

# Why don't we launch a nurseries parent partnership scheme?

By Deepak Poddar

Wouldn't it be great if we could devise a system which would allow mothers to spend potentially large amounts of time with their children at nursery - in an approach which would also enable mums to get back to work?

As somebody who believes very strongly in giving children the best possible environment in the crucial pre-school years, I think there's a potential opportunity being missed.

It's one which if addressed imaginatively, and with full regard to every necessary safeguard, could make a dramatic difference to the lives of many parents – but, more importantly, would also hugely benefit the children.

My idea – which although simple in general terms obviously requires a great deal of discussion before it could be put into practice – is to devise a system which would allow parents to work in nurseries, with their own children as well as with others, for at least part of the time when they'd otherwise be separated from them.

This would have the double benefit of acting as a “half way house” on the way back to full time employment for mums – who might otherwise lose all connection with the regular working world for a lengthy period – while also greatly easing the strain of children parting from their parents for the first time: this way of managing things could potentially make a huge positive difference to all concerned.

It might seem like a piece of untested “blue sky thinking”, but looking at the challenges which face government, councils and the Care Commission when it comes to satisfying modern demand for high quality nursery care, there really are some powerful arguments for bringing parents into the equation in a way never really contemplated seriously before.

To manage this, mums able and willing to take part would clearly have to become nursery assistants, a job usually performed by young adults in their late teens. They'd have to be supervised by fully qualified nursery nurses, to an established ratio, and the mechanism for employing them would have to be both transparent and flexible enough to accommodate different needs.

However while it might not be an easy system to set up from scratch, I believe it's one which could deliver several very important spin-offs, and not least for the children.

Under the scheme, a parent – who would, realistically, almost always be the mum – would work a number of set hours at the nursery. The pay that would

usually be earned as a nursery assistant would then be deducted from the fees normally charged for having a child at the nursery.

The benefits would be considerable. Mums who would otherwise be separated from normal working life for a considerable period would be able to keep up the momentum of a working routine without being separated from their children. Parents who find nursery charges a drain on limited resources would be paying considerably less, and would also be gaining valuable life experience.

Another benefit could be that an unknown but potentially significant number of parents becoming nursery assistants could go on to develop a full-time career as nursery nurses, pursuing all relevant qualifications – adding to the general pool of professional talent at a time when there's clearly an established need.

But perhaps best of all such a system would bring the family element into the nursery in a way which is currently unknown, potentially benefiting all of the children there.

For many parents leaving their young child for any length of time is a wrench, and an environment in which it would be usual for some mums to be there at least some of the time would make the whole nursery experience more “normal” for all of the children.

Not all parents would be able to take advantage of such a scheme, and of course not all would wish to, but in many ways it would create a useful bridge between family life and working life which would ultimately benefit all of the children.

As with all new ideas, of course, there are major questions which have to be answered about exactly how to put such a system into practice.

These centre on the key areas of qualification and supervision – what should the ratio be of nursery nurses to parent-nursery assistants to children? The other big question is funding, and how it could effectively be administered. Would such a system be difficult to regulate?

As somebody whose working life revolves around the delivery of high quality private nursery care, meanwhile, I'd stress that the beneficiaries would be those using council-run nurseries – and perhaps particularly those in disadvantaged areas where potential sources of part-time work are very limited.

So it isn't a scheme with much direct relevance to my own business, but anyone who is seriously committed to quality nursery care is inevitably interested in the bigger picture.

And I'm convinced the potential benefits mean that a proper debate on parent partnership schemes is well worth the effort.

I don't care whether any points raised are positive or negative, or even if somebody comes up with a similar but better idea, so long as the subject gets the sort of discussion I'm convinced it deserves.

Naturally I am particularly interested in what fellow nursery care professionals have to say on the issue, and, of course, to find whether many parents would find it as useful as I think it would be.

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