



The Family Children's Champion 2020 Finalist Story - Helena



What's the story?

Helena is an exceptional practitioner and leader. She has supported a small setting in the heart of Exmouth with high numbers of vulnerable children for 12 years. She has overcome many challenges to keep her setting open and ensure that the children and families she supports can access to the best early years provision possible. She is always on to the next exciting and innovative idea to improve outcomes and her relentless focus which is always on the children, giving them the best opportunities to achieve their potential no matter what the barriers, is an example to us all.

How do they understand and develop bonds with all the children in their care?

Quite simply this is the underpinning ethos of all of Helena's work. Everything she stands for grows from the core principle of having positive relationships with the children. It is the fundamental starting point that all her staff are trained from, plan from and deliver from. This includes the importance of relationships with the families, I have observed the way she enables all her families to feel safe and how this helps them to engage in meaningful dialogue about their children, the way they are coping with parenting and supporting their children's learning. It also extends to the way she supports and grows her staff, she has developed her staff team over the past few years as well as taking on staff who are completing their training. She nurtures them all.

Her key skill is in modelling effective interactions with the children which promotes and supports those strong attachments. When I have attended the setting I have often observed her ability to tune into each child and make them feel like they have her full and undivided attention even though she is often juggling a number of things every minute of the day. No matter what her focus she will drop everything to listen intently to a child who wants to share what they have been doing or tell her something important. The impact of this is the children are some of the happiest and most settled I have seen. Her ability to include all children and help them achieve is quite simply amazing.

In consistently and persistently modelling this way of being with children her staff follow suit. She keeps numbers low despite the impact on finances because she insists that the statutory ratios do

not allow for the level of adult interaction that her children need. She therefore never has more than 14 children to 4 staff. Every activity of the day is developed around opportunities for social interaction, relationship building and supporting children to feel valued and special.

How do they work with and represent your local community in their work?

The provision operates from a church hall but her aim is to provide a home from home feeling that everyone belongs to and feels part of the community. The ethos of building a sense of community within helps enable her families to feel part of the wider community.

One of the key areas she has supported is supporting BAME and mixed race families. She recognised how isolating her local town could be for these families due the diversity of backgrounds and cultures that the families come from including Russia, Bulgaria, China Malaysia and Turkey. They are often without a wider family or community to support them. The setting cater for a higher than average number of families from different backgrounds in an area which is predominantly white British. She has raised funding both from national lottery and local charitable organisations to develop a range of additional opportunities for these families. These have included a book swap library with books with different languages, summer holiday activity club, and a toddler group which she set up and is now run by the families themselves. She encourages and supports parents and carers to become part of the committee to develop their confidence and has employed several members of her setting community over the years.

The impact of this work has been to foster and engender as sense of equality and support relationships between cultures, she hopes that this rubs off on the children and promotes a lifelong attitude of tolerance and understanding In addition to working with the families she ensures the children are part of their local community, she shops locally with the children, visits the library and local park, she fund raises for local charities and works collaboratively with charity shops., she collects for them and they offer her any suitable toys or resources that come into the shop.

How do they continuously develop their skills and help others understand the importance of the early years profession?

Helena is one of the most reflective practitioners I know. One of the things that brings us together is our passion for debating and developing our understanding and thinking in relation to the best way to ensure young children learn and develop effectively.

Over the time I have known her she has constantly engaged in research, reading and professional development opportunities. She undertook her Early Years professional status and was an active member of the network, often providing workshops sessions at events as well as working with the local authority to develop an approach to engaging with EYP's to support ongoing quality improvement. Within our local authority we set up a scheme where EYP's could go through a quality assurance process and become specialist EYP's. Other early years practitioners can visits their settings so that they can observe practice in particular areas of expertise. Helena is a specialist EYP in Communication and Language, this links particularly to her skills in supporting

adult child interaction. She gives freely of her time for other setting staff to visit and observe, talk to her and discuss how she approaches this area of learning and development

One of her mantras is that her staff are the most important resource she has and she invests in their development and improvement. She has a strong cycle of performance management and has a clear training plan and self-development approach. This includes a training manual which all staff follow and update. She includes herself in this and believes that modelling her own professional improvement supports staff to value this for themselves. She is creative in the way she enables staff to access training despite the lack of financial resources. She uses an online training provider to access a range of relevant mandatory training as well as general CPD opportunities. Where financially possible she also enhances this by asking external experts to attend staff training days and takes all staff to the Early Years Education show.

What makes their work this year particularly special and how have they gone the extra mile in 2020?

Helena recognised immediately the likely impact of the initial lockdown would have on the children and their families. She started a Whatsapp group for any parents who wanted to join. She shared activities for families to do at home, put short video clips up and asked parents to share things they were doing with their children at home.

She ensured that she video called every child each week so they could share their 'work' and talk to the parents about how things were going. She was able to do more frequent calls where these were needed and her staff supported additional contacts for those families who were struggling. In addition to this she was concerned that the families who relied on the pre-school hot lunches as a key part of their children's daily food intake did not have sufficient support unlike school children on free school meals. She decided that she would deliver freshly cooked food to these families and this enabled a more direct opportunity to check in.

At the end of the first lockdown her priority was to get children back into the setting as soon as possible so she made sure she had prepared her setting for re-opening well in advance using the guidelines to ensure the setting was COVID secure. Her COVID policy was in place so she could fully re-open on 1st June. The feedback from parents was that they felt safe and supported and all children returned apart from two who need to shield due to health issues.

The setting is usually a term time only but this year they stayed open all summer, no additional charges were made because the early years funding could be used flexibly but this enabled parents to get back to work and provided some continuity and consistency for the children. The impact of this has been to support children's well-being and sustained learning, children have continued to demonstrate progress in their learning and positive attitudes to being at the setting. Parents have also reported that they are less worried about their children's future.

Is there anything else you'd like to add to explain why they should be our 2020 Children's Champion?

An area that I have been unable to share in the rest of the information is that the ethos of inclusion for children with special needs is again something very important to Helena and I would like to share a short case study.

One of the parents asked Helena if her friend could come and speak to her about her little boy who was attending another setting which Helena agreed to. The parent explained that the setting had suggested that her little boy might have autism, that his behaviour was very difficult and he his language was delayed. The parent for who English was a second language was distraught. Helena supported this conversation and made some suggestions including perhaps this little boy attending her setting for a second view point. When he started he was extremely withdrawn and he did need a lot of support to get used to the routines and settle in but with lots of encouragement and appropriate adult interaction he began to grow in confidence. His language developed, he began to interact with other children and make friends. Helena's approach ensured this little boy was not prematurely labelled and was supported to develop and achieve his potential. Helena describes his areas of strength as being his caring nature and his ability to empathise, he was the first to write his name and was developmentally where he should be when he moved to school. He is now at school without any additional support or special educational needs. She says it is her total belief in the children that makes her go to work, as she says it is up to us to make it right for them and enable them to succeed; it is not up to them it is up to us. She says that everyday the children amaze her.

Do you have any quotes from fellow staff, parents, or the children who your nominee works with?

Visiting Helena's setting to support her with inclusion is an absolute pleasure. Her commitment to children and families and her efforts to ensure that every child gets the best start in life is so evident in her practice. (Area SENDCo)

Child - 'I love you Helena, you are my best friend'