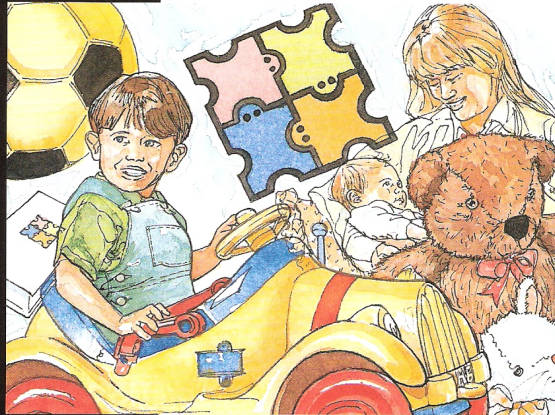


# OPEN LEARNING

*An Innovative Training Solution at Kids Unlimited*

## TRAINING IN A CARING PROFESSION

### The Business Challenge



Wilmslow-based Kids Unlimited is a leading nursery nursing company. The organisation was quick to recognise an increase in the demand for childcare, arising from the growing trend for both parents to have careers. It responded by entering a new market and servicing employers such as Thomas Cook, The Body Shop and Midland Bank.

In 1990, it set out to capitalise on this demand by expanding the number of its nurseries across a wider geographical area. Management recognised that maintaining the quality of the service provided would be a crucial factor in the success of the expansion plan and so set up a systematic training programme to meet these standards.

Kids Unlimited's competitors were already offering comparable services. However, the company believed that it could distinguish itself through the quality of childcare it provided and that this would be a decisive factor in winning new contracts.

The aims of the training initiative were:

- to increase the number of contracts by at least ten per cent
- to develop skills and procedures that would reduce recruitment and selection costs
- to reduce staff turnover by 50 per cent
- to make training more cost-effective.

Although many of the company's senior staff already held formal childcare qualifications, junior employees often had no formal training. Kids Unlimited set itself the target of enabling staff at all levels to meet its rigorous in-house standards. Equally important was the need to meet requirements set by Local



Learning Methods Branch  
Employment Department  
Moorfoot  
Sheffield S1 4PQ

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LEARNING METHODS CASE STUDY

Authorities following the 1989 Children Act and to enable staff to work towards a nationally recognised qualification.

To achieve the latter objective, Kids Unlimited contacted the National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB). It was agreed that the two organisations would co-operate in the creation of a brand new qualification, to be known as the Certificate in Nursery Practice. At the time of the training initiative, new National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in childcare were still being developed.

A coherent training policy within Kids Unlimited would reduce staff turnover and act as a recruitment aid, ensuring a stable workforce at a time of rapid expansion.

#### **The Open Learning Solution**

Kids Unlimited decided on Open Learning as the most effective and economic way of

achieving its primary objective, that of establishing consistent skill levels in nurseries spread over a wide geographical area. A flexible training programme would enable nursery managers to devolve responsibility for quality, while at the same time meeting the ongoing demands of an expanding business. Funding for the £200,000 project was provided jointly by the Employment Department and by the company itself.

#### **Developing an Open Learning Solution**

Discussions were held with the NNEB to establish the topic areas that should be covered by the scheme. The involvement of the NNEB meant that the new learning materials and the company's on-site training centres would be verified by a national awarding body.



## O P E N L E A R N I N G

NNEB produced a syllabus based on its discussions with Kids Unlimited and on the company's stated objectives. The emphasis of the training programme was on the theory underpinning childcare practices and the materials were designed to act as a 'refresher' for senior staff as well as providing full training for junior employees.

The Open Learning materials, which require some 400 hours of study time, consist of:

- a video
- written modular coursebooks
- a competence and assessment record book.

### **A Training Partnership**

To support the initiative, a new member of staff was recruited to oversee the training of the company 'mentors' who would be responsible for the day-to-day running of the scheme. Two mentors were chosen to assist with delivery of the course, after completion of the City and Guilds Open Learning Delivery Certificates. Finally, South East Cheshire Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) became a partner in the initiative, delivering the Certificate in Nursery Practice to additional trainees as part of their own skill-build programme.

Eight staff from four Kids Unlimited nurseries close to the company's Head Office site were selected for the pilot initiative. Funding provided for weekly day release over the one-year period of the programme.

### **Project Results**

Eight Kids Unlimited staff and eight Employment Trainees followed the training programme. All were awarded the Certificate in Nursery Practice.

At the end of the pilot programme, Kids Unlimited assessed what had been achieved against its four business aims.

- *To increase contracts by at least ten per cent.*

At the start of the programme in 1990 Kids Unlimited was operating six nurseries. Later that year, five additional nurseries were set up within prestigious employing organisations, followed by five more in 1991. A further three have recently been contracted, an increase of 200 per cent. Kids Unlimited founder and joint managing director Jean Pickering believes that the Open Learning initiative was a decisive factor in many of the new contracts.

- *To develop skills and procedures that will reduce development and recruitment costs.*

Kids Unlimited has seen an improvement in the calibre of applicants as a result of its real commitment to training. Joint managing director Stuart Pickering explains:

'The quality of applicants is now higher than it has ever been. Potential employees do not see working for Kids Unlimited as simply a nine-to-five job. We can now offer our staff posts in which they can take real pride as professionals. Enhancing their own skills is a crucial part of this.'



## O P E N L E A R N I N G

- *To reduce staff turnover by 50 per cent.*

The Certificate in Nursery Practice has now been in operation at the Wilmslow site for over a year. In this period, staff turnover was 12.5 per cent, a third of the average historical figure of 36 per cent. This 'snapshot' indicates that the training is set to exceed the targeted reduction.

- *To make training more cost-effective.*

Kids Unlimited calculated the costs of creating the Open Learning materials and of implementing the training scheme against the cost of following a conventional Further Education college route. Costs were reduced by some two thirds.

### **Conclusion**

The success of the training programme is such that other nursery care organisations and Local Authorities are expressing an interest in the training materials.

For Kids Unlimited, the innovative Open Learning initiative has yielded real and lasting business benefits, exceeding initial targets and enabling the company to become the UK's largest provider of private nursery nursing facilities. With a proven commitment to training and quality in childcare, Kids Unlimited is now able to meet the challenges of an increasingly competitive marketplace with confidence.