

Stepping Stones Play and Learn Group

Inspection report for early years provision

Unique Reference Number	650140
Inspection date	12 November 2007
Inspector	Sarah Williams
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Registered person	Carol Nice
Type of inspection	Integrated
Type of care	Full day care, Out of School 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

For more information about early years inspections, please see the booklet *Are you ready for your inspection?* which is available from Ofsted's website: www.ofsted.gov.uk.

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?

Stepping Stones Play and Learn Group opened in 1991 and operates from a community education building in Colchester, Essex. A maximum of 26 children may attend the group at any one time. The group is open each weekday from 09:00 to 15:00 during school term times. Additionally, an after school and holiday club operates for children of school age. All children share access to a secure, enclosed outdoor play area.

There are currently 52 children aged from two to under eight years on roll. Of these, 36 children receive funding for early education. Children come from the local area and surrounding towns and villages. The nursery currently supports a number of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and also supports a number of children who speak English as an additional language.

The nursery employs 16 members of staff. Of these, 13 hold appropriate early years qualifications and three are working towards a qualification.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PROVISION

Helping children to be healthy

The provision is good.

Children are encouraged and helped to develop habits which contribute to a healthy lifestyle. Their health is well promoted by staff who follow sound and consistent procedures which are documented and shared with parents. For example, children know that their hands must be clean before eating or after using the toilet. They use the hand basins with soap and disposable towels, or hand wipes where these are more appropriate. All spills are cleaned up immediately with disposable cloths, and staff wear disposable gloves to prevent any risk of cross-infection.

If children become poorly they are kept comfortable until they can be collected by a parent or carer. Those with infectious conditions are asked to stay at home until they are well, again to protect children and staff from cross-infection. Children requiring first aid for minor injuries are treated by trained staff, and the details recorded to be signed off by a parent or carer. Children requiring medication are similarly looked after, with careful attention to their specific needs all doses are recorded to ensure that correct quantities and times are adhered to.

Children enjoy a healthy menu of snacks and drinks. The fruit and vegetables are freshly prepared and presented appealingly, along with a drink suitable for each child's needs. Children enjoy spreading their own crackers with cheese spread or butter and snack time is a relaxed social occasion when staff sit with the children in small groups, chatting and encouraging good behaviour. Children who bring a packed lunch have a plate and cutlery provided. Staff again sit with the children encouraging independence and helping those who need assistance. Children are allowed to take as long as they need to eat; those that finish soonest can choose a quiet activity such as books or floor toys, again making sure that the lunchtime period is relaxed and friendly.

Children enjoy a wide range of physical activities to help them develop their confidence and skills both when using large and small apparatus, tools and equipment. The soft play room is used to provide safe, active play, developing children's competence and awareness of their bodies' capabilities. The outside area has specially adapted equipment and pathways to allow all children to enjoy physical and sensory activities. The bikes, tractors and other wheeled toys are popular and children use these imaginatively, for example, taking the dollies for a ride in the digger's scoop!

Climbing and balancing equipment, tunnels and swings all add fun and challenge for children. Staff are vigilant but unobtrusive, allowing children to explore and try things out and assisting only when necessary. Children thus develop confidence and self-esteem. Manipulative toys such as puzzles and the hammer and tacks set develop children's fine motor skills. Play dough is an eternal favourite and children can mould, form and squash it to their hearts' content, whilst developing their small muscles in a fun way through play. During the topic on Africa children made mud huts the photographs show that they had immense fun exploring and experimenting with the materials whilst developing their skills!

Protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe

The provision is good.

Children are cared for in a safe and secure environment. The premises is within a shared facility so staff have developed procedures to ensure children's safety when moving through the

building, for example, when going to the outside play area. Security is paramount and all visitors are screened before being admitted. Children are only released to known persons and are signed on and off the premises, so that there is a clear picture of who is attending at any time. Fire drills are part of the nursery routine and children understand what to do in the event of an emergency evacuation. The high staff ratio ensures that children with limited mobility are able to be helped to safety should the need arise.

Children benefit from a wide range of carefully selected toys and play equipment. Many children have adapted chairs or mobility aids and the setting accommodates these without compromising the free movement of the fully mobile children. Children can easily access the toys and have choice from what is set out for them, or can ask for favourite equipment if they wish. Staff ensure that equipment is kept clean and hygienic by rigorous cleaning and maintenance.

Children are protected from potential harm or neglect by staff's knowledge and understanding of Local Safeguarding Children Board procedures. The nursery's policy is made clear to parents before children begin attending so that they are aware that the children's well being is paramount and any concerns will be acted upon and referred if necessary.

Helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do

The provision is good.

All children enjoy individualised care and learning based on a full assessment of their needs and stage of development. Parents play a very active part in completing profiles and exchanging information with staff on a regular basis, to ensure children's needs are met. Staff develop extremely close and warm relationships with the children, and the system of having two key persons for each child with additional need ensures consistency and continuity of care. Children who need a rest or space to flop down can use the soft play area and sensory room, supervised by staff.

Children attending the after school and holiday club enjoy the same high staff ratio and have the freedom to choose activities from the range available. They enjoy the computer, art and craft activities, books, toys and outings. Children feel at home and develop friendships with their peers as well as warm relationships with the staff, who understand their particular care and learning needs.

Nursery Education

The quality of teaching and learning is good. Staff demonstrate a very sound understanding of all aspects of the Foundation Stage, including how children learn. They use this underpinning knowledge when planning a broad and varied curriculum based on the early learning goals, enabling children to make good progress through the stepping stones. Staff evaluate and assess the activities both broadly and in relation to their key children, enabling them to ensure that activities are challenging and suitable for the children's age and stage of development. Careful observation enables staff to identify the next steps in learning and these are then incorporated into the activities.

Staff are very conscious to ensure all children are included and able to access all areas of learning as far as possible. To this end, teaching methods are adaptable and varied and include open-ended questions, encouraging children to try new things, sensitive intervention in their play and extending activities to retain children's interest, including those with additional needs such as learning difficulties and/or disabilities, or who have English as a second language.

Staff manage behaviour to ensure an optimum learning environment and they are enabling the children to develop their understanding of right and wrong by the consistent implementation of simple rules and boundaries and how to be considerate to others. Children receive plenty of praise and encouragement for positive behaviour and staff all demonstrate a great deal of patience as many children need additional time to complete routine tasks or activities. Children benefit from effective use of time, the accommodation and resources. The sessions are paced well and there are no times when children are not engaged. Staff are directly involved in the learning at all times and give the children their full attention. Children are aided to access resources and learning areas independently when this is appropriate, enabling them to make choices within their learning, and have time to complete activities.

Children are developing their competencies well across the four aspects of communication: speaking listening, reading and writing. Staff always make eye contact and speak directly and clearly to the children, acknowledging their responses. Good use is made of signing and visual means of communication for those children for whom this is appropriate, however, the labelling of displays, resources and areas does not always make full use of the potential to develop children's awareness of print. Children enjoy using the books to relax with and to seek information. Mark making opportunities include paint and printing, and using large brushes with water when the weather allows in the outside area.

Children begin to see connections and relationships in numbers, shapes and measures. They match and sort and are using mathematical language such as more than, one more, one less to help them to solve problems across a wide range of practical activities such as stories rhymes, games, puzzles and in their imaginative play. Cooking introduces concepts of weight and measurement, and sand and water play allows children to explore capacity and volume. Calculation is built into routine activities, for example, children work out how many chairs, cups and plates are needed at each table for snack time.

Children are able to be creative, expressing their own ideas and thoughts through art, music, dance, role play and imaginative play. Circle times include singing and action songs, children enjoy pretending to be asleep and then springing to life on cue during the 'sleeping bunnies' song. Staff assist those with limited mobility so that they can join in the fun too. A Christmas production is staged each year and children rehearse songs and actions to perform for an audience of parents and grandparents. The specially resourced sensory room is a wonderful area enjoyed by all children. Soft sounds, coloured lights and appealing tactile materials allow children to engage with their environment in a safe and stimulating way. This can be calming too for children who need sensitive and gentle sensory experiences.

Children are beginning to make sense of the world around them by investigating and exploring through first hand experiences in an interesting environment. They make visits to local places of interest such as shops and a care home, where they deliver harvest gifts to the residents, bringing ideas of the wider world to life. Children grow vegetables and then use these to make a soup for a shared lunch, allowing them to see the processes of growth and change right through. They have been introduced to ideas about recycling to raise environmental awareness, and know that paper scraps go into a special collecting bin. Technology is introduced by way of the digital camera which is used daily to record children's play and achievements. A computer has a range of educational programs to support learning across the curriculum. Children are able to take the setting's travelling bear to places they visit; his adventures are photographed and shared with the group on his return.

Helping children make a positive contribution

The provision is outstanding.

The setting offers care and education to children of all abilities and specialises in the care of children with additional needs. As such there is a very focused approach to the individual care and education of each child. Staff work closely with parents first and foremost, and outside professionals who have an interest in the child's development. Regular 'about the child' meetings are scheduled to ensure the care plans are on target and to note any changes and developments. Outside professionals work very closely with the nursery staff and parents to ensure that it is children's best interests which are at the forefront at all times. Meticulous observations and records of the children's activities are made to inform the profiles which are used as the basis for discussions and individualised plans.

Children have very good opportunities to develop the attitudes and dispositions that enable them to achieve well in their learning. The whole ethos of the nursery is very inclusive and exceptionally sensitive to the individual needs of the children attending. Children are given time and attention to allow them to make good progress and gain enjoyment and a sense of achievement from the activities. Children are very responsive and helpful towards one another, showing high levels of cooperation and kindness, learning to take turns and share equipment and the attention of staff. Children's social, moral, spiritual and cultural development is fostered.

Children's behaviour is excellent. They are very happy and secure at the setting and allowed to follow their interests and ideas through. For example, two little girls follow staff to the changing area to change their doll's nappy whilst the staff member attends to a child being changed. Children are fascinated by the construction vehicles working adjacent to their playground and are allowed to watch for as long as they are interested. Children understand and respond to routines such as tidy up time, following the musical prompt. They are able to remember what comes next, such as snack time or outside play time, demonstrating their sense of belonging.

Children benefit from the strong and meaningful relationships developed between staff and parents. This is seen as central to supporting the children and helping them make all-round progress. Parents are appreciative of the setting's attention to the whole child, whose needs may be complex and require a great deal of specialised knowledge and understanding. Careful attention is given to ensuring that key workers are fully informed on matters as diverse as medical and health issues, likes and dislikes and attitudes and styles of learning, such as whether a child is shy or gregarious and enjoys being handled in a certain way or prefers to be left alone at certain times. Settling-in times are completely flexible to allow for individual differences.

The partnership with parents and carers is outstanding. Parents are kept informed at every stage of their child's development. The children's profiles are informative and contain many photographs as well as observations and details of achievements. This enables them to be involved in the learning plans for their child. A newsletter provides information about the activities and topics as well as social functions and staff news. Parents are supportive in terms of fundraising and also give their time when they can, spending sessions at the group if they wish to, as they are made very welcome.

Organisation

The organisation is good.

Children are cared for by adults who have been checked and vetted to ensure their suitability to be in contact with children. The nursery has a robust selection and induction process for new staff. They are supported through a three month probationary period before being considered for a permanent position. Job descriptions are clear and thorough, so staff are very aware of their duties and responsibilities.

Children enjoy very favourable staff ratios, with a key person for every child and two for those with more complex needs. The organisation of the sessions is very good, and routines are carried out with minimal disruption to children's play and learning time. The operational plan is in place and parents can access policies at any time in a separate folder. At the time of the inspection the registration certificate was not easily accessible to be viewed by parents or visitors.

Leadership and management is good. The manager has been in post since the group started and has maintained her visionary ideals as the group has grown and developed. The ethos to provide an inclusive, play-based care and learning environment for all children is successfully implemented and shared by all the staff. They are committed and dedicated to providing for the children's best interests and maintain a cheerful and positive attitude in circumstances which can be difficult as some of the children attending have complex learning needs.

Staff are encouraged to extend their skills and knowledge of matters relating to child care and education and keep abreast of trends and developments. This ensures the curriculum remains fresh and exciting, ensuring children's interest and engagement. There are very positive plans for future development as the setting will move to new, purpose-built premises within the next year. This will enable the staff to extend the learning opportunities and offer, for example, free-flow indoor and outdoor play, which is seen as highly beneficial in developing children's independence and discovery skills.

The quality of nursery education is monitored and all activities are evaluated; time is allocated regularly for staff to reflect and discuss the plans and activities, ensuring that children's needs are kept at the centre at all times. Staff are very aware of their roles and responsibilities and work extremely well as a team to ensure the smooth running of the setting. This is due to clear direction and good communication between the manager and committee and the staff team.

Overall, children's needs are met.

Improvements since the last inspection

At the last inspection the group was asked to ensure that times of arrival and departure are included on all registers. The group agreed to review and update policies in line with requirements for standards 7,11 and 12. and to include within the operational plan an induction programme for new members of staff, copies of job descriptions, roles and responsibilities for the staff, a copy of the risk assessment conducted and an outings policy. These issues have all been addressed fully and documents are available within the operational plan.

As a result of actions taken, the quality of children's care and welfare is improved.

The group was asked to continue to develop the planning, assessment and record keeping system to ensure that learning outcomes are identified for both 3 and 4 year old children, continuing to include adaptation for differing needs and recording progress within the stepping

stones for each area of learning. Also, they agreed to introduce a more rigorous system to monitor and evaluate the quality of teaching and to extend opportunities further for children to experience calculation on a regular basis through everyday practical activities.

Again, as evidence from this inspection report shows, these areas have been fully addressed and as a result the standard of education has been improved, bringing positive benefits to the 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.

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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):

- ensure that the registration certificate is displayed and accessible to parents.

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):

- review the labelling of resources and displays and use of lettering within the nursery environment to improve presentation and to enhance children's awareness of the uses of print.

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