

An A to Z of learning

J is for Joy

The **Rachel Keeling Nursery School Team** explain how they have brought joy to everyday life at their setting, for both the children and the staff

Can you remember the last time you felt joy? How did it feel? The importance of joy in our lives is vital in combatting stress and building resilience. At Rachel Keeling, we try to find the joy in the tiny, everyday things: when we manage to finally stick that tricky lid to a model, when someone masters the two-wheeler bike, when that lost sock turns up, when the bin lorry collects our recycling, or when someone replaces the empty roll in the staff toilet!

We have made a concerted effort to make joy part of our whole school journey and embroider it into our everyday school life.

It starts with the team and our shared, agreed ethos: the expectation that we greet each other with warmth, a smile and kind words each day. Our staff room is a safe space where we can talk, joke and laugh (one child actually said, 'What is that room you go in, you know, the Laugh Room?' – as he heard so much laughter coming from it!).

GROW AND FLOURISH

Joy is not necessarily something we are born feeling, and it is not a constant state, but we can work on it. If you create the right conditions, you can encourage joy to grow and flourish, and improving well-being is key to this.

Well-being is a central part of our school structure, permeating our supervision sessions. Staff are supported to invest in their own well-being and are encouraged to take responsibility for it. We have shared a bespoke list of things that we can do for each other that improve our day-to-day well-being.

With the children, we are aware they look to us for cues, such as non-verbal communication and the language we use. We ensure we talk about our emotions and try to



model joy when we find it. We look for joy in the everyday!

HANDS DOWN

Before we assess the children's development in areas of the curriculum, we assess their well-being and engagement using the Leuven Scales. Hands down, this is the most valuable assessment tool we use.

At baseline, we assess well-being using the Leuven Scales and again review it at least termly while the child is with us. These assessments are discussed and moderated as a team. Any child who is 'scoring' (I only use this word as it is a numerical score of 1-5 overall) below three is highlighted for 'nurture' work in small groups.

Of course, this is alongside daily support by sensitive and skilled adults. We discuss the child's interests, skills and in which situations we are finding well-being dipping. Is it separation? Maybe transition time? Lunchtime?

We make a plan for that child and review it at end-of-day evaluation meetings. This focus on improving well-being is the most effective single change we make to a child's progress and their ability to access the full curriculum with an open heart and mind.

WELL VERSED

Good training is key. We make sure every member of the team has

The children's well-being is monitored using the Leuven Scales, and nurture support is given when needed

attended Leuven Scale training. When we first implemented it many years ago, we ensured staff were put into pairs to observe and assess children. This gave them opportunities to discuss and reflect on their findings. We did quite a few cycles of this, covering staff so they could spend an hour working through a group of children to get some snapshot scores. We were able to feed this back to the whole team, moderate and discuss the context of the observations.

Now we are at the point where we are all very well versed in the scales and have internalised them. The teaching team can work through a list of children and could give very accurate assessments of their well-being. We can walk through the school and assess children without knowing we are doing it.

Maybe think about the children in your care. Around which experiences are the children most joyful? Is it physical games? Storytime? Music and dancing? Climbing the trees?

A note of caution: we celebrate the uniqueness of all our children, families and staff. We recognise that some children may display joyfulness quite differently from others. Some may shriek, laugh and move. Others may just show with their eyes or toes. Take time to get to recognise their signs of joy. ■



Rachel Keeling Nursery School is an Outstanding setting in Bethnal Green, east London