

# Hiring for Attitude: Unlocking Level 2 Apprenticeships

Smarty Pants Day Nursery is a family-run early-years provider based in East London. For over 31 years, the nursery has been rooted in its local community, committed to high-quality practice, child development, and staff progression. Its dedication has been recognised through two consecutive Outstanding Ofsted ratings.

Apprenticeships sit at the heart of Smarty Pants' staffing model, helping the nursery grow motivated early-years practitioners who share the organisation's values and approach to care and education.



## Why Smarty Pants Day Nursery made it an apprenticeship

For Smarty Pants, **apprenticeships are not an add-on**, they are a core workforce strategy. The nursery employs both Level 2 and Level 3 apprentices and typically has two apprentices at any given time. Treating apprentices as full, valued members of staff helps them gain meaningful experience from day one, while contributing directly to high-quality provision.

### Business benefits include:

- **Developing home-grown talent:** Apprentices learn “the Smarty Pants way” from the outset, building practice aligned with the nursery’s ethos.
- **Improved retention:** Many apprentices progress into permanent senior roles, helping to secure longer-term staffing stability in a sector facing national shortages.
- **Fresh energy and creativity:** Young apprentices bring new ideas to the classroom – including music, art, outdoor learning, and child-led activities.

## Karl Lewis, Director, explains:

“Once you take on an apprentice and help them grow, they are far more likely to stay. They

become the experienced members of staff – and even the mentors – that support the next generation.”

## Approach to recruitment and training

Smarty Pants works in close partnership with apprenticeship training providers to ensure a shared understanding of expectations and standards. Rather than prioritising experience, they focus on candidates who demonstrate motivation, reliability, strong communication, and a genuine interest in early-years education. As a result, they are able to offer both Level 2 and Level 3 entry routes.

Once in post, apprentices receive **structured mentoring** – often from former apprentices – alongside **clear guidance**, **hands-on classroom experience**, and **tailored support** with their off-the-job learning. **Confidence-building** is embedded through activities such as role-play and supported parent interactions.

This combination of clarity, practical experience and personalised support enables apprentices to progress rapidly.

During the nursery's most recent Ofsted inspection, inspectors noted they “couldn't tell the difference between apprentices and experienced staff”, reflecting the strength of Smarty Pants' development approach.



## Overcoming challenges

Like many early-years settings, Smarty Pants has seen apprentices initially struggle with punctuality, time management, confidence when speaking with parents, and balancing academic requirements with day-to-day responsibilities.

To support apprentices through these challenges, the nursery emphasises **transparent expectations from day one, regular check-ins, and open communication**. Experienced staff act as role-model mentors, helping apprentices build confidence and problem-solve in real time. Apprentices are also given dedicated time and space for coursework, within **a culture that treats questions, mistakes and learning as a natural part of development**.

### Success story: From nervous starter to confident practitioner

One recent Level 2 apprentice joined with a diagnosis of ADHD and initial anxieties about communication and organisation. Working in partnership with the training provider, Smarty Pants ensured she had reasonable adjustments, additional support time, and a clear structure for both work and study.

Her strengths in music, art and outdoor learning became invaluable classroom assets.

Over the course of her apprenticeship, her confidence grew significantly, she built strong relationships with children and parents and developed into a capable early-years practitioner; she now stands out as one of the nursery's most creative and dynamic staff members.

As Karl reflects: **“It’s about giving people a chance and harnessing their strengths.** She’s brought so much to our setting, and now she’s thriving.”



## What's next?

Smarty Pants plans to continue embedding apprenticeships at the heart of its workforce strategy. Their ambition is to:

- **Expand** the number of Level 2 opportunities
- **Strengthen** mentoring pathways
- **Support** more young people with additional needs into early-years roles
- **Encourage** other nurseries in their network to "make it an apprenticeship".

## Make it an Apprenticeship: Key lessons from Smarty Pants

- Treat apprenticeships as a **strategic investment**, not a bolt-on
- Build strong relationships with training providers
- Set high expectations, and match them with high support
- Celebrate the unique skills young people bring
- Offer pathways at **Level 2** to widen access and inclusion
- Recognise that apprenticeships can transform both young people and your organisation.



*Make it an Apprenticeship*