

Sustaining outstanding provision over time: Southwater Village Hall Pre-School

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Brief description

Outstanding provision is difficult to achieve, and just as challenging to sustain. This is all the more challenging where committee-run groups have regular changes in leadership and share use of the premises. Southwater Village Hall Pre-School shows it can be done. The maintenance of exemplary practice in such settings requires exceptional dedication so that each child receives superb levels of care and teaching from all adults. Southwater Village Hall Pre-School operates from its local village hall, run by a parent-led management committee, and has successfully achieved outstanding grades for three consecutive inspections. This example is one of a set of 10 that have been published to support the survey report: [Getting it right first time](#).

Overview – the pre-school’s message

‘All children in the early years need a safe and stimulating environment. We aim to provide children with generous care and attention from qualified staff, as well as volunteer parent helpers. We want children to join with other children and adults to live, play, work and learn together. Sessions are organised so that children can choose from, and work at, a variety of activities and, in doing so, build up their ability to select and work through a task to completion. The children are also helped and encouraged to take part in adult-led small and large group activities, which introduce them to new experiences and help them to gain new skills, as well as helping them to learn to work with others. We see parents as partners in helping each child to learn and develop. Our pre-school recognises parents as the first and most important educators of their children. Parents are seen as partners in providing care and education for their children.’

Heather Clarke, Pre-school manager

The good practice in detail

The pre-school is well established in its local community. In the past, it was a traditional ‘playgroup’ where local children benefitted from a warm and caring provision, but there was little emphasis on education. The manager’s appointment coincided with increased national

expectations about what early years providers should offer, especially with regards to education. The manager devised and implemented effective systems of assessment of children's learning, in order to plan and deliver a play-based educational programme. She also emphasised the importance of good quality interaction between adults and children in order to improve and extend children's opportunities to learn.

At first, there was some reluctance at the setting to change the activities provided for children, and some staff were not used to engaging with children throughout each session to support their learning and development. However, the manager and committee developed a strong staff team over time. Recruitment processes became focussed on applicants' knowledge and experience, as well as testing the quality of interaction with children for prospective staff. As a result, the pre-school has established a highly effective workforce which delivers high-quality provision, as exemplified in the setting's outstanding inspection judgements in 2008 and 2011.

There is no magic trick to sustaining excellent provision at the pre-school. It relies on strong leadership, well-qualified and experienced staff, and a dedication to maximise learning opportunities for all children. The manager is supported well by a strong staff team and management committee. Staff work exceptionally hard, with some routinely working over their contracted hours to ensure that the learning environment and provision continue to be outstanding.

High-quality teaching and interaction with children is the cornerstone of Southwater's success. Recruitment procedures test applicants' skill in this area, and establish from the outset that the manager expects staff to maintain consistently high-quality teaching practices. The qualifications necessary for recruitment are seen as 'just the start' of a successful career in early years.

The effectiveness of staff interaction to support and extend children's learning is the main focus of their performance management. Good practice is frequently modelled and explained to enable staff to improve their teaching. They make the most of all learning opportunities in spontaneously occurring incidents as well as in planned activities. They empower children to



become active learners, confident in making their own decisions by ensuring that they get sufficient time to evaluate their actions and choices. For example, in the snack area, children spend a very long time selecting their choices and paying for their orders with real money. As well as deciding when and what to eat, they are also learning about numbers and money in realistic situations. Where possible, the children use real-life items, such as china mugs and plates in the role play area.

The inevitable changes in committee membership means regular opportunities must be planned to inform new members' understanding about the Early Years Foundation Stage. This is managed well at the setting so that the business needs of the pre-school are met: the manager and external consultants brief new committee members in their roles and responsibilities so each annual committee changeover is smooth, with no significant disruption to the pre-school's day-to-day operation.

The pre-school operates from a village hall that is used by other members of the local community. This means that manager and her team must set up and pack away all the elements the rich environment has to offer. Creating a stimulating, enabling environment from scratch each day involves significant investment of time, effort and careful planning. This is well worth it as children are making exceptional progress in their learning and development. They enjoy an extensive range of imaginative activities in areas enhanced by a wealth of interesting displays.

Rigorous self-evaluation procedures underpin the provision so it evolves and improves continually. For example, recent evaluations have resulted in changes made to how children move around activities on offer throughout the setting so that their individual needs are met well.

Pre-school background

[Southwater Village Hall Pre-School](#) was first registered in 1974. It operates from two rooms at the Village Hall within the village of Southwater, near Horsham. The pre-school is run by a parent management committee and is a member of the Pre-school Learning Alliance. It opens every weekday during term-time, offering morning and afternoon sessions. The setting is registered to care for a maximum of 42 children under the age of five years at any one time, and the majority of children are two years four months or older. At its last inspection in 2011, the pre-school was judged outstanding in all aspects of its provision.



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