

Why I Joined a Childminder Agency **By Emma Palfreyman**

Background

I always wanted to work with children, but after I completed a degree in childhood studies, I got a bit lost in the retail industry. After having my own little boy, it seemed like the perfect time to formally join the sector. Childminding appealed to me because it meant I could stay at home with my son and work at the same time.

I searched for courses online and came across @Home Childcare, an organisation that offered pre-registration training in my hometown of Nottingham. The team was very supportive during the training process – every time I had a question, I fired an email off to the chief executive, Yvette, and she was always happy to help. I had not previously heard of childminder agencies, but when I found out that @Home also ran one, I started looking into the benefits of registering with the agency as opposed to Ofsted.

Quality assurance

For me, one of the biggest bonuses of registering with an agency is the annual inspection visit. From my point of view as a mother, I would definitely prefer my childminder to have a yearly inspection rather than waiting five or six years to be inspected by Ofsted – anything can happen in that time span. Parents don't often understand what an agency-registered childminder is, but as soon as I mention the annual inspection, they are always on side.

Training

Another key benefit for me is that everything is under one roof, rather than having to go out and find things like training courses for myself. I see other childminders on online forums asking each other to recommend a safeguarding course for example, or checking whether a course they have found is suitable. I feel confident knowing that the agency will always recommend the appropriate courses for me and that the training will be reputable.

Mentorship

I now look after two children before school and am just about to take on another two for a couple of days a week. One of the key ways in which @Home supports childminders is by matching each one with a personal mentor who provides advice and guidance. As a new childminder I really appreciate my mentor, who has a background as an Ofsted inspector. She rings me every three weeks and comes out to see me every other month. We use an online early years tracker tool, supplied by the agency, which allows me to enter my observations of each child online. She can then make suggestions about anything she picks up on and point me in the right direction. The system really cuts down on paperwork.

Parents can also access the software with a remote log-in to keep an eye on how their children are doing. I pay the agency an annual fee of £50 for using the software, and

pass that cost on to parents at £5 a month. They are all happy to pay because they love the system.

Business support

I will soon have my own profile on the @Home web site, which I can update to reflect any changes to my offerings, and it's a good way to market myself to parents. The agency also has forms and paperwork I could use, but I prefer to use my own branded forms as I very much wanted to stay an individual childminder, which is perfectly fine with the agency.

Value

Some childminders think agency fees are really expensive but I find I get a lot of value out of it. I charge £3.50 an hour during the day and £4 an hour for before and after school, including meals – that is the market rate in my area. I pay £25 a month to the agency, and all the support and training is included in that, apart from the fee for using the software, which comes directly from the parents. The registration fee was £55, which I don't think is extortionate considering the support that comes with the process.

Peer support

I am the agency's first registered childminder, but when more childminders sign up we will be able to offer cover for each other. I think it is a good idea, as parents often ask, "What happens when you are ill, or away?" It's great to be able to say that as a member of an agency, I have access to other childminders.

For me, the benefits of being part of an agency specifically focused on the needs of childminders are very clear. I am happy to be part of @Home Childcare.

For more information, visit www.athomechildcare.co.uk.