

**13 Secrets of Managing Staff Absence in Day Nurseries**  
**By Imogen Edmunds, Principal HR Consultant at Redwing Solutions**

Introduction

Welcome to my 13 Secrets of Managing Staff Absence in Day Nurseries. I hope you find this pdf useful.

Redwing Solutions have been working with day nurseries, pre-schools and out of hours clubs for 18 years.

We understand how staff absence can affect your ratios and your ability to deliver quality childcare. We have built an enviable reputation for the practical and friendly advice we give our clients.

Don't just take our word for it, here's a testimonial we received...

*"I cannot recommend Redwings highly enough. They have been so helpful and reassuring whenever I have needed them and have been able to accommodate without hesitation. They are very supportive, and it is reassuring to know that they are able to adjust their advice in accordance to our business needs. The company prides itself on building a personal rapport with its customers which makes it so much easier to pick up the phone or arrange a meeting which they are always happy to do. Thank you for all your dedication and support that you have given to not just me but the business as a whole."*

We'd love to talk to you about your HR needs. Just give us a call.



### **Secret #1 Have a time staff must report their absence by**

In many organisations staff are salaried and do not have to report their absence by a particular time of the day when they are absent from work. In childcare you should always have a time in the morning that your staff know that they must have informed you by that they are to be absent. Many nurseries request that staff let them know by 7 a.m. on the first day of absence and that they report using the Manager's mobile number.

I would advise against allowing them to find a colleague to cover, texting you or their friends or using social media messages to let you know they are not in.

### **Secret # 2 Advise staff to keep you informed to allow you to stand down cover**

Ask staff to contact you to stand down cover. It's important to encourage the staff to contact you during the day if they believe that they are improved to return to work the following day. Unlike other employers you may well need to stand down cover otherwise you will be over staffed. The need to ensure that someone is not returning too early can also not be underestimated. In the notoriously low paid childcare industry, it may be tempting for staff to return to work earlier than they should in order to be paid. This could present a danger to the employee and the children.

### **Secret #3 Use your own Self Certificate Form**

Always prepare your own Self Certificate Form that your staff must complete on their return to work. The form should have a declaration so that they sign to confirm that the information provided in the form is a true statement and that they understand that failure to provide a true statement is fraud. Few employees are prepared to 'lie' on paper. You need to keep

these Self Certificate Forms as evidence of absenteeism. The absences may add up over a period of time before you realise that someone's attendance is not as it should be.

#### **Secret #4 Handle absence information securely**

You must handle all absence information sensitively. Never allow other staff to know reasons for a colleague's absence. Should staff members share information amongst themselves then that is their decision. Don't display bar charts of staff absence in common areas and keep forms and records under lock and key. The most common mistake we find in day nurseries is recording sensitive information in the office diary which is then used for staff messages. Keep personnel files in a locked cabinet.

#### **Secret #5 Know Your Numbers**

Always measure staff absence! There are many measures you can use. The measure of total time lost can be misleading as it does not differentiate between staff who are long term sick and those who are having many short-term absences. As the latter causes more disruption to the nursery, and is more likely to be indicative of misconduct, we recommend you use the Bradford Factor to measure absence. The Bradford Factor is calculated using spells of absence, multiplied by spells of absence, multiplied by total number of days lost through absence in the period being measured. Plot all the results from the nursery on a graph using a spreadsheet and you will see three areas of staff that you need to speak to. Those who have a high level of attendance and that you should thank. Those who are having absence and need to be reminded that attendance matters, and those who are having too much absence and need to be warned about their non-attendance.

#### **Secret #6 Address high levels of absence with your staff**

When you have identified that you employ staff who have high levels of absence, you need to be consistent as to how you manage them. If you are inconsistent or exercise discretion you run the risk of discrimination claims.

Consider using your formal Disciplinary or formal Capability procedures to manage absenteeism. Some staff members need to realise the impact their absence has on ratios, their work colleagues and the children and you can achieve good results with staff counselling and one to one's. However, if the informal approach doesn't give you the results you seek you should make matters more formal.

#### **Secret #7 Carry out Return to Work Interviews**

In your Absence Policy refer to the employer's right to undertake Return to Work Interviews. They are very useful with occasions of short-term absence. If the employee knows that they will be interviewed on their return, they are less likely to mislead the employer as to the reason for the absence or lie on the Self Certificate Form. At the Return to Work Interview you have an opportunity to establish that you are satisfied that the employee is fit to return to work. If you are not satisfied you can ask them to see their GP again. You can also use the interview to update the employee on anything they have missed and to answer any questions/concerns that they may have.

#### **Secret #8 Record Absences Relating to Pregnancy separately**

As a sector you have more than your 'fair share' of pregnancies at work. When someone is pregnant, we advise that you record pregnancy related absence separately to prevent the data being used as part of your normal absence management. It would be inappropriate to

warn a pregnant employee about their absence if it is pregnancy related and you should not use pregnancy related absence when calculating attendance in a redundancy situation where a pregnant employee is at risk of redundancy.

### **Secret #9 Carry out Home Visits**

A useful strategy to manage long term absence is to carry out home visits. If the employee won't allow you to meet them at their home, then suggest a neutral suitable location or meet them in the workplace and call the meeting an Absence Review Meeting. Many employees in childcare welcome the opportunity to attend a meeting at work as they get to see the children in their care, if only for a brief period. The structure of the Home Visit should be to establish what has been happening whilst the employee has been absent (surgery, hospital appointments, physio etc) and what medication the employee is now taking. What the prognosis is and when the employee is likely to return. They should not be too informal and not too formal. A good Home Visit is about getting the balance right. The employee should realise that you are keen for them to return to fitness and return to work, the employee needs you to understand what is preventing that from happening now.

### **Secret #10 Employers don't have to accommodate a Fit Notes recommendation if they can't**

When an employee has been absent from work for 7 calendar days or more they should provide you with a Statement of Fitness for Work from their GP. On that Statement the GP can indicate whether they feel the employee could return if certain adjustments take place.

For example:

- Reduce hours
- Undertake different duties
- Use aids such as a chair/stool
- Don't work nights
- Reduce duties

**Commented [AL1]:** Change to 'Medical Professional' after the list of medical professionals able to issue fit notes has been expanded?

It is not uncommon for a GP to record on the Statement that in his/her opinion the employee should undertake 'light duties'. If you do not have any light duties that the employee could perform you are not compelled to create some unless you wish to. If you can't accommodate the recommendations, then the employee remains unfit for work and the note covers them as if the GP had marked the Statement 'Unfit for Work'.

#### **Secret #11 Request permission to right to GP**

In your Contracts of Employment you should reserve the right to refer the employee to independent medical examination. This may be a local occupational health adviser. The Government is currently looking at how they can support SME's with this, so watch this space! When someone is unfit for work, perhaps frequently (short term absence) or perhaps has been off for 4 weeks or more (long term absence) we would recommend you seek permission to write to their GP for a report under the Access to Medical Reports Act 1988.

The employee can refuse consent. They could also give consent only after they have read the report or give full consent and let you see the report without it being 'held back' for them to review. Your letters seeking permission show your reasonable response to their absence and how you are looking to manage their absence in a reasonable way. Give the employee approximately 7 days to reply with their consent form.

When you get a report from the GP bring your employee in for an Absence Review Meeting to discuss the report with them before making any decisions about their future.

#### **Secret #12 Ask about absence records in a reference**

The Equality Act 2010 prevents employers asking about sickness absence before a job offer is made. The employer can ask ex-employers about this in a reference request **after an offer has been made** and we would recommend you do so. It is not uncommon for an employer to not answer the question. The fact someone has been absent before may not indicate that

they will be absent in the future. We would recommend you use any information you obtain in a reference as a point of discussion with the employee to clarify what you are to understand from the reference.

### **Secret #13 Manage absence as a conduct or capability issue**

As we said in **Secret # 6** managing absence as a Disciplinary matter means you consider that the employee has committed misconduct. This would be common for short term absences, or payday Mondays etc.

If you consider that the employee is incapable of giving you good attendance, perhaps because they have been long term absent, then this is a Capability matter.

Capability is a potentially fair reason for a dismissal.

All employers should operate with separate Disciplinary and Capability Procedures.

If you need these for your childcare business, please visit our on-line shop.

[www.redwing-solutions.co.uk/shop](http://www.redwing-solutions.co.uk/shop)