



## A letter to all staff across Storal Learning

17th April 2020

Dear colleagues,

Beneath the very visible impact that the COVID-19 crisis is having on our daily lives, these past few weeks have also precipitated a period of deep soul-searching - for us as individuals, as a society, and as an organisation. Amidst the intense, real-time decision-making that we've tackled on a daily, and sometimes hourly basis, we've also had to ask ourselves some deeper questions:

- What *really* matters most to us?
- How are we supporting the response efforts?
- What does the future hold?

As individuals, we'll have different responses to the questions above. That's what makes us unique. But collectively we all form part of Storal Learning, an organisation which you, our staff, are the heart and soul of. As such we'd like to share with you some of our inner thoughts on the questions above.

To address **what really matters most to us**, and **how we are playing our part to support the response efforts**, actions speak louder than words, so let's reflect on some of the actions we have taken across the country:

- We are extremely proud to have kept 15 of our 20 nurseries open for key worker families and for vulnerable children. By providing fantastic care for the children of key workers, we are enabling doctors, nurses, delivery drivers, teachers and other emergency workers to go into work and play their essential role in keeping our country safe. The NDNA recently published figures showing that only half of all nurseries remain open for key worker children and we have managed to keep open 75%;
- When the nursery and school closures were announced, we are proud that we acted quickly to reassure staff that we would pay their full wages for March, even before the Government's Job Retention Scheme was announced, and before we knew which nurseries would remain open beyond 20th March;
- We are proud that we have taken the stance not to charge non-eligible families any fees after 31st March and until the end of the closure period. Other settings and groups have taken a different approach, as I'm sure you've read in the news. We pass no judgement on their choices. These are exceptionally difficult times for businesses. We just did what we instinctively felt was fair and right;
- We are proud that we took the decision to continue with our performance-linked pay review in April, despite the economic uncertainty. Moreover, we decided to honour our commitment to paying all Level 3 qualified nursery staff, who have performed in line or above expectations, a salary above the statutory minimum wage, and ensuring pay transparency for all our staff;
- And congratulations to 11 of our colleagues across the organisation who have deservedly been promoted during the semi-annual promotion cycle, a signal of our continued commitment to career development, even at the toughest of times. We'll be sharing these details with you in the coming days.

The past few weeks have also demonstrated that leadership comes in different forms across Storal. A nursery practitioner, whether furloughed or working at nursery, taking the initiative to read stories or make learning videos to spark the imagination of children at home has been a leader; a senior practitioner who has stepped in to run the nursery on behalf of the management team has been a leader; a manager who believes it is their duty to go into nursery every day, even when there are only 1 or 2 children attending, has been a leader; an Area Manager who skipped their child's bedtime on many consecutive evenings early in the crisis to ensure that they could provide timely updates to staff and parents has been a leader; our Finance and HR team who have worked round the clock to ensure minimum financial disruption to staff and that payroll is run on time have been leaders. ***Leadership is not about titles or age; it is about stepping up when instinctively you know your contributions, regardless of how small or big, will help your colleagues and those who we are responsible for – which for ALL of us includes, first and foremost, our children.***

And amongst all our leaders who have stepped up during our country's hour of need, we would like to extend



particular admiration and gratitude to our colleagues on the front line who have continued to go into nursery, day-in-and-day-out, with a positive attitude and a profound sense of duty. You are true heroes. Every Thursday at 8pm, when we clap for our carers, we are also clapping for you!

Like it has for us, your mind may also have been oscillating between feeling very anxious to feeling completely inspired, at multiple times during this period. While we are all taking precautions to protect

our physical health, please remember to give proper focus to your mental and emotional health too. We hope that you found the recent Well-being email and the Storal Learning Staff Support Toolkit useful – don't forget to refer to it if you ever feel you need some hints, tips or advice. We also have our Employee Assistance Programme for when things may feel a bit overwhelming – just call 0333 000 2082 for free and confidential support.

Here are just a few examples of the fun activities that have taken place across our nurseries over the past few weeks, which we hope will give you inspiration:

- Rainbows have become the universal sign of hope and gratitude during this crisis. Tiggy-Winkles in Cheshire shared theirs with their local supermarket and hospital and we know many of you have yours posted on walls and windows at nursery.



- From activity packs to video messages and puppet shows, staff have really shown their creativity and love for their children and families. At Ickle Pickles, even our furloughed staff have voluntarily sent videos of themselves reading stories for the children, so the children don't forget their faces;
- Wilmere Lane in Cheshire shared a lovely activity with their parents, involving making a 'thankful paper chain' – writing down something that they are thankful for/makes them happy and hanging them around the house to focus on positive thoughts;
- Archway in Dorset created a display of their children keeping busy at home to give their children a sense of belonging and to still feel part of the nursery when they return from isolation;
- Ashby Day Nursery was very busy the week before they closed, filming enough story sessions with the lovely Emma to post one story a day for a month. These have been extremely popular with the first story session on the 26<sup>th</sup> March receiving 1.4k views on the nursery's Facebook page!
- Families at Tiny Tots have been participating in online drama and music sessions at home, as well as enjoying a virtual tour of Longleat Safari Park, while children at nursery have taken part in a cinema day with popcorn, whilst watching the animals roam;

- The management team at Old Crofts Bank, in particular Marie, who has swapped her nursery uniform for painting overalls, with the hope of inspiring the children and, indeed, the staff when the nursery re-opens.

Now is perhaps as good a time as any to remind everyone that nominations for the Storal Awards close on 31<sup>st</sup> May. This is a wonderful opportunity to recognise your peers, not just for their heroism during the crisis, but for their extraordinary work throughout the past 12 months. Voting is open to all employees across the company and you can nominate more than one person! For more information or to submit your nomination please visit: [www.storal-learning.co.uk/storal-awards#](http://www.storal-learning.co.uk/storal-awards#)



**So, what does the future hold?** In the short term, although the shutdown has been extended by a further 3 weeks, we can seek hope from the curve flattening out and by what's happening on the continent. On Wednesday children returned to schools and kindergartens in half of Denmark's municipal districts; Austria allowed DIY stores, garden centres and shops with an area of no more than 400 sqm to resume trading on Tuesday; and in Germany, schools are set to reopen on 4th May. We know that any re-opening is likely to take a gradual approach, but these are positive developments.

But it's important we level with you. The economy is currently going through an unprecedented shock and much of the employment gains that have taken place over the past decade have been wiped out in a matter of weeks. Even once shops and businesses start to open, with less people in work, the requirement for childcare may reduce. As businesses have grown more accustomed to remote working during this lockdown period, we may start to see more parents working from home and potentially adjusting their childcare requirements.

But there is also reason to be cautiously optimistic about the future of the childcare sector. As the Chancellor has said, the economy was fundamentally strong before the COVID-19 outbreak, and there is reason to believe that the sharp fall in economic activity will be followed by bounce back, albeit not as sharply. Moreover, even if demand patterns do change in the short term, this crisis has highlighted just how important our sector is to the functioning of the economy, and indeed to nurturing future generations. Not a day goes past without some mention in the press about the importance of nurseries and early years education.

When it does come time for parents deciding which nursery to place their child in, or indeed, for practitioners deciding which company they would feel proud to work for, we hope our collective team efforts during this period have demonstrated our true colours and will stand us in good stead. Never have the benefits of being part of a larger group been more apparent than during this crisis. Our team at Central Support and our Area Managers have quickly had to become quasi-experts in all areas related to the new Government guidance. We simply could not have responded the way we did without them. Moreover, through the collective pooling of resources and prudent financial management, we know that we will weather this storm, and all of you should take comfort from that. Moreover, with the dedication we have observed over the past few weeks across every level of the organisation, we are confident that we will emerge from this crisis as a stronger, more cohesive organisation.

We'd like to end our letter by sharing a few observations. While the news has a habit of focusing on the worst in society, this period has also showcased the very best in us, with countless small acts of kindness that have melted our hearts and reminded us of the importance of compassion, selflessness and a spirit of generosity. Thank you to Cook, the food retailer where a few of our parents work, for donating a full array of delicious meals for our children and staff at Ickle Pickles to enjoy; to Morrisons for donating more Easter Eggs than the team at Rocking Horse could possibly eat in a lifetime; to the parent in the South West who insisted on paying April fees, even though his child is not eligible to attend, just to show his support for the nursery and the staff; and to the parent at Rocking Horse, again, for providing us with such a generous quantity of hand sanitizer that we were able to share our supplies with parents and the local care home which the children used to visit before the virus struck. The list goes on and what it so clearly shows is that there is goodness to be found everywhere. And, let's not forget Captain Tom!



Thank you, all, for everything you do. We truly hope that we, and most importantly all our children, will meet again, soon.

Take care,

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Storal Learning