



Jennie Johnson (centre) with this year's apprenticeship graduates

Everyone's a winner



Jennie Johnson, who was awarded an MBE for Services to Apprentices, outlines her award-winning approach to training apprentices



I set up Kids Allowed in 2003 and quickly realised that recruitment was going to be one of our biggest challenges. No revelations there – that's the case for most businesses in most sectors – but the difficulties we all face in the childcare sector are quite unique. For a long time, we struggled to work out why colleagues joining us from college qualified and apparently equipped to do the job just didn't get it. On paper, no problem. Full list of modules completed? Tick. All criteria met and

units passed? Tick. So, why didn't they have a deep understanding of what makes children tick!

And that's the thing. In many industries, being 'qualified' can, of course, be judged on qualifications alone, but in childcare it's just not that simple.

We recruited lots of fantastic apprentices from colleges, many of whom remain with us today. But we had to spend a lot of time training them further to really get them to understand (and put into practice) what being a childcare professional is all about - and that was pretty frustrating.

It's a lot to expect an external apprentice provider to know your business's culture inside out, especially so when we have such a strong and clear culture – something we call the 'Kids Allowed Way'. It took us eight years as an employer to work out that we couldn't keep waiting around for qualified, quality, engaged and passionate people to bang down our door and drive the Kids Allowed ethos forward. We had to take ownership of what we saw as a problem and sort it out.

The academy

So, we set up our own training academy in 2012 and have been delivering Cache-certified childcare qualifications at Levels 2, 3 and, more recently, Level 4 ever since. Six years on, it was, without doubt, one of the best business decisions we ever made.

For us, the real star colleagues in our centres are those who go the extra mile to make sure our children have an amazing day, the ones who throw so much creative energy into make-believe games with their key children that little ones are utterly mesmerised. After a brilliant day at work, they're thinking about how they could make it even better tomorrow. Easy to say. But how do you instil that kind of passion in an apprentice?

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Our academy is led by Becki, who, with a perfect blend of very high standards and caring demeanour, enables our learners to flourish and become the very best version of themselves. Her team of assessors don't follow convention and mark against criteria. They go into the rooms and work with the teams to create the best possible opportunities for the children and then they go back to the academy and discuss and research how to 'get better every day' – one of the core values of Kids Allowed.

The commercial benefits of our academy are obvious. But our scheme is a holistic one in that we welcome talented and passionate recruits whom we repay in every way we can with personal development, progression opportunities, financial and non-financial incentives and rewards. The list goes on. It's a self-sustaining model.

All of that said, our academy doesn't solve every recruitment problem. Finding great people in our sector will never be a breeze and neither should it be – we're making some of the most important hires in the world, after all, and it is a crucial piece of the puzzle.

'A goldmine of future talent'

With our firm commitment to internal promotion and to keeping both initial and further training and qualifications in house, it's clear our academy is as crucial to our success as everything else we have discovered on our journey: a goldmine of future talent. Not only do our graduates hit the ground running as new recruits, they set the bar for every Kids Allowed team member, regardless of age or seniority.

I know of other providers in the sector who operate an induction system with similar results, so an all-out academy like ours isn't unique. There are lots of brilliant ideas in practice across our industry helping apprentices soak up their work culture, and many of my peers are happy to share their best practice, which is really beneficial to us all.

However, the introduction of the Apprenticeship Levy in 2017 forced us to adapt the way we delivered apprenticeships. With a system that

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had developed over five years and worked well, it was frustrating to have to rethink it in order to fall in line with government legislation.

We've managed it without losing any of the elements that make our academy unique, but the changes the Levy has brought to off-the-job training and the increased admin it involves is a headache we could do without. Government really needs to listen to and respond to some of the concerns from providers, and hopefully the Levy will be more accessible and attractive to companies.

Recognition for all

The recognition for our academy over the years means a lot. Especially the MBE for Services to Apprenticeships I received in 2016. What an honour! But it's the people whose lives we've helped change and who've helped make Kids Allowed the business it is that matter most.

We inspire loyalty from our learners and we attract real grafters with grit as a direct result of developing our own in-house apprenticeship scheme, which is so closely connected to the 'real life' careers at Kids Allowed. We have learners who catch three buses to get to us once every couple of weeks. Others have had babies during their courses and still completed their studies on time.

A particularly affirming moment was when a 56 year-old apprentice joined the academy and discovered her true passion for developing young lives. She was amazed she'd managed to complete all of her functional skills tests as well as a childcare qualification. The pursuit of happiness and fulfilment doesn't disappear with age – it gets stronger!

Our academy manager, Becki, summed up our role as a provider recently when she said: "My favourite part of the job is receiving a card and a massive hug from a learner to thank me for believing in



The challenge in this teambuilding exercise was to build a bridge joining the desks with minimal resources

them. I tell them every time they've only got themselves to thank for learning to believe in themselves."

An equal option

I'm a firm believer in the learning journey continuing beyond school, but I'm fiercely passionate about giving young people options that suit their learning style and their situations. University isn't for everyone; nor is it accessible to all. Traditional education settings just don't work for some. That shouldn't stifle their potential.

I feel that as an employer, mum, apprenticeship provider and a friend, I have a duty to advocate apprenticeships as an equal option to higher education. Teachers, careers advisors, parents, all of us need to be talking positively about both.

If we all do our bit in that respect, we'll soon find ourselves in the situation where everyone's a winner. ■

- Jennie Johnson MBE is founder and chief executive of Kids Allowed, which consists of seven dedicated centres and a training academy across South Manchester and Cheshire.

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