



Green is for

...but also for families now and in the future

Sue Churchill asks Vanessa Warn, MD of the award-winning Little Green Rascals how her green credentials marry with today's business needs

In the year that corporate greed has hit the headlines, whether it's zero hours contracts or pension funds being milked, it's reassuring to know that businesses fueled by the milk of human kindness can succeed. From 2009, when the first Little Green Rascals was set up in York, Vanessa Warn's ethically driven business has been pleasing children and parents alike, operating at full capacity and winning awards.

Her green credentials are indisputable – the original name for the nursery was Little Green Footprints – and they are matched by an imaginative awareness that the children in her care are “someone's child, someone's sister, niece, nephew”. She even, she says, likes “the tough mummies” as “they keep us on our toes”.

Not a hippy business

But don't be fooled into thinking this is a hippy business: just two years after opening, Little Green Rascals won the York Evening Press Business Accelerator Competition, which, like

BBC2's Dragon's Den, identifies and rewards new entrepreneurs across all sectors. As a result, she won business mentoring support and a stack of free publicity.

Her drive is indisputable. Determined that her founding nursery would be green through and through, she rang the Soil Association for advice before opening. They told her about their Food for Life Catering Mark, which sets very high standards around freshness, provenance, seasonality and animal welfare.

She was awarded the Gold Catering Mark just after opening without any preparation (her second nursery also achieved the gold standard). All the more impressive, when you consider it generally takes months, working through the bronze and silver – and silver is where most people stop, as the standard is very high.

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and everything is organic, free range where appropriate, and tasty – even innovative.

As a result, Little Green Rascals won the NDNA Top Toddler Meal 2015 with organic, locally sourced chicken and polenta strips, served with fresh lime, a tangy dip, crunchy green salad and jacket potato.

Sometimes Vanessa smuggles in disbelieving parents so they can see how well their children eat sophisticated food with their peers and friends – the pre-schoolers at tables set with tablecloths, proper cutlery and vases of flowers. The staff also eat with them at £1.00 each. No one is rushed. Everyone benefits from a good, varied diet.



A potential foodie perfecting her pastry skills

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the planet

Home-grown always tastes best



Spreading the message

The same high standards apply to the nursery norm of raised beds in the garden. Three are for serious growing with polytunnels, providing fruit and vegetables for the nursery kitchens, while the other two are for the children's use, and even there, everything is edible, including flowers like nasturtiums. Nothing is wasted: the guinea pigs eat the carrot tops, and all other vegetable waste goes in the compost bins

The children naturally take all this on board, including the chickens, which keep them in eggs, and take these principles home. As a result, some parents now keep chickens and manage compost bins.

What is evolving is an ecologically-aware community, driven by hands-on research conducted with the parents' support. For example, the biodegradable disposable nappies the nurseries use were getting very expensive. So, the staff and parents tested all the nappies and Mamia came out top, as not only do they release no chlorine on use, but they are made from FSC pulp, which means that for every tree used to make the nappies another is planted.

The only drawback was that they don't biodegrade. The nursery spent time finding a provider who incinerates them, releasing energy, which is re-used. The extra cost is covered by the saving in the cost of the nappies.

As Vanessa says, "Green is for the planet, but also for families living now and future generations." This includes the children's health and wellbeing. Each room uses essential oils, some in combination with hot stones, and bumps and bruises are treated with natural products. So, if there is a minor bump at nursery, the child is sent home with a tube of

arnica. If they're ill, the nursery sends a small box of food home.

'Long-term investment'

Equally, if a parent has problems paying (perhaps a death or unemployment), they might waive fees for a short period, and they will almost certainly set up a payment plan. Too tender hearted? Not at all. You could reasonably see it as a long-term investment in health, wellbeing and customer satisfaction. And make no mistake: the nurseries are run on business lines: they raised their fees in response to the national living wage.

Essentially, though, it's people that matter, and Vanessa's instinct is to nurture them. All new recruits, for example, have free homeopathy and osteopathy sessions, and massages are widely available to relieve stress and aching muscles. Everyone also gets a free fruit and veg box. This might seem profligate, but they buy in large quantities. Consider too that it not only improves nutrition; it helps avoid waste – and they make up the boxes themselves.

No surprise to hear that Little Green Rascals pays well – and reaps the benefits in terms of high staff retention. But, like every nursery business, they have to balance altruism with business needs: she is hard-headed about sick leave in that everyone pays for the first day's sick leave in order to reduce spur-of-the-moment 'sickies'. They then they have three days paid.

Recruitment matters

The business also experiences the recruitment problems that typify the sector, but in Little Green Rascals fashion, they work very hard to resolve it. One of the business spin-offs of their green credentials and their reputation for looking after

their staff is that they have an excellent reputation locally, which means applicants are keen to get Little Green Rascals on their CV.

They have also reduced the number of no-shows by ringing a few days beforehand, giving them the option to back out, but politely pointing out they would like to know if that's what they want to do. This is followed up with a text on the day. More work, but effective.

Looking at recruitment from another perspective, they have developed a relationship with York College to provide mutual support. As with their permanent staff, once apprentices are in place, the nursery looks after them, develops them and involves them in all aspects of nursery life, including staff meetings.

No soft options, though. As with all new members of staff, their probationary period is very testing – they don't automatically get taken on. The person specification is an independent thinker with a commitment to their own development. The Elvington Lane nursery, for example, has no fewer than three early years teachers.

And that typifies all their working relationships – children, staff and parents. Everyone genuinely matters. Everyone has their full support. Everyone is encouraged to think for themselves and assume personal responsibility.

As she says to the children, when encouraging personal choice and commitment, "Did you make a happy choice or a sad choice?" And happiness is key. As she says, "We all come into this to have a happy heart." ■

● Vanessa Warn is MD of Little Green Rascals, which comprises two award-winning nurseries in York.

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