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# The rise of the super nursery

Every parent wants to get their child into a great school, but competition for places can be fierce – even when you're only two years old...

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**T**HE MAN HAD bags under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept for several days. His clothes were rumpled, his hair dishevelled. The reason? He'd come straight from one of West London's smarter maternity wards, where his wife had just given birth. His mission was important. Once he'd cut the umbilical chord, he had to attend to his next important fatherly duty – putting his newborn child's name down for the Acorn nursery school, in Notting Hill.

The Acorn, which snuggles neatly into Lansdowne Crescent, has a legendary reputation for the education of two-and-a-half- to five-year-olds. Ex-government minister, William Waldegrave, who sent his four children there, has said: "The only education you need in life is Acorn and Oxford." The roll-call of former students reads like a baby *Who's Who* – the children of Harry Enfield, Jade Jagger, Jeremy Paxman and Richard Curtis. And you have to be a very special sort of A-lister: Madonna's son, Rocco, was turned down for a place.

Welcome to the world of the super nursery school. The possession of a place for your child is as important as a double-fronted Georgian townhouse, a Tuscan retreat and a gas-guzzling 4x4. These establishments are a rare breed, mainly scattered around the metropolitan centres. Hot on the heels of Acorn (£1,500 a term, half-days only) are Miss Morley's in Belgravia, (£940 a term for

three half-days) and the Young England Kindergarten (£1,025 a term for morning sessions). Miss Morley's has educated Peaches and Fifi Trixibelle Geldof, and Young England is popular with London's lawyers and stockbrokers, many of them from Europe or America. It's the place where Diana, in her famous diaphanous skirt, worked before she married Charles.

Outside London, the northwest has its own nascent super nursery, in the form of Kalgarth Grange nursery school in Cheshire,

## SUPER NURSERIES OF THE WORLD

### The 92nd Street 'Y', New York, USA

The Big Apple's top preschool is the well-recognised first step to an Ivy League education. Two-year-olds are given IQ tests and interviewed. Four years ago, there was a nationwide scandal when a city analyst, Jack Grubman, changed some high-level shares advice to gain influence with one of the Y's biggest benefactors, and secure a place there for his two-year-old twins.

### Otowa Kindergarten, Tokyo, Japan

In the capital's Bunkyo district, competition for the top preschools is particularly fierce. Preschool entrance exams, known as 'ojuken', have literally become life-or-death situations. In 1999, Mitsuko Yamada was jailed for strangling the two-year-old daughter of a neighbour who had won a place at the prestigious Otowa, while her child had been rejected.

### The London School Kindergarten, Shanghai, China

China is a culture obsessed with education – a rumoured £19bn is spent every year – and this is the crème de la crème for ex-pats. The 'big school' has been running since 1619. PG Wodehouse and former Bank of England Governor Eddie George were pupils.

which was opened two years ago by retired Liverpool footballer, Rob Jones, and his wife. Robbie Fowler, Ian Rush and Steve McManaman were guests at their launch party, and the phone started ringing off the hook soon after.

So what is the appeal of the super nursery? Well, it's the same appeal that any good nursery has for parents and pupils. Miss Morley's and Young England are based on Montessori principles, the latter with a leaning towards the arts. The Acorn leads the pack - its Ofsted report in 2004 was faultless: "I've never heard of such an excellent report," confided one inspector. A day at Acorn consists of a morning 'show and tell', music, movement and singing, letter and number work, and community fundraising. Not so unusual, you might think. But according to headmistress, Jane Cameron, the Acorn secret is that the children love being there so much. "We've had children, on holiday in the Outer Hebrides, saying 'Am I going to nursery today?'" she says. "Yes, the teachers are excellent and love their jobs. But most importantly, for the children to be happy, the parents have to be happy. So we

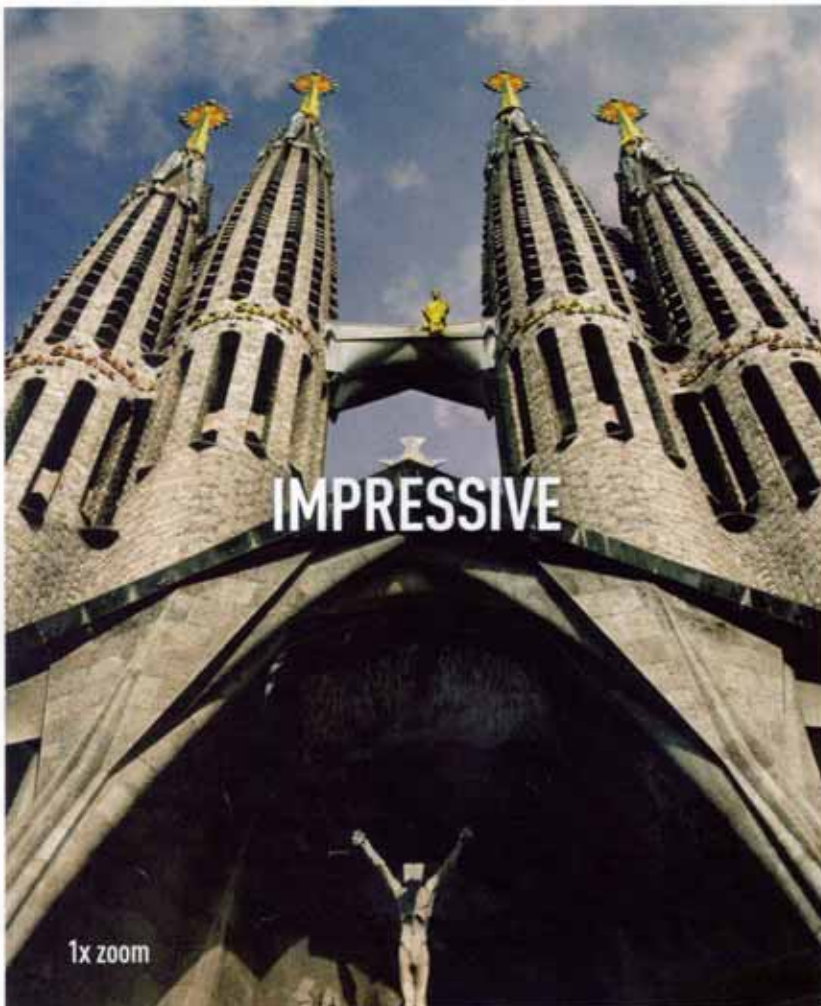


work hard to get them involved, encourage them to stay for the good morning song, the register, and the news. Then, it's a good first experience of education for everyone."

No-one is doubting a superb standard of education and care at the super nurseries. But what is more baffling - and perhaps a little alarming - is the behaviour of parents trying to get their children enrolled. It's competitive parenting elevated to a worrying degree. Jane Cameron maintains that the Acorn works on a ballot system, with a first-come-first-served

rule but, off the record, some parents whisper of a sinister secret network. One complained of it "acting like a snobby club", where you have to be informally nominated by two sets of parents before you're even considered. And once you're accepted, the bar is raised further. "You're expected to donate gifts to the summer raffle - the first prize may be a week in Mustique - so, if all you can contribute is a jar of jam, you'll feel pretty inadequate."

It may come as no surprise that in America this behaviour has been endemic for years. There are legendary stories of parents spending nights sleeping on pavements to get their children's names down in time, or contributing lavishly to the school's fundraising (one TV-producer in New York even offered a walk-on role in a popular sitcom worth \$15,000 to get his son into the school). Stories of parents buying flats in popular primary school catchment areas are nothing new in this country, but in America they're snapping up multi-million dollar penthouses near the 92nd Street 'Y' preschool, New York's most wanted. And most recently, in a delicious twist, people are



setting themselves up as preschool consultants. For \$4,000, Nina Bauer of New York's IvyWise Kids is available day or night to dispense her wisdom on how to get your child into the right school, which will hopefully offer computer courses or fast-track reading regimens for your child. There's a new breed of parents who are very achievement-oriented and results-driven. Parents want success for their children, and it all starts with a great preschool.

**H**EREIN LIES AN important question, and possibly the most questionable thing about the super nursery: is it all about the parent's ambition, while the real needs of the child come second? Eva Lloyd is a senior lecturer in early childhood studies at Bristol University. While she can't comment on particular nurseries, she's horrified at the way the 'waiting list' culture of private kindergarten classes is developing. "It's terribly sad to see the divisive and competitive nature of early education," she says. "Since the 19th century, the UK has had a wonderfully child-centred

philosophy, and it's a shame to see it slipping to the level of social cachet. It's all about the parents looking good, when it should be about the child." While Eva is sure that a three-year-old won't be damaged by early pressure or the rejection of not getting into a first-choice school, she's concerned about the implications. "My main worry is the kind of system where the child isn't the customer, but the parent is. Plus, the risk of 'hot-housing' can put children off education, and it can take a long time to put this right. There's a widespread feeling among educationalists that learning is already too formal, too early – and increasing the pressure to get on to the achievement treadmill cannot be a good thing."

In the meantime, the crazy dash for that coveted super nursery place continues. But don't despair if you find yourself abandoned by Acorn or rejected by the 92nd Street 'Y': just dose yourself up on some much-needed humour. As Woody Allen joked of his daughter, Bechet: "She didn't get into the right preschool, which means she won't get into right private school, which means she'll never get into an Ivy League college, which means she won't get a good job. I mean, she's three years old, and her life is finished" ■

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD PRESCHOOL

A good starting point to finding the right preschool or nursery for your child is the Ofsted report. Personal word-of-mouth recommendations from parents are also invaluable. You should also visit the nursery, with your child, to get a feel of what it's like, preferably during school time, so you can see how the children and teachers interact. All children have different needs, but consider the following:

- How long do the staff stay? If they have a quick turnaround it implies that staff are not that happy or well-paid. If staff have been there for a long time it is a sign of commitment.
- Look at the surroundings. Are the children's work and drawings displayed on the walls? Is there evidence of different outings and projects that show the range of activities being covered?
- Consider practical issues, like class size and carer-to-child ratios. This will have a direct impact on your child. Will there be time for your child to have some one-to-one or small group activities?
- Ask what your child's average day will be like. Is it structured or overscheduled? Is there also time for free play and outdoor activities?
- Trust your instincts. You know what will work for your child better than anyone else. If your child responds to structure then they will thrive in a school with a stricter routine, while another child might be better suited to a less formal setting.

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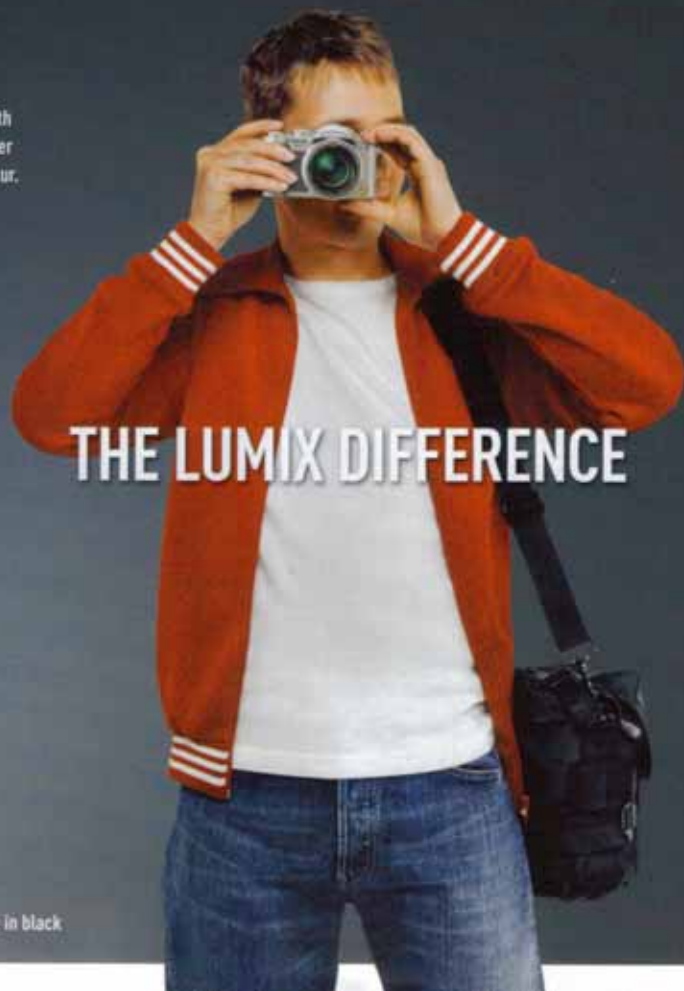
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