

Children's centre support

Registered childminder Chris Jones set up a childminding group at a brand new Sure Steps Children's Centre in Kent, to provide a regular meeting place for local childminders.

“U ntil the Sure Steps Children's Centre was built three years ago in Kennington, near Ashford, in Kent, I was running a childminding group with less than adequate facilities. I was also running a parent and toddler group at the local school which is where I started developing a working relationship with Lee Robinson, project manager at the new children's centre. Conveniently, he was a neighbour of mine, and I invited him along to the group to talk to the parents about what they would like to see at the centre.

I kept in touch with Lee and followed developments at the centre, and when it opened, I jumped at the chance of starting a new childminding group there. We meet once a month. We'd like it to be more often, but there are so many groups that want to use the space that we compromised rather than abandon the idea. It is a great place to encourage new childminders and for us "beacon" childminders to support others that might need help. It's very relaxed with lovely facilities. It's brilliant to see the children play in a safe, purpose-built environment. When we're there, we have use of the whole centre including the kitchen, outdoor play area and garden where we can grow things. Best of all, it doesn't cost us anything either.

We get a lot out of using the facilities, but it's also beneficial for the children's centre to have us there because we act as a link between them and the families they are trying to reach. I invite the parents to come along to our group

sometimes to see their children play in a different setting, which brings them into the centre. In the holidays, the children's centre organises lots of free fun days and we encourage the families to go along when they can.

I have a timetable displayed in my setting of the activities that are happening at the centre, for parents to see. We can also let parents know if there's something going on that they might benefit from. For example, there's a multi-sensory room at another children's centre in our area. I told a friend who has a disabled child about it – she wouldn't have known about it otherwise.

The children's centre provides a really positive link with the community. As well as the fun days, they have lots of different activities happening. For example, they recently held a six-week music course encouraging parents and children to have fun with music at home, which included a volunteer worker playing the oboe and guitar for the children.

The connection also benefits us – not only do we get a free, purpose-built space to meet regularly, we can publicise how professional we are, too. I am a qualified play therapist and I have always worked with children; I want



Chris and one of her minded children

other professionals to recognise that we provide a valuable service equal to them. Sometimes childminders attend the health visitor-led drop-in group, with play and talks on healthy eating and behaviour management, which helps the health visitors to understand our work. We have also got more work from our presence at the centre, because the children's centre recommends us to parents looking for childcare.

I would encourage all childminders to get involved with their local children's centre. If you know of one opening near you, get in at the planning stages if you can. Go along to consultation meetings and steering groups and talk to people about what you'd like to see happening. Make your voice heard!



If you are interested in finding out more about the benefits of childminding networks, or how to join, visit www.ncma.org.uk for more details.