



# Employment shortage – the great resignation

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Even before COVID-19, ensuring that nurseries and preschools were fully-staffed was a complex matter. Now, in the wake of the pandemic, the problem has developed into a full-blown crisis throughout the country. Overall, **almost a third of early-years staff, about 350,000 employees, lost their jobs due to the pandemic**, but even now that things are beginning to return to normal, many of those vacancies remain unfilled.

At first, it seemed that the unemployment relief being offered by the government was a disincentive for some to return to work. Popular opinion suggested that it was easier to stay home than return to the workplace. But the unemployment benefits ended weeks ago, and the staffing crisis has continued well past the start of the academic year, so it's clear something more profound is going on.

Here at Stepping Stones we have experienced more employee staff turnover during 2021 than ever before, and I wanted to understand what was causing this unprecedented

problem. I have been listening to our teams, and comparing notes with other nurseries to try and gain some insights into the problem, so that we can figure out a solution.

What I have discovered is that there are several issues which are causing the staffing shortage. Each issue alone would be a serious problem, but experiencing all of them together has created a “perfect storm” situation:

- **Health and safety:** One of the factors holding employees back from returning to the classroom is concern about the health and safety aspect. Some staff are nervous about returning to a closed environment, particularly as the winter approaches. This is a particular worry for older staff, or those with pre-existing health conditions, and also those who have a family member who is considered vulnerable. And just as things seemed to be settling down, along came the Delta variant and threw us all for a loop again.
- **Mental health:** The pandemic has led to a mental-health crisis as people throughout the world have struggled to cope with the heightened demands of life in lockdown, health concerns, sickness, isolation and so on. This has had a knock-on effect on employment levels in many sectors, including early-years education.
- **Lack of child care:** The problem actually reinforces itself: if a pre-school staff member doesn't have access to childcare, then they will not be able to return to work! How do you stop a vicious circle?
- **Relocation:** Nurseries often have younger employees on their staff who have moved away from home and are working in their first job. The pandemic made life very difficult for those young people and many ended up moving back to their home states, and are reluctant to move again whilst the threat of lockdown or travel restrictions still exists.
- **Retraining:** Living through a global pandemic is something none of us has ever been through before, and for some, it made them re-evaluate their lives and priorities. Some of our older staff chose to stay home to be able to provide care for grandchildren. Some of our younger staff, who were already concerned about working in a job which doesn't pay enough for them, have taken the opportunity to go back to school and re-train, and for some this was the push they needed to pursue their life's dreams. We might be losing staff, but it's for a great reason.

Many of the factors driving the employment crisis are about the staff members, and their needs as individuals. Employees who have health concerns should not have to compromise their wellness, and those who have struggled with stress and anxiety should be allowed time to recover. Young people who are choosing to move back home, or to move on to other opportunities should be given the support and encouragement to do so.

Here at Stepping Stones, we value our teams and want the best for them. That's why, even though the high employee turnover has been a challenge, I am not concerned about the long-term situation, and I believe it will lead to a positive change. It is so important for early-years staff to love their work and to have a high level of job satisfaction, as this is reflected in their relationships with the children.

Our patient approach to the situation is already paying off: in the past few weeks, three of the Stepping Stones team who were previously nervous about working during the pandemic, now feel ready to return to the classroom. Without any pressure from us, they chose the time that felt right for them. We had a beautiful reunion, welcoming our employees back, and finally getting a taste of pre-pandemic life. Perhaps "normal" really is just around the corner!

I am hopeful that one of the outcomes of this crisis will be a change in mindset throughout the country, as childcare should no longer be seen as an easy choice which anyone can do. A dedicated team with staff who actively choose to work with young children has the ability to transform the classroom environment and nurture each individual child. This can only benefit society as a whole.

Change can sometimes be uncomfortable (just ask your child how they feel on the first day of preschool!) and often involves stepping into the unknown. But rather than pushing off the problem, I feel that it is well worth embracing this opportunity and I look forward to the positive results of the situation.

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