

ACE is an Early Excellence Centre and its 2001 report
is below



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THE ACE CENTRE

Reference: 88/01/P

This pilot inspection was carried out at the request of the Department for Education and Employment as part of its evaluation of the first Early Excellence Centres. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools (HMCI) elects that the inspection report shall be published.

INSPECTION REPORT

THE ACE CENTRE

Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire

Local Authority: Oxfordshire

Director of Centre: Mrs Sue Clempson

Reporting Inspector: Anne Pitt HMI

Dates of Inspection: 20 – 23 November 2000

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INFORMATION

Type of centre:	Early Excellence Centre
Age range of children:	0 – 14 years
Gender of children:	Mixed
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Dates of inspection:	20 - 23 November 2000
Date of previous inspection:	18 - 20 November 1996

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Ruth Beazley AI	Team Inspector	Day nursery (Gems) Family Centre

Any concerns or complaints about the inspection or the report should be raised with OFSTED by writing to:

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The Office for Standards in Education
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On 25 October 2000, Ros Tustian, a member of Oxfordshire Social Services staff carried out an annual inspection required under the Children Act for day care provision at the Centre (Gems).

A copy of this inspection report can be obtained from the ACE Centre or from the Social Services Inspection Unit, Calthorpe House, Calthorpe Street, Banbury, OX16 5RE.

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PART A: SUMMARY OF THE REPORT

Information about the Centre

1. The ACE Centre provides a range of educational and leisure opportunities for children and adults on one site. It offers full-time day care for 22 children aged 0 to 5 years in the day nursery, "Gems", and provides 80 part-time places for children aged 3 to 5 in the nursery school. There is a Family Centre that supports parents and carers and provides learning activities for young children. The after school club caters for 24 children aged 5 to 14 and, in the school holidays, there is a play-scheme for 32 children. The adult education and computer training centres offer courses and support for adults, and the outreach facility provides advice to families and to other pre-school providers. In the nursery, eight children are identified by the centre as requiring additional support for special educational needs (SEN). Two of the current intake are Traveller children and two come from homes where English is not their first language. The Centre serves a rural community where 26 per cent of families do not own cars; there are a number of lone parent families and there is relatively high unemployment. Attainment on entry to the nursery school is at the expected level for 3 year-old children.

How good the Centre is

2. The Centre has made a positive impact on its community. Overall, the children achieve satisfactory standards and they make steady progress during their time in Gems and the nursery school. Families receive accessible and affordable childcare and there is good provision for adult education. The success of the Centre can be attributed to good features in teaching, secure management and a strong sense of team working. The Centre is enthusiastically led and it provides a firm basis for children's and adults' future learning. The services provided by the Centre are effective and demonstrate sound value for money.

What the Centre does well

- Children's personal, social and emotional development and physical development are good because they are taught and cared for well.
- The management team is committed to improvement and success.
- Children behave well because adults promote high standards of moral development.
- Adult education is good and, in particular, the information technology (IT) centre is excellent.
- The outreach facility provides very good support for parents and early years services.

What could be improved

- Educational planning, so that it focuses on children's learning in Gems and the nursery school, and on the specific needs of adults and children referred to the Family Centre.
- Assessment and record keeping procedures which track children's progress in the nursery school and day nursery (Gems).
- The centre's management plan so that it identifies the most important priorities, how these will be monitored and the financial costings.

The areas for improvement will form the basis of the governors' and trustees' action plan.

How the Centre has improved since its last inspection

3. This is the first inspection of the centre as an Early Excellence Centre. The nursery school, however, was last inspected in November 1996 and since then it has made sound progress in all of the areas identified for improvement. Standards have been maintained and the quality of teaching has improved further. Induction of children starting the nursery is now effective and links with parents are developing rapidly. Children experience a balanced range of learning and teaching experiences and there is greater fostering of pupils' spiritual development. The governors take an active role in supporting and finding out about the centre's work.

Standards

Achievement and Progress

4. Children in the nursery and in Gems make good progress and show high standards in personal, social and emotional development and physical development because the staff promote these very effectively. Children behave well, collaborate readily in activities and show respect for each other. In the other areas of learning, which are communication, language and literacy; mathematical development; knowledge and understanding of the world and creative development, the children achieve the levels expected for their ages and stages of development but they could go further.

5. The adults and children who attend the Family Centre gain in confidence and self-esteem.

6. The adult education courses cater well for the adults', parents' and carers' needs and they make good progress in classes.

7. There are clear indications that the outreach provision brings benefits to young children and improves the quality of work in other settings.

Children's and adults' attitudes and values

8. Children behave well. Adults deal with problems consistently and positively. They show respect for the child's level of understanding and maturity. Children listen well to the views of others and work happily together. Relationships between adults and children are a strength. Children are keen to take part in play activities and they extend their learning imaginatively by working together well.

9. The people who attend the Centre are enthusiastic and the Centre is regarded as an asset by the community.

10. Adult learners are well motivated and respond well in classes and in the Family Centre. They are keen to support each other and are relaxed with the centre staff.

Teaching and learning

11. Teaching of children in the nursery and the learning in Gems have good features. The best teaching and learning takes place when adults support children's personal, social and emotional development and physical development and when small groups are taught together. The teaching of computer skills is also a strength. Staff make imaginative use of resources to capture children's interests. However, improvement is needed in the planning of children's learning and in assessing and recording their progress.

12. The teaching of adults is good. The centre's staff offer adults, including parents, access to a range of learning opportunities.

13. The tutoring and support offered by the outreach workers is very good.

Other aspects of the Centre

Aspect	Comment
The quality and range of the curriculum for children and adults	<p>Satisfactory. The Centre provides children with a suitable range of stimulating learning activities both indoors and out. The curriculum promotes all areas of learning and all children have equal access. The planning of challenging activities to ensure children achieve as much as they can is not as secure as it should be.</p> <p>Adult learners also have access to a wide range of appropriate educational, creative and skills-based activities and classes. These are provided in venues and at times which make them easily accessible.</p>
Provision for children with special educational needs	<p>Good. The support offered by the Centre is well-planned and organised and this enables children to achieve well. Children's records are thorough and parents are fully involved.</p>
Provision for children's and adults' personal development, including children's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development	<p>Good provision for children overall, with strengths in personal, social and moral development. Spiritual and cultural development are fostered satisfactorily.</p> <p>Personal development of adults is good and is effectively fostered through informal and formal contact with the centre staff. This enables adults and carers to take charge of their own learning and development.</p>
How well the centre cares for and supports its children	<p>Satisfactory. The staff provide sensitive and good care for the emotional well-being of the children. The procedures for ensuring that registers are kept up-to-date need closer attention.</p>
How well the centre works in partnership with parents, carers and users of the centre	<p>Satisfactory. The day-to-day contact with parents and carers is good but the involvement of parents in children's learning is less secure.</p> <p>The views of adult learners are vigorously sought and these influence the future content of the classes offered by the centre.</p>
Day nursery (Gems)	<p>Satisfactory with good features. Children are well supported and cared for. The work of the day care leader has had a positive impact on the recent improvements in the quality of the provision but the practice is not consistent yet. Development is needed in planning for children's learning and in providing stimulating learning resources.</p>
Adult education and computer training centres	<p>Good. Adult education offers a responsive and flexible programme of learning opportunities. The IT centre is excellent and provides highly effective education and training for those seeking to improve their skills, and for others who wish to gain qualifications for employment.</p>

Family Centre	Sound. It offers a relaxed, friendly and responsive open-door service to support families and carers. Children and parents experience a range of activities in a social atmosphere well supported by the centre staff. It is now in a good position to be more pro-active in addressing and planning for the specific needs of families.
Outreach	The quality of the outreach work is very good. Sensitive and positive involvement with parents, carers, children and pre-school groups brings benefits to the quality of educational experiences for young children.
After School Club	A good range of planned recreational activities is provided in a warm and supportive atmosphere.

How well the Centre is led and managed

14. The management team has a shared commitment to succeed and improve due to the director's consultative and enthusiastic approach. She and the deputy director place a strong emphasis on team building. They have effectively developed team working between the co-ordinators of the different services. The Centre has experienced a number of staff changes during the year but in recent months the management team has achieved a great deal. The governors and trustees fulfil their statutory duties appropriately and are increasingly getting more involved with the Centre. Great strides have been made in improving the accommodation. The building is well used and is managed effectively; it is a valued community resource. The management team, trustees and governors are now in a strong position to build on their successes and to develop the Centre's strategic planning so that it identifies priorities, monitoring procedures and financial costings.

Parents', carers' and users' views of the Centre

What pleases parents, carers and users the most:	What parents, carers and users would like to see improved:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the progress made by children and adults at the Centre; the standard of childcare, teaching and support for children and adults; the friendly and approachable staff at the Centre; the interesting range of activities for children; and the benefits the Centre brings to adults in other aspects of their lives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> no significant issues identified.

15. The inspectors agree with the positive views of parents, carers and users but believe that the centre could do more to extend children's learning.

PART B: COMMENTARY ON THE MAIN FINDINGS

WHAT THE CENTRE DOES WELL

Children's personal, social and emotional development and physical development are good because they are taught and cared for well

Personal, social and emotional development

16. The children reach higher standards in personal, social and emotional development than most young children. They feel good about themselves and want to learn. The staff demonstrate a good knowledge of personal, social and emotional development and this contributes to children's success in the other areas of learning.

17. In the Family Centre, children from an early age learn to mix well with older children in a warm and friendly atmosphere. Carers and centre staff work effectively together to provide encouragement and good supervision, which leads to children feeling secure enough to try out new activities. Great importance is placed on developing harmonious relationships so that children do not upset others.

18. In the day nursery, Gems, the staff are responsive to social needs and this enables the children to feel secure and safe. Children learn to understand each other, for example, when an adult explained to three older children why the baby was in a rocking chair. Children are also encouraged to make friends and this was evident when children naturally sought a partner to hold hands and dance with during an action song.

19. The staff in the nursery school form good and positive relationships with the children. They encourage children to understand differences in ethnicity by providing positive images in displays and books and by planning good opportunities for learning about different cultures, for example Diwali. The children trust the adults and this gives them the confidence to try out new activities such as making jam sandwiches, playing unusual musical instruments and making patterns in foam.

20. The staff have organised the nursery school effectively so that it interests and reassures the children. The space is well set out and there is space for children to work together, for example, when exploring the wind chimes outside or using construction kits inside. The children work well independently because the staff ensure materials are easily accessible. The careful structuring of the day enables the children to choose their own activities and to work as part of a group organised by adults. In the nursery school every day routines such as 'hello time', where children are together at the beginning of a session, and 'snack time' encourage a sense of belonging and self-confidence. Children's self esteem visibly grows when their birthdays are celebrated at 'hello time' and there is a sense of wonderment when the birthday candle is lit and blown out.

21. Nursery staff know the children's personalities well. Adults respond sensitively to children and encourage them to take part in activities and to concentrate and follow their interests. Stable relationships are established with adults in group time and with peers during free play. Adults place good emphasis on insisting that children tidy away things for themselves and this helps the children to develop a respect for their environment and the property of others.

22. Since the last inspection the nursery staff have successfully improved the induction procedures for children before they start the nursery. Parents report that children leave them readily and settle in quickly.

Physical Development

23. The children make good progress and they achieve better standards than most children at this stage of development. Children at the centre are fit and active, and display a sense of well being. The teaching and learning is a strength because the staff have a good knowledge of physical development; they plan suitable activities and teach them effectively.

24. Outdoor play is an important part of the centre's work. The outdoor environment is of high quality and gives the children good scope to develop their own ideas and physical activities. Outdoors, the children in Gems and the nursery school use space and equipment confidently; older children show good control of body movements when running up and down a slope, climbing on frames and ropes and when pushing wheeled toys. They find repeating actions satisfying, for example, when pushing a friend in a trolley up a steep slope and watching the child in the trolley roll down.

25. Indoors, the children are taught well to use a range of equipment and tools successfully, and with growing dexterity. For example, young children demonstrate perseverance when threading paperclips together. Adults have high expectations when helping children to hold pencils and tools correctly. Staff are successful in teaching hand and eye co-ordination. Good examples of this were seen when children were given clear explanations and demonstrations about how to play a steady beat on a musical instrument and how to use the mouse on the computer for clicking and dragging.

26. In Gems, the staff are skilled in exploring movement using familiar songs. This enables children to dance without inhibitions to music and perform actions to 'The wheels on the bus'. In the nursery school, adults skilfully encourage role-play and children are given opportunities to dress up and to move in different ways, for example, like a tiger. Children spontaneously choose to use musical instruments to explore marching movements to the bang of a drum.

27. Staff provide imaginative resources to ensure children have opportunities to practice how to manipulate and control a range of small equipment. Good use is made of string and glove puppets to help master small movements. Appropriate resources are provided which encourage threading, posting, pushing and pulling. In the nursery school, children receive frequent opportunities to make dough and they use it well to experiment with tools and investigate its properties.

28. In Gems, the staff make the most of the resources. However, some of the equipment needs to be replaced and this means that the children need more encouragement to use the older worn equipment, whereas they readily choose to use the newer apparatus.

The leadership and management is committed to improvement and success

29. The director and her deputy are enthusiastic and they create a positive atmosphere and an air of lively optimism. This is infectious and the staff show a willingness to strive for improvement.

30. During the current year there have been a number of changes on the staff, governing body and board of trustees. At the time of the inspection the director and deputy director had been in post seven months. Prior to them taking up their posts the Centre had been managed by five different heads of centre in six years.

31. The director and her deputy work well together and place strong emphasis on collaborative working. In a short time they have achieved a great deal. They are committed to establishing a common vision for the centre in order that they can move forward to provide

the best for the children and the community. Collectively the staff have agreed the following aims for the centre:

- people really matter;
- individuals are valued, respected and nurtured;
- opportunities are accessible to all;
- we respond to needs and extend the horizons and self-confidence of our users; and
- learning, playing and growing span every generation.

32. Members of the management team know that the aims are not fully realised yet but they demonstrate a strong drive to move forward.

33. Good delegation is enabling staff with responsibilities to contribute keenly and effectively to the Centre's improvement. The establishment of a senior management team comprising of service co-ordinators and the Centre Administrator has been a key factor in beginning the journey to 'joined-up working'. It meets regularly in order to ensure a two-way flow of information between all of the service teams. Service co-ordinators hold weekly planning meetings with their teams and they are also responsible for monthly one-to-one meetings to address staff development needs within their service. This has encouraged healthy debate about styles of working and how to provide a quality environment.

34. For many staff, having a real say in the management of the Centre is new. The director and her deputy have trained staff effectively to lead their services and to take responsibility for motivating and supporting their teams. For example, this has led to establishing an organised and planned structure to the day in Gems and the introduction of new methods in assessment and record keeping in the nursery school.

35. Since the last inspection, the determination shown by the director to team build with all sectors of the Centre has impacted well on the involvement of trustees and governors. The staff, governors and trustees are all beginning to help shape the direction of the centre. Governors are starting to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the nursery school. A good example of this is that two governors have recently visited the nursery to observe its running and to raise questions. This has resulted in improvements in liaising with parents who have children with special educational needs (SEN) and improving staff knowledge of the SEN register.

36. The director is also actively involved in monitoring aspects of the centre. She has observed the teaching in the nursery school, Gems, the Family Centre and the after school club. Her observations are rigorous and pinpoint the areas that are successful but also where improvements are needed. This has resulted in changes for the better, to the structure of the nursery school day and the resourcing in the after school club.

Children behave well because adults promote high standards of moral development

37. The staff have high expectations of behaviour and children are familiar with the consistent routines and rules they need to follow. Children respond well to praise and this is used well to re-focus children who need to be coaxed to concentrate. The main emphasis is to change unacceptable behaviour and praise good behaviour.

38. Children are learning quickly to respond to a range of social settings. It was noticeable during the inspection how the children sat listening attentively to the staff during

group times and how confidently they understood routines like getting ready for lunchtime in Gems or putting coats on to go outdoors in the nursery school.

39. Younger children are quickly checked by adults if their behaviour is unacceptable. This was observed in Gems when a child snatched a toy and the adult gave gentle feedback about the reasons for sharing and waiting turns. Older children are given clear explanations why their behaviour is unacceptable and feelings are discussed.

Adult education is good and in particular the information technology centre is excellent

40. The Centre provides good quality adult education in collaboration with Oxfordshire Community Education Service. A range of effective learning opportunities, which include physical, creative, and skills-based provision are offered in accessible venues.

41. The quality of the provision for adults is good. Adults, including parents, make good use of the provision which includes basic education and IT courses offering accreditation and those which are targeted at parents such as the post-natal classes, music and movement with children and the work in the Family Centre.

42. Adult learners are taught by committed and supportive staff, many of whom are subject specialists who plan and organise sessions well, taking into account the needs of adult learners.

43. Many of the students gain in knowledge, skills, confidence and self-esteem; they make good progress and, particularly in IT, move on to more demanding courses. Students benefit from attending a child-friendly centre, which is accessible and well resourced. The carers (mothers, grandmothers and child minders) attend a range of courses which give them the opportunity to meet others, for example, in the music and movement class or the post-natal class. For young mothers, in particular, such opportunities offer support for families where they can learn about community health and parenting provision. Some, who have moved into the area and have felt isolated with young children have made new friends. For example, one young mother with a baby with colic (aged six weeks) was offered effective advice whilst attending the post-natal class. She also has the opportunity to enrol for baby massage to help relieve the baby from the colic and attend yoga classes for relaxation purposes.

44. The Centre caters well for a diverse student body; it offers them a warm and welcoming environment and the opportunity to engage in a range of activities. Provision is offered at flexible times which enable adults to attend, in particular the IT centre provides daytime and evening courses as well as drop-in provision.

45. A number of adult learners use a variety of the services offered at the centre but links between these services are not fully exploited. The overall planning for an adult programme does not have enough senior manager input from the Centre in the monitoring, assessment and targeting of the provision.

46. The best of the teaching at the Centre has clear goals, and is challenging, well planned and paced. The tutors effectively meet the needs of adult learners and children in joint sessions such as music and movement. The planning and organisation is good, taking into account the age range of the children. Two sessions are offered, one for younger children and carers and one for children over three and their carers. This works successfully and reflects the level of attention to detail in the planning.

47. The adults who use the Centre value the good relationships with staff both in their teaching and individual support. Many are clear about what they want to do, they enjoy

learning and parents appreciate the sessions where they can learn together with their children.

48. The adult students are proud of what they achieve and there are some good creative examples of their work in the centre. The work which they produce is often of high quality, for example, in the IT centre students work hard to ensure that they acquire skills and make progress, they are dedicated learners, and gain nationally recognised accreditation.

49. The IT centre is an excellent facility and staff are responsive and pro-active. It is at the “cutting edge” of developments in adult learning. It is involved with the recent ‘Learning Direct’ initiative and a significant number of students are using the individual learning accounts in order to participate in provision at reduced fees. [Individual learning accounts enable adults to claim a contribution to work related learning courses.]

The outreach facility provides very good support for carers and early years services

50. The quality of the outreach work undertaken by ACE staff is very good. Sensitive and positive involvement with parents, carers and children and with pre-school providers brings benefits and improves the quality of the educational experiences for young children. This also enhances adults’ knowledge and leads to better teaching and learning.

51. Both outreach workers have a clear and sound understanding of the tasks they have to do. They have established good professional relationships with pre-school providers and with groups of parents and their children. Both are experienced childcare and educational practitioners. They use their skills and knowledge effectively to assist groups in improving and developing their practice. This is achieved by modelling ways of working with children or by discussing different methods.

52. The workers are sensitive to the needs of adults and children, and they pitch their interventions at a suitable level, which moves people on in appropriate smaller steps. For example, on one visit the pre-school practitioners were thinking about changing the organisation of a session and were invited to the centre to observe and glean different ideas about how to go about it. On another visit, mothers were helped to think for themselves about how they might organise a weekly group for their children, rather than being told how to do it. The worker’s approach gave the parents confidence and empowered them to make their own decisions.

53. The outreach worker gives very good support to pre-school groups across a wide geographical rural area following their inspections. Useful guidance is given on action planning and this helps to inform decisions about training which might be provided, for example, on assessment and record keeping. The outreach worker also has good knowledge of training opportunities which are available in the local area.

54. The pre-school practitioners and carers view the support positively and appreciate the guidance given. The community is keen for it to grow, and with this in mind the Centre has recently opened a toy library to support carers and pre-school groups. Volunteers are being trained to organise the lending system.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

Educational planning, so that it focuses on children's learning in the day nursery (Gems) and the nursery school and on the specific needs of adults and children referred to the Family Centre

55. The quality of teaching in the nursery school and the quality of learning in Gems is satisfactory overall with some good features. However, the quality of teaching offered by the staff in Gems is inconsistent. Good features were observed in both settings, for example, the learning that takes place during small group time; the support given to children when learning early computer skills; the imaginative use of resources to capture children's interests; and the support given to pupils with special needs. The learning in personal, emotional and social development and physical development is also a strength, but more could be done to improve aspects of planning in order to extend the children further in the other areas of learning.

Communication, language and literacy

56. Overall children reach the standards expected and make suitable progress but more could be done to extend their learning of reading and writing skills.

57. Older children know that print conveys meaning and they are encouraged to write for a variety of purposes, for example, labels for teddy bears and shopping lists. They write strings of letters and begin to copy and write their names. At the end of sessions, children enjoy looking at books. They hold them correctly and understand that the words and the pictures tell a story. Some attention is given at group time to recognising letters that start children's names and to saying sounds. However, there is no clear rationale to the teaching of early phonic skills and how this might link to the individual development of children's writing. The planning of work does not explicitly identify how language will be used, the related vocabulary and the teaching of early literacy skills.

58. The development of speaking and listening skills is given high priority. Talk is valued by the staff and they use good questioning to encourage children to communicate. Children listen with enjoyment to well-told stories. They act out familiar stories with the help of an adult and speak words in role. Higher attaining children describe their ideas and talk about what they are doing, especially in imaginative play, using sentences and expressive language. Children are given space and time to consider a response, and adults praise the attempts made by hesitant speakers which encourages them to try harder.

59. During the inspection few children chose to look at books or write spontaneously during free play. More attention should be given to planning an environment that is word rich and stimulates children to read and write.

Mathematical development

60. Overall the children reach the expected levels for their stages of development but they could achieve more if the next stages in children's learning were more closely identified. During the week of the inspection, mathematics mainly took place incidentally and did not receive enough focused attention. The Centre needs to review the frequency with which it plans well-focused mathematical activities.

61. The staff seize on incidental opportunities for children to count. For instance, they count the fruit in a basket in the home corner and the number of children in a group.

Children show a reliable understanding of one-to-one correspondence and can count up to 10. The number line on a rocket helps them to recognise numbers and some children can write numbers.

62. A suitable range of practical mathematical activities is provided outdoors. For example, the children were observed comparing the height of towers, looking at the different shapes of bricks and blocks and finding longer and shorter ones. Children have looked at patterns with blocks and can continue a pattern made by an adult. They are generally confident in naming simple shapes. They use computer programmes successfully to foster mathematical concepts, for example, when matching objects and sorting for size.

63. The staff effectively create opportunities for children to use mathematical language by using number rhymes and songs which help them understand counting forwards and backwards.

Creative development

64. Children are developing creative skills and working at the expected level for their stage of development. Children experience a wide range of opportunities in painting, printing, collage and model making. Adults teach them a variety of techniques and the results are of good quality and displayed to good effect in the Centre. However, there is little evidence on display of children's spontaneous work or of them drawing on their own imagination and originality. The Centre should seek ways to integrate the taught techniques into the children's own work.

65. There are good opportunities for role-play. Adults use role-play skilfully so that children can develop their own creative ideas. A good example of this was when a nursery nurse played the role of getting her hair done. The children decided to queue up to get their hair brushed and this generated a great deal of talk and the writing of names in an appointment book.

66. In music sessions, children learn to play a steady beat on untuned instruments and are beginning to learn the names of instruments. They show good control and know that effective music making relies on players starting and stopping together.

67. In Gems, children are learning to sing simple nursery rhymes and action songs. They dance to rhythms and enjoy trying to respond to slow and fast music.

Knowledge and understanding of the world

68. Overall, children make the progress expected of them. The current emphasis in science is on giving children opportunities to experiment with magnets and shadows. But this is not planned as a focus activity and it is not clear from the planning how children will learn about science if they do not choose it in their free play.

69. Early computer skills are taught well. Children choose to use the computer independently and are proficient at using the mouse to make effects on screen. They are confident with the programming of the roamer and understand the need for clear instructions in a given sequence.

70. There are plenty of opportunities for building using scrap materials and children are confident with glue, scissors and paperclips.

71. In the nursery school, the best teaching and learning takes place in the above areas of learning when adults clearly focus on specific tasks and what children are going to learn.

This clarity of intent ensures that teachers' efforts and interventions are appropriately channelled. Adults are more effective in helping children learn when they work in small groups with a focus. They are less effective when they move around to supervise individuals or groups during free time because they are uncertain about what should be learnt. The broad learning intentions indicated on the short-term planning are too wide and not specific enough. This means that adults are unclear about 'the bite sized' steps children should be taking. Sometimes, too many activities are available during free time and this makes it difficult for adults to understand the purpose of all the activities and give meaningful support. At other times the children do not get enough opportunity for sustained, repeated or revisited work.

72. In Gems, the weekly planning indicates what is to be done but not what should be learnt. This means that some staff are uncertain about the support needed for children at different ages and stages of development, especially when they are in whole-group situations. For instance, the planning and organisation for mealtimes and immediately after lunch for the under-threes and the more able children need closer attention. During a lunchtime session, when the staff were changing duties, there was very little meaningful interaction with the children. When the children finished their meals at different times they were given free choice, but they were not well supported because the staff did not take responsibility for the learning.

73. In the Family Centre, more could be done to address the specific needs of the families who are referred. It is mainly the health visitors and outreach worker who refer vulnerable parents to the Family Centre. The outreach worker provides support for them on two mornings per week. However, the co-ordinator of the Family Centre is unaware of the reasons for referral and this means that their needs are not fully addressed at times. There are no formal assessment, planning, recording or evaluation procedures to ensure that children and adults who are referred to the Centre are receiving meaningful support and making progress.

Assessment and record keeping procedures which track children's progress in the nursery school and the day nursery (Gems)

74. The co-ordinators in the nursery school and Gems have a good understanding of the importance of good assessment and record keeping systems. The systems set up for monitoring the progress of children with special needs are good. Children are observed on a regular basis, small learning steps are identified and staff are aware of how they should support the children in achieving their goals. Systems for helping other children to reach their full potential are not as well developed.

Nursery school

75. Over recent months the co-ordinator has introduced a number of record keeping and assessment procedures. However, these are applied inconsistently and they need refining to ensure they are used to plan the next steps in children's learning.

76. The children are assessed within the first two weeks of starting nursery. Settling in observations are completed and these are shared with parents. However, they are not used to identify what the child needs to do next and how the nursery and parents can work together in ensuring progress is made. At the end of the child's time in nursery a final assessment report is sent to parents which details what the child can do but does not indicate targets to stretch the child further.

77. In the nursery school, four children are observed each session. Notes are made in each area of learning, but the notes do not always indicate how well the child is doing or whether they have made significant progress. The notes are recorded on an ongoing record but they are rarely used to indicate what the child needs to do next to improve and to plan the next steps for learning. This means that adults are uncertain about where the child is at and the support needed to improve. There is insufficient clarity about how significant achievement will be noticed and recorded when the child is not receiving the attention of a daily focus.

78. The nursery staff are developing folders for each child which contain annotated pieces of children's work and an ongoing record of observations made against the Oxfordshire Profile. The annotations and entries on the records are not always dated and rarely indicate targets for the future. This makes it difficult to track whether a child is improving and making significant progress.

Day nursery (Gems)

79. In Gems, record keeping and assessment procedures are at an early stage of development. The co-ordinator is keen to introduce a record keeping and assessment system as soon as possible. The staff have devised a record book for 0 to 3 year-olds based on the Portage scheme and there are plans to use the Oxfordshire Profile for older children. Currently children's progress is monitored through informal observation.

80. The procedures for recording children's attendance at Gems and the nursery school need attention. It is important that the names and numbers of children in attendance at all times are known and recorded.

The Centre's management plan, so that it identifies the most important priorities, how these are going to be monitored and the financial costings

81. The trustees, staff and governors have been successful in establishing the broad range of integrated services identified in the DfEE memorandum of understanding for the early excellence centre. The Centre is well regarded in the community. Great strides have been made in improving the accommodation and the building is well used and managed effectively.

82. The trustees, staff and governors are now in a secure position to build on this achievement. They now need to develop the Centre so that they know they are making a significant difference to children's, adults' and family learning. The centre staff, together with some input from governors and trustees, has corporately formulated a plan to develop their particular service. These plans link to the whole centre three-year management plan.

83. Whilst the Centre has developed collaborative ways of working there is still a distance to travel in order to establish a corporate vision. The Centre's three-year management plan is a detailed document. However, it identifies 29 different areas of focus and it is not clear from the plan or those involved with the Centre which of these areas are the most important. For example, the staff, trustees and governors all had a different view when asked about the main priorities within the Centre. The plan identifies clear and often measurable statements about the 'evidence of achievement' but these rarely relate to children and adults making progress with their learning. How, when and by whom the achievement will be monitored is not specific enough and a lead person is not always identified. Costings are not clear enough and this is borne out by staff suggesting that resources are allocated on a supply and demand basis rather than being strategically planned.

WHAT SHOULD THE CENTRE DO TO IMPROVE FURTHER

84. In order to improve the standards and quality of provision at the ACE Centre even further the senior managers and staff should:

Improve the educational planning by:

- identifying specifically what children are intended to learn (Gems, nursery school);
- planning an environment which is word rich and encourages children to read and write (Gems, nursery school);
- ensuring there is more mathematical development (Gems, nursery school); and
- planning programmes, which relate to the specific needs of adults and children who are referred to the Family Centre.

Improve record keeping and assessment procedures by:

- using assessment information to plan the 'next steps' in children's learning;
- working in partnership with parents to enable them to be actively involved in their child's learning;
- ensuring children's records and annotated pieces of work are dated, in order to track children's achievements; and
- ensuring registers of attendance are up-to-date.

The senior managers, staff, trustees and governors should collectively work together to:

Improve the three-year management plan by identifying:

- the most important priorities which will lead to improvement in children's and adults' learning;
- how, when and by whom these will be monitored; and
- the appropriate costings.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE CENTRE'S PROVISION INSPECTED

Family Centre

85. In the Family Centre, carers and staff work well together to support each other. It is open every weekday morning and offers a range of activities to support parenting skills. These include a drop-in service, visiting tutors, shared play activities for carers and children, and advice and counselling. Parents describe the Centre as 'a life line' and 'a second home'. It is well attended and some parents continue to attend after their children start school. The Centre, however, has not yet developed ways of ensuring that the service is accessible to the most vulnerable within the community, perhaps through stronger links with social services.

86. The personal development of adults is well supported by the centre staff. They provide space and activities for parents and childminders to learn about child development and play activities. One parent commented: 'The staff give me confidence and there is immediate response when I ask. They sense when I need help and support.' One user described how she had been supported over a long period of time and how the Centre had helped her overcome depression and agoraphobia. She now has a job working in the community. Users attend a monthly meeting to plan the Centre activities and developments. Decision-making is democratic and this aids users' self esteem.

87. The Centre is well used as a meeting place for childminders both for children to mix and develop new skills and as a support group for themselves. Users commented that the Centre offers activities which they cannot provide at home. For example, one parent who does not have a computer at home was observed sharing computer games with two children. A childminder said she found the Centre useful for providing messy activities that she would be reluctant to organise in her own home.

88. The Centre staff demonstrate good involvement in children's play. Free play activities such as sand, water, painting, stickle bricks and dough are used very well. Parents are helped to understand the value of play through written materials and conversations with staff. Parents of special needs children are offered useful advice from the nursery school special needs co-ordinator. Staff model good practice and this encourages children to play and engage in a variety of activities.

89. All of the sessions take place with parents and children in the same room. This means that the children frequently interrupt adult-focused learning sessions. Some of the joint sessions do not respond to the different needs of the children and adults. For instance, the music session observed catered well for adults but the children drifted in and out of the session because it did not engage them fully. The Centre plans to overcome this issue by providing creche facilities in the future.

90. Users are encouraged to participate in learning opportunities in other parts of the ACE Centre. A good example of this was when one parent expressed an interest in computers and this was quickly followed up with a taster course in the IT centre. Some parents have gained in confidence and gone on to secure jobs working with children for example, as a playground supervisor or in community education.

The out-of-school scheme

91. The scheme is an important element in providing affordable childcare in this rural community. It offers effective after-school facilities for school-aged children including a convenient pick up service from local schools. Pupils from different schools mix well together in an organised and sociable setting.

92. A range of purposeful activities is planned which appeal to the age range of the children. Sessions provide a breadth of experiences, which are fun and complementary to school activities. Children are given good choices in the activities they undertake in order to pursue their own interests. For example, during the inspection children were observed enjoying five-a-side football, monopoly, computer games, and a construction kit. Some activities develop creative skills, which encourage the children to experience things they would not normally do. For instance, one parent talked of her amazement when her son, who she did not perceive to be interested in craft, talked with great pride about his creative work.

93. The children show enjoyment and good attitudes to the tasks they undertake. This is due to the staff who provide good support for the children and who talk to them in a relaxed way. Staff and children show good relationships and children's views and opinions are valued.

94. The staff are committed to improving the service. Recently they have achieved Level 3 accreditation in the Kids Club Network. Their plans to develop an area for children to do homework are sensible and should be pursued.