

Support for children and families to access early education and care, during the pandemic

Background

The Council is responsible for three nurseries, providing early education and care for children aged 6 months to 5 years, within the communities of Hayes, South Ruislip and Uxbridge. The nurseries provide funded places for eligible children under the FEEE funding scheme

The Equality Issue

Children and young people have not been immune to the wide-ranging effects of the Covid-19 pandemic; access to education and health care has been significantly disrupted and their mental health has been disproportionately affected. Young children who are disadvantaged, such as those living in low-income households, can experience significant developmental delay when compared to their peers; this gap has increased during the pandemic.

A report by Ofsted in November 2020, highlighted that almost all early years providers found that the pandemic had significantly impacted the learning and development of the children in their care. They were particularly concerned about children's personal, social and emotional development. Some children who had been absent during the Lockdown had returned less confident and more anxious. In some cases, children had also become less independent, reverting to using dummies or being in nappies, having previously been toilet trained.

Children were also observed to be more solitary in their play, less likely to seek out friendships with their peers; typically, children had fewer spoken words or were not confident or/able to communicate with a trusted adult.

New families joining the nurseries were anxious when separating from their children and expressed concerns about childhood illnesses and how to best manage these.

Support strategies for children and families

- Staff reviewed the settling in process for new children and reduced the hours to give children and parents more time to build a relationship and trust with key workers and become familiar with their surroundings.
- An audit of the languages spoken in children's homes, enabled the nurseries to create a learning environment that was communication

friendly and reflective of the cultures of the children, supporting their sense of belonging.

- Staff placed emphasis on providing language rich learning opportunities, attending training on dialogic reading, to enable the children to become involved with storytelling and develop their vocabulary, and increasing the new educators' confidence in reading stories out loud.
- The children's routine included a purposeful story time with smaller groups of children, to encourage them to sit together and develop friendships whilst engaging in learning.
- Being outdoors enabled children to have more space and socialise on a larger scale and provided opportunities for interaction with a wider group and positive role models with older peers.
- One nursery has introduced stay and play sessions for children and parents who are really struggling to separate from each other, which is proving successful for both the children and their parents.
- Parents have been supported to access the children centre programme, including groups for targeted support such as Attention Hillingdon and Language for Life.
- Applying the principles and knowledge of the Five to thrive programme supported key workers to understand the importance of remaining positive and calm themselves, to help the children learn to self-regulate.

Outcomes

- Key workers have become more knowledgeable in individual children's cultures and seek to include elements in nursery life, e.g. using words in a child's home language to help them settle into the nursery.
- The nurseries have introduced a buddy system for parents who speak the same language as a support system for new parents who may be feeling isolated.
- Keyworkers feel confident they have the skills to meet the children's emotional needs and support their development in a positive and healthy environment.
- Parent Workshops are being delivered to increase parental knowledge and confidence on topics such as Early Childhood Illnesses, Oral Health, Toileting.