

Interview

Bill Zuckerman,
founder, The London
Preschool and Active
Learning



Tell us about your new nursery group

We opened our first London Preschool nursery in Wandsworth in September. Nurseries in Finchley, Northwood and Winchmore Hill will open over the next 18 months.

The Wandsworth nursery is a state-of-the-art new build in the Riverside Quarter. Parents can use the river boat direct to the nursery from Westminster. Anne Sheldon, who was on the board at Bright Horizons, has joined me as chief operating officer, and Ria Powell, who has a passion for Reggio, is our principal. We have 1,800 sq ft of outdoor space, including an adventure/sensory garden.

The Northwood nursery is an arts and crafts villa, and in Winchmore Hill the nursery is an old dairy. The Finchley nursery was a primary school. All will have around 100 places.

What is the nursery's ethos?

My focus has been on creating nurseries that meet the needs, talents and abilities and interests of early years children, through the physical environment, curriculum and staffing models. Innovation and excellence in education are central to what we do.

I've had three careers – in politics, economics, and I founded Active Learning in 2002.

The London Preschool nursery in Wandsworth is designed around 'activity laboratories', visual arts, science and discovery, technology labs, and sensory rooms for under-tuos. We design an environment with activities based on the children's

interests. Planning is based on each child, making our curriculum tailor-made. We have four qualified teachers, including in the performing and visual arts, and a sports coach.

We call our practitioners 'Mentors'. Senior Mentors are room leaders (Mentor was a character in Homer's Odyssey responsible for Odysseus's son's development). 'Key person' sounds too clinical.

Performing arts are central to what we do. We have activities with music in the background. We want all under-fives to experience all aspects of world culture. A lot of children aren't exposed to classical music, so we play that, and folk and jazz.

What projects are you involved in?

We are working with the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Professor Paul Harris on how children use creativity and imagination. He is working with our staff on the project. We are also working together with Harvard's Project Zero as a way of focusing on how to use visual and creative arts in education (when I ran Active Learning, our three- to five-year-olds composed an opera).

We are also influenced by Reggio – children determine where they want to go, they are responsible for their decisions, so with the opera they knew it so well because they created every part of it. They were not just learning it, they generated the ideas and followed where they wanted them to go.