Children pretend to answer the telephone, take messages, book holidays and change pounds into euros.

The Foundation Stage curriculum is extremely well planned. It is clear, detailed, well-organised and understood by all practitioners. Planning covers all six areas of learning and reflects children's individual needs and interests. It shows how activities should be adapted for younger children and extended for the older or more able child, therefore, providing sufficient challenge for all. The various methods of teaching used in this setting further ensures that all children's needs are appropriately met. For example, there is an extremely good balance between adult-led, structured activities such as making streamers to blow in the wind, and allowing children the freedom to develop and extend their own play as they, for example, construct buildings with Duplo or manipulate dough into various shapes. Staff ask questions to extend and expand children's knowledge. For example, 'What does this feel like?', as a child cautiously puts his hands into some wet sand, and 'what will happen if we put one more on?' as a child is building a tower with Duplo. This encourages children to begin to think for themselves. Their confidence grows and they are able to concentrate for significant periods of time as they become interested and absorbed in their play.

Children's progress is monitored exceptionally well. Staff make observations of children at play and during routine times such as circle time and snack time. These observational assessments are used to plot children's paths, across the stepping stones, towards the early learning goals. Children are making exceptional progress in relation to their starting points as staff support children to reinforce their learning through play. They encourage children's natural curiosity as learners and provide so many interesting and worthwhile activities and experiences. The use of assessments and observations, identifying children's starting points and next steps in learning illustrate staff's commitment to improving outcomes for children and creating an environment where children can flourish as they enjoy their learning experiences.

Children have many opportunities to use language for communication. They interact with others, taking turns in conversation as they play. They talk about what they are doing as they organise, sequence and clarify their thinking and ideas. For example, a four-year-old child was telling a story as she was illustrating a card she had made. She had drawn two houses and linked them together with a line which, she explained, was the route to take to get from one house to the other. Children are able to link sounds to letters, naming and sounding letters of the alphabet.

Some older children use their phonic knowledge to write simple words and make plausible attempts at more complex words and sentences. Children know that print carries meaning and have developed a good understanding of various elements of stories such as the main character, sequence of events and openings. For example, children thoroughly enjoy the 'Someone Bigger' story. As it is brought to life for them skilfully, children join in to finish sentences and accurately anticipate what happens next. Practitioners ensure that all children can see the pictures and give them the time to ask questions which staff often re-direct to other children.

Mathematical learning takes place during many different activities; those that are planned and also during routine activities such as snack times. Children show great interest in numbers and counting. They enthusiastically join in with number rhymes and songs, counting up and back. Many children count independently as they play and use developing mathematical ideas and methods to solve practical problems. For example, when there was one piece of dough on a table with four chairs around it, a child worked out that if she cut the dough in half and then in half again, she would have four pieces. Most three and-four-year olds can confidently say the number that is one more than the given number and use language such as 'more' or 'less' to compare two numbers. They compare quantities by using language such as 'lighter' or 'heavier' and talk about, recognise and recreate simple patterns.

Children develop a strong knowledge and understanding of the world as the thematic planning supports them to investigate and explore things such as the weather. Children make streamers and flags and learn that they blow in the wind. They work and play in an interesting environment where they learn to observe, question and satisfy their curiosity through first hand experiences. These learning experiences are reinforced throughout the curriculum. Staff thoughtfully choose songs and stories which link to the current theme. For example, 'Someone Bigger' is a story about Sam and his kite, linked with the weather theme and the wind. Children find out about, and identify, some features of living things as they watch the giant snails and learn how to care for them. They discover technology as they become confident in their use of the computer and the many highly appropriate games.

Creativity is highly valued in this setting and children achieve well in this area as staff teach them how to use different materials and tools and provide them with many opportunities to use these skills imaginatively and in their own way. Children experiment with sewing and woodwork activities and explore what happens if they mix colours, for example, black and white. They use their imagination in art and design as they make models from boxes, paper, and other interesting materials.

The strength in the quality of teaching and learning in this setting is that themes are brought to life skilfully for children. The activities are meaningful and therefore encourage and develop children's motivation to learn and, consequently, many children have already reached some of the early learning goals.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is good.

All children are fully included in the life of the setting because they have equal access to toys and equipment which meet their individual needs. Similarities and differences are acknowledged and valued and all children and families are warmly welcomed into the playgroup. Children enjoyed making spectacles and felt what it would be like to wear glasses. They become aware of the wider society and benefit from many activities and resources which help them value diversity. Many festivals are celebrated and children learn that ways of life are different in other

parts of the community and the world. Children look with interest at a large poster which shows that some people live in mud huts and others live in castles and palaces. Children see notices and labels around the playroom that are written in many languages and they also enjoy using simple signs alongside spoken language. During a recent theme about 'people who help us', children were visited by a nurse who talked to them about her job and practised some bandaging on them.

Children develop a strong sense of belonging as they see photographs of themselves around the setting, displayed to reinforce their learning. Children's own work is also attractively displayed, helping them to feel good about themselves and valued as individuals. The provision has an extremely positive approach to caring for children with additional needs and the special needs co-ordinator works in close partnership with parents and other professionals to ensure their specific needs are met. Individual education and play plans further support this.

Children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is fostered. Children understand responsible behaviour as they learn to share and take turns. For example, when playing a colour matching game. Staff set clear and consistent boundaries for expected behaviour and children respond extremely positively to this and behave well. Older children are given the time and support to begin to take responsibility for their own behaviour. They learn to negotiate and resolve conflicts themselves. Children are kind and considerate towards others, for example, when a child became upset, another child gave her a tissue.

There is an excellent two-way communication between staff and parents. Parents come into the setting at the beginning and end of each session and relevant information is shared. Practitioners are very friendly and approachable and parents feel confident to discuss issues with them.

Partnership with parents and carers is outstanding. Parents receive very good quality information about the setting and its provision. As children become eligible for funded nursery education, staff take full account of the needs of all parents to help them to understand the Foundation Stage and how they help children to make progress towards the early learning goals. All policies and procedures are shared with parents and they know how the routines and activities provided help their children to learn. Channels of communication are both formal and informal. Parents are kept very well informed about their child's achievements and progress, both verbally, as they bring and collect their child, and in meetings with their key worker where parents look at and discuss their child's development records.

Parents are encouraged to share what they know about their children. They contribute to an initial assessment which informs practitioners what children already know and can do. Staff know each child extremely well. They find out about the child's family, faith, racial and cultural heritage so that familiar experiences, interests and needs can be used as starting points for care, teaching and learning. The playgroup welcomes parents in and clearly eases the transition from home to setting through effective settling-in procedures.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Overall children's needs are met. Robust recruitment and vetting procedures ensure that children are very well protected and cared for by staff with a strong knowledge and understanding of child development. This is a very stable and dedicated staff team who are well qualified and highly experienced in the field of childcare. Practitioners have a structured induction programme

and go on to enjoy further training and development in related subjects. The effective appraisal system helps to identify training needs and ensures that staff remain motivated to continually improve the service provided.

Children are grouped effectively in order to fully meet their care needs and to maximise their learning opportunities. Morning sessions are exclusively for older children who are in receipt of funded nursery education, whilst afternoon sessions are for younger children from two to three years. This group is smaller in number as the care needs of younger children require more adult support. Practitioners are deployed very efficiently in the setting. The playroom is divided into clearly identified areas of learning and each member of staff has a specific role to play during each session. Staff know where one another is and what they are doing at all times. High staff ratios ensures that there are sufficient adults to work and play directly with the children.

All necessary documentation is in place and is used very effectively to ensure all children are kept safe and well. There is a comprehensive set of policies and procedures which underpin the good practice. Children's personal information is stored in a confidential manner, whilst remaining accessible for inspection and should a parent need to be contacted in an emergency.

Leadership and management is outstanding. The setting is clearly led and managed for the benefit of the children. The great effectiveness of the leadership and management has created an improving setting where children are safe, feel good about themselves and make excellent progress towards the early learning goals. There is a clear vision to provide high quality nursery education with a strong focus on children learning through play. The supervisor demonstrates a commitment to early education and has built a superb, stable team of qualified and experienced staff who are highly motivated to continue to develop. Practitioners fully understand their roles and responsibilities in developing children's learning and helping them to reach their full potential.

The provision assesses its own strengths and weaknesses at staff meetings and through evaluations of activities. An ongoing development plan successfully sets out targets and how and when they should be achieved. Feedback from parents is also gathered and used effectively. All aspects of the provision for nursery education are evaluated and areas for improvement are identified and acted on. This setting benefits from a confident, competent and well supported staff team who provide a fully inclusive environment where every child matters.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the provider agreed to four recommendations regarding children's safety and welfare. The staff appraisal system has been formalised to ensure all staff are fully supported in their professional development. Children are protected as the effective staff appraisal procedure continually ensures that staff are suitable for the work they do. Training needs are identified and practitioners and children benefit from the range and regularity of courses attended. Risk assessments are undertaken before each use of shared areas such as the outside play area. A padlock is used to secure the gate so that children cannot leave the premises unsupervised and, for the afternoon sessions, when the adjoining Primary School Playground is being used, a member of staff stands at the main gate to welcome children and parents. The setting's behaviour management policy includes information about bullying and children's safety is ensured as strategies are in place for the effective management of bullying should it occur. Children are effectively safeguarded as all staff are fully aware of their roles and responsibilities in the protection of children.

Complaints since the last inspection

Since the last inspection there have been no complaints made to Ofsted that required the provider or Ofsted to take any action in order to meet the National Standards. 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 outstanding.

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 arrangements for outside play and snack times to further enable children to make independent choices about their play and care.

The quality and standards of the nursery education

No recommendations for improvement are made because the quality and standards of nursery education are outstanding.

Any complaints about the inspection or the report should be made following the procedures set out in the leaflet *Complaints about Ofsted Early Years: concerns or complaints about Ofsted's role in regulating and inspecting childcare and early education (HMI ref no 2599)* which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk