

LITTLE ACORNS

Choosing childcare and early education for your child is an important decision for any parent. But how do you decide which is the right way to go to give your child the best start in life? Agenda has been finding out a little more

There seems little doubt that childcare provision in Cambridgeshire is generally good. According to Dianne Sinnatamby from Granta Montessori School, "Provision for children is generally good in the county and children are well catered for."

It's a sentiment that is echoed by Jane Roberts from Buckden Day Nursery, who says that "Nursery provision is a lot better in Cambridgeshire than in other counties, partly because as a county we escaped the effects of the government's overprovision of facilities which unwittingly had the effect of squeezing the Private Voluntary Independent sectors (PVIs)."

Having said that, the sheer range of childcare provision can still be bewildering. It can be offered by private, independent and voluntary providers whilst schools can also offer childcare on site.

Everything from childminders - professional daycarers who look after children in their own homes - to day nurseries, LEA nursery schools and preschools and playgroups is available. Many of these provide funded early years education places.

Other options include private nursery schools which can provide sessional or full day care to children aged two to five, and independent schools, which often offer early years care and education as a springboard to a place at their junior and senior schools later on. Whichever route parents choose to take, however, pressures on pre-school children have definitely increased. As children are expected to know more by the end of Key Stage 1, so a greater emphasis has been put on pre-schools to help prepare a child. Jane Roberts, however, isn't a great fan of too much formal education.

"If a child's creativity is stifled in favour of counting to 100, doing arithmetic, reading and writing, where are our future authors and scientists going to come from?" she says. "If imagination isn't stimulated in the

under fives through play, we could be in danger of losing many good creative adults of the future.

"The biggest thing you can give a child is a happy childhood, which includes play, imagination and creativity. It's our job to encourage all those features and to ensure that children are keen to learn.

"That's why the atmosphere at Buckden is so important to us. We have a big, open plan house with happy staff and children. Our hygiene and care standards are top-notch, and we also offer dance, music and French as extras. A particular innovation here is the gym and the ball pool, so children can have some kind of physical exercise every day, no matter what the weather."

As if to prove how much she believes in Buckden, Jane even has her own children, Jennifer and Alex, at the school.

Over at the Montessori School in Shepreth, meanwhile, Diane Sinnatamby says that, "We're a traditional Montessori school, in fact we're the oldest Montessori school in Cambridgeshire.

"Montessori offers a very specialist way of learning. Our years of experience, and reputation gained, has stood us in good stead. What we do suits almost all children but we offer a structured approach to learning and play which is directed at the individual child. This ensures that they learn at their own pace and their own stage of development.

"As well as standard lessons, we offer dance and French on a regular basis and provide a very good foundation level of education for when they start school.

"We always recommend that parents make an appointment and come to see the school to work out exactly what we can offer. We are happy to have children come for a couple of trial lessons to see if it fits their individual needs."

Back in the centre of Cambridge, meanwhile, the ACE Nursery School provides a warm, secure and stimulating environment where children can gain confidence and develop at their own pace. "It's a place for making friends, and for acquiring social, intellectual and physical skills," says head teacher Lisa Tuohy. "Learning through play is the focus for helping children to develop pre-school skills.

"Staff take special care to create an environment which is free of prejudice, and without stereotyping. ACE is positively non-sexist, multi-cultural and without religious bias.

"As a parents' co-operative, ACE is far more than a nursery or a school, because the well-being of the children and the staff is dependent on real involvement from parents."

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