



How to source awesome nursery staff and keep them

An in-depth guide

A valuable guide to hiring and retaining staff

Childcare and early education are some of the most rewarding areas to work in, so why is it so hard to recruit quality early years staff? The current recruitment pool is sparse, with even less coming through the ranks via apprenticeships.

We have collated all you need to know about sourcing early years diamonds to join your nursery team and, importantly, how to keep them!



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Why are recruitment and retention so challenging in the Early Years?

There are sector-wide shortages in the early years. The vocation of helping children to navigate their first educational steps is rewarding, but there are a number of challenges nurseries face when trying to recruit for vacancies:



Low pay for long hours



Increased restrictions surrounding qualifications needed



Negative media presence

Demand for applicants to fill positions in nurseries is high. Early years settings nationwide are struggling to recruit quality staff, meaning additional strain to keep within ratio. Post-pandemic, the move towards remote working has enticed potential apprenticeship applicants to take alternative routes into higher paid employment rather than continue studying for a career in early years. Meaning Level 2 and 3 practitioners are in high demand, with an increased risk of being poached by other local nurseries for more pay.

Ideas on how to source quality EYFS staff

Sourcing your new staff member can be challenging. You want to get your advert in front of the right audience, using a limited budget and your precious time to sieve through applications. When recruitment is at an all-time low, it calls for some thinking outside the box. Here are a few ways to advertise the vacancy that you may not have considered.

Traditional job search sites

Online job sites are viewed tens of thousands of times per day, and with a large footfall, they are a great starting point for filling your positions. Sites such as Indeed, LinkedIn and your local council website can allow a wider reach than other advertising methods.

Costing a small fee, these adverts can champion your workplace as a professional setting, and share links and large amounts of text to personalise your job description and ideal candidate information.





Social media

Your setting may have a Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter account to share snippets of your day or messages. Social media is an avenue that can be utilised for positive marketing of your nursery and free advertising to help you fill those positions.

Use your social platform to share the positive journeys of your staff to help encourage anyone considering the leap into the early years.



Refer a friend

Word of mouth praise and recommendations can be much more valuable than a well-written advert. The opportunity to ask real-life questions to someone in the setting is invaluable and can decrease a significant amount of anxiety and concerns around the position.

You can add incentives for your staff to recommend suitable friends and family to join the team such as celebrating successful recommendations with small gifts or recognitions.

Local further and higher education settings

- ✔ As apprenticeships can start from age 16, local colleges and schools are a great starting point to generate interest in your nursery as their prospective setting to undertake their apprenticeship.
- ✔ Career fairs are often the first time many young people begin to think about their working direction, igniting passions and interests that can shape their future careers.
- ✔ Discuss with local colleges and schools to organise or participate in their career fairs, and set up a stand with some of your most confident staff members to assist.

Guest lecturing

With the recent changes to qualification requirements, targeting universities and colleges that offer early childhood courses is a sensible option to ensure they meet the minimum requirements.

Colleges and universities are often grateful to have experts from the field to give guest lectures in hot topic areas. This gives their students precious second-hand experience and allows them to ask any pressing questions they may have.



Parents and volunteers

You have daily contact with your parents through your communication platform; many of these parents may be considering career changes to fit in with their childcare. Share via your platform the available positions, including the opportunity to volunteer.

This may be the introduction they need to begin their career in childcare. This can also be extended to their friends and family, using their own positive opinions on the setting and staff to encourage their cousins, friends and neighbours to apply.



Creative methods

Some settings are using more creative approaches in addition to traditional job site advertisements. Badges for staff to wear on their work uniform to explain your setting is hiring can be free publicity when your team members pop to the shops after work or interact with the local community.

Some job adverts have been turned on their head to show the setting is aware of the demands whilst placing the children at the heart of the focus.

DID YOU KNOW?

Post-pandemic anxiety increases have been found across all sectors; childcare and early education are no different. Many potential new team members may feel increased anxiety surrounding the 'unknowns' of the job.

Creating a video tour of the setting out of hours can reduce the unknown factors as much as possible. This helps to remove the initial panic of not knowing where to go to ask for more information through visual ways.



Interview ideas for securing quality staff

Interviews are often thought of as the worst part of the job interview process, where confidence can be knocked, and brain fog takes over. Your aim as managers, directors and owners is to attract and employ the best people for the job: nurturing and educating the children of the setting.

Although confidence is essential, this can be learnt and developed when in the post; the skill of performing well at an interview is not the be-all and end-all. Your prospective candidates will breathe a sigh of relief when they know this.

Interviews are ideal opportunities to test if your setting and the candidate's ethos and philosophy are compatible. They should not be an opportunity to put additional pressure and stress on your prospective candidates via a series of complex and sneaky questions.

Think of the skills you value as a nursery and create questions and tasks to uncover these potentials. Friendliness, professionalism, eagerness to learn, knowledge, and reflection are essential skills within the early years field.



Interview questions for outstanding nursery staff

Interview questions can become a checklist, where you ask the typical questions (strengths and weaknesses), but who gives an honest answer to the weaknesses question? With perfectionists, “struggle to delegate” and “work too hard” are used in every interview you sit through.

Can there be more useful questions to ask to get to know your new potential team member in your short window of time?

Of course, there are!

We have collected a selection of interview questions and tasks for you to try during your next interview to reduce the pressure and get the best response from your candidates.

Some companies are now giving their shortlisted clients some questions in advance, allowing them to prepare their best possible answers without the brain fog.



Basic questions with a twist

- ✔ What do you think the learning environment should include in a nursery?
- ✔ If you were offered the job, what would be the first 3 things you would do?
- ✔ What do you like to do in your free time?
- ✔ Would you say you were creative? Can you give an example of where you have been creative?
- ✔ Why have you chosen to apply to this specific setting?
- ✔ Do you think all nurseries should have an outdoor space?
- ✔ What was the last present you gave to someone?
- ✔ If you could choose a superpower, what would it be?
- ✔ What are your thoughts on garden gnomes?
- ✔ What is your proudest moment?
- ✔ Tell me about a child you have a good relationship with?
- ✔ Tell me about a time when you were reflective?
- ✔ What is your understanding of safeguarding?
- ✔ What is your favourite part of the day when working with early years children?



Simple interview task ideas for early years staff

Give your potential candidates two images- you may have sourced them from Once Upon A Picture or Pobble365. Can they identify their favourite image and why? You can extend this further by linking to any learning activity ideas to which they feel they lend themselves well.

Provide an inclusion profile of a child in your setting or a fictional child; what types of interaction games do they think they might enjoy based on what they have read?

Escort them into one of the nursery rooms, and ask them to select a toy or object they are particularly drawn to. Ask them to expand on why they think this is a beneficial resource for that room.



How to keep your quality nursery staff

Brand understanding of your nursery

Think about why people choose to use a particular energy provider, phone company or even pet insurance? Usually, the reason centres around the service and the brand understanding of being a 'quality' product.

You aim to develop a strong brand where people will have confidence that they will be treated with respect and courtesy, and have an investment in their progression. To build this brand, you must have a clear ethos and vision on how you want your nursery to be run and follow this ethos when tackling all challenging situations: irate parents, staff disagreements, and potential unprofessionalism.



Value your staff

Everyone enjoys being appreciated for their hard work, and small acts of recognition can be integral for staff retention. Working in nurseries is challenging; we know it's not all sandpits and nursery rhymes. The hours are long, and the observations are constant, making it a tiring and responsibility-heavy career.

- ✔ Sending small notes to individual staff when you have noticed them going above and beyond can go a long way to making them feel valued. You can find several different ways to harvest the appreciation your families will feel for your staff.
- ✔ Use your communications platform as an opportunity for parents to share moments of joy and gratitude with your team.



♥ Be human

No one working with children does so for the salary; it is for the reward of building foundations of learning, relationships and helping to mold them into the adults they will become. Your staff will have families and lives outside of the workplace; occasionally, family stresses can affect our working performance.

With a firm understanding of competency in mind, staff benefit from a human understanding that we all have tough days and times. Supporting your staff through sickness, grieving and life challenges builds a loyal, grateful team.



Invest in them

Continued professional development is essential for your team to feel confident and prepared for all the changing dynamics of the children they care for.

- ✔ Keep an eye on the changing government-funded apprenticeships and single out those you think would be good in this role.
- ✔ Give them time to complete their applications during their working day and discuss during regular performance discussions their ambitions and interests.

You may have a newer team member who expresses a skill supporting children who are English Additional Language (EAL); harness this and provide support with suitable training.

You can find free CPD ideas to develop your staff [here](#).



Non-negotiable culture

We spend most of our day in our place of work; we invest a large proportion of our time in honing our craft. The least we can expect is a positive working culture and environment. Being the manager or owner of your setting, the culture is nurtured by your actions.

There must be a non-negotiable supportive culture within your nursery. This includes nipping in the bud negative professional feuds, encouraging growth and professional development, and adopting an open-door policy for any concerns your staff may have. This can be particularly challenging in a small setting but even more vital for a harmonious work environment where people want to remain.



Involve staff in decision-making

Involving your team in decision-making is important when creating a working environment where all feel valued and heard. This can be reviewing policies and procedures together. They implement the procedures daily; it is valuable to listen to their opinions on what works well and what needs tweaking for maximum effectiveness.

- ✔ Think about having a topic as a staff discussion of 'once in a lifetime events' and how, as a company, you can accommodate them most easily.
- ✔ Encourage the open discussion as to what constitutes these events (family weddings, graduations, first nativity plays) and the process of applying for time off during these events.
- ✔ Make sure to explain that you will endeavour to accommodate as much as possible but cannot guarantee.



Workload understanding

When discussing policies and procedures, have staff wellbeing and workload at the forefront of decisions. Supported by Ofsted, observations should be monitoring the children, not the arduous paperwork attached. Re-evaluate your current observation recording software or process. Is it simple and able to be shared easily with others to reduce the repetition of paperwork?

Social element

Your role as a leader within the nursery is to be the face of the nursery and the professional mentor. It is your decision how much you interact with social events your team participate within, although it is essential to encourage social events to be organised. Catch-ups outside of the nursery walls can help build friendships and strengthen team bonds. This can be timed well by introducing new staff or apprentices to welcome them to the friendly, supportive team.



Health and well-being

Staying healthy when working with small children can be a challenge, coughs and sneezes are rarely caught in tissues. Your staff will appreciate every effort in taking steps to keep them as healthy as possible.

- ✔ Think of the times of the year when your team are particularly run-down (build-up to Christmas, perhaps), and bring in some fruit or healthy snacks.
- ✔ Organising and paying for flu jabs for all staff who would like one can be a job ticked off during work rather than a rush afterwards.
- ✔ Small, thoughtful gestures to support keeping in ratio to allow staff to run to the toilet encourages them to drink plenty of fluids. The well-being of your team is a direct reflection of the quality of the care your children will receive.
- ✔ Think about the length of time for staff meetings, the relevance of meetings and additional workload when you are planning your team discussions.



★ **We are with you!**

Running your own nursery is challenging, it is a team effort, and your team is vital for its success.

To talk to one of our experts on how we can help to ease the workload and support parental engagement.



