



School's Voice

St Margaret's Church of England Primary School, Ifield on early years



St Margaret's is a two-form entry school in Crawley with a linked purpose built 36 place nursery (St Margaret's Ducklings). With 30 children in their current Reception year having also attended St Margaret's Ducklings, the school and nursery work incredibly closely to facilitate effective transitions and create inclusive learning spaces where children are comfortable and confident.



We caught up with headteacher Jill Hine, school SENCo Billy Marchant, and early years teachers Ellie Mathias and Harley Jacklin to discuss how great relationships and open dialogue underpin their early years ethos on transitions and inclusion.

Can you start by telling us about your transitions process?

Ellie & Harley: The transition process plays a really big part in identifying the individual needs of our children. A large percentage of our internal nursery cohort move into Reception, so we are lucky to have many already well-established relationships. However, we also engage in a process of home and summer visits to get to know how we can cater to our new children within the whole class environment. During the summer, Jill leads a meeting in the school hall for parents, where she explains how the upcoming year in Reception will look. The children then have the opportunity to move around the school, see their classrooms and meet their teachers. We also offer 'stay and play sessions' at the school, first with the parents and then without, throughout June and July. This allows us to gain different perspectives on the children with and without their parents and build up the bigger picture on each individual's needs.

In September, we then practice a very slow start with home visits, followed by a half timetable for all children for the first two weeks. It's all about creating a safe space so our children feel comfortable and confident to proceed in education.

Jill: Throughout the transition process, we engage closely with our parents to establish an open, honest dialogue using tools such as SeeSaw. It is important to us that we work with our parents, rather than dictating to them. For example, if a parent feels that a child is not ready to move to a full timetable after two weeks, we cooperate to collaboratively assess what the best next steps for that child are.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we implemented practices to prevent parents accompanying children into school in the morning for drop off. We may not have taken this step if not to initially prevent the spread of coronavirus, but we have found that it has helped our children develop additional confidence and independence. Without their parents, the children have to learn how to hang up their coats, sort their bags and





get ready for the learning day ahead on their own. Now, we have staff greeting the children at the gates on arrival and throughout the year, the drop off support from staff lessens to further facilitate this growth towards independence.

At St Margaret's, you have a strong focus on speech and language. How have you implemented this focus across the school and nursery settings?

Billy: Our nursery manager Nichola is a qualified early years SENCo and has specialised in speech and language needs.



Nichola's placement in the nursery therefore enables even earlier identification of speech and language needs before the children who remain in the St Margaret's system even reach Reception.

Ellie: There is also a high level of knowledge sharing across both settings. Nichola has delivered face to face speech and language training to school and nursery staff together to ensure that we are all aligned in our practices. During these sessions we have focused heavily on the principles of adult child interaction – which is the crux of our ethos for every child!

Billy: In addition to the structured, formal training provided by Nichola and external agencies, we are also very chatty on the topic of speech and language! We share what works and what doesn't and maintain an active informal dialogue between staff.

Harley: As a team, we are excellent at asking for strategies and resources when we have external agencies in to deliver training; they are the experts and there is lots to be learnt from seeing them model good practice in action. After all, knowledge is power!

Can you explain the principles of adult child interaction therapy and how they inform your way of working?



Ellie: Adult child interaction therapy focuses on having high quality interactions with children. One central precept is the need to be specific with language. For example, if a child is playing with cars, adult child interaction therapy teaches that instead of asking 'what colour is that one?', you should ask 'what colour is that car?'.

At St Margaret's, our headteacher gives us the trust and time to have these high-quality interactions, as there is a general understanding that language is the foundation of learning.

What is the team culture like at St Margaret's school and nursery?

Billy: As you can see from our discussion so far, at St Margaret's we have a clear culture of collaboration and communication – with children, parents, external agencies, and colleagues!

Harley: This culture of communication is underpinned by a high degree of trust, especially from Jill and the senior leadership team. Where the curriculum has been recently updated, we have had to make a lot of changes to our working practices. Being given the trust to



throw things at the wall and see what sticks has been really important. We have also been encouraged to discuss our options to determine the best result.

Billy: What Harley is articulating here are the principles of the assess, plan, do, review cycle (outlined in the SEND Code of Practice) in action!

Jill: Our dedicated team of early years teachers and teaching assistants (all of whom hold an early years qualification) also maintain an excellent culture of internal positive relationships. I don't have a tattoo, but if I did, it would say 'relationships are key'!

Aside from your excellent working relationships and internal knowledge sharing, what are you most proud of at St Margaret's school and nursery?



Billy: I am really proud of the team culture around SEN and inclusion. Every staff member here can talk about SEND with confidence and positivity. This extends to our students; physical disability is a very visible difference and a good starting point for early conversations.

Harley: We give our children with disabilities the option to talk about their lived experience in the safe classroom space – in their words to their friends. This gives them the opportunity to discuss

how this makes them special and unique and acknowledges the reality that the other children are inquisitive.

Jill: The children show fantastic respect for the accessibility adjustments and equipment – we employ that rule in school that school if your legs work, then you use the stairs, not the ramps or lift!