

CHILDCARE

Keeping a close eye on nurseries

The quality of care at nurseries is under the microscope following the BBC's *Nurseries Undercover* investigation in which Ofsted approved nurseries were shown breaching regulations. **Jo Stephenson** finds out how the sector is trying to allay parents' fears

Gary and Sara Kewin regularly log on to the internet to check up on their two-year-old son James.

The Liverpool couple are among a growing number of parents keeping an eye on their children at nursery via CCTV systems linked to secure web sites.

"It is peace of mind more than anything," explains Gary. "If you're worried about anything, if your child has been up all night with a cold, you can make sure he's being well looked after."

Gary, a maintenance fitter, and Sara, a nurse, are very happy with the care James receives but admit their confidence in nursery care in general was shaken by a recent television investigation into private day nurseries.

The BBC's *Nurseries Undercover* has thrown a spotlight on standards, but an Ofsted report published last week found most childcare settings are providing a satisfactory or good service.

On the flipside, Ofsted looked into 6,250 concerns about nurseries and childminders from April 2003 to March 2004. It took formal action in 378 cases, permanently cancelling the registrations of 49 nurseries and childminders and prosecuting four childcarers.

Ofsted registers nurseries and carries out checks on premises and staff to make sure they are suitable. It pledges to inspect all new providers within a year of registration and re-inspect once every two years.

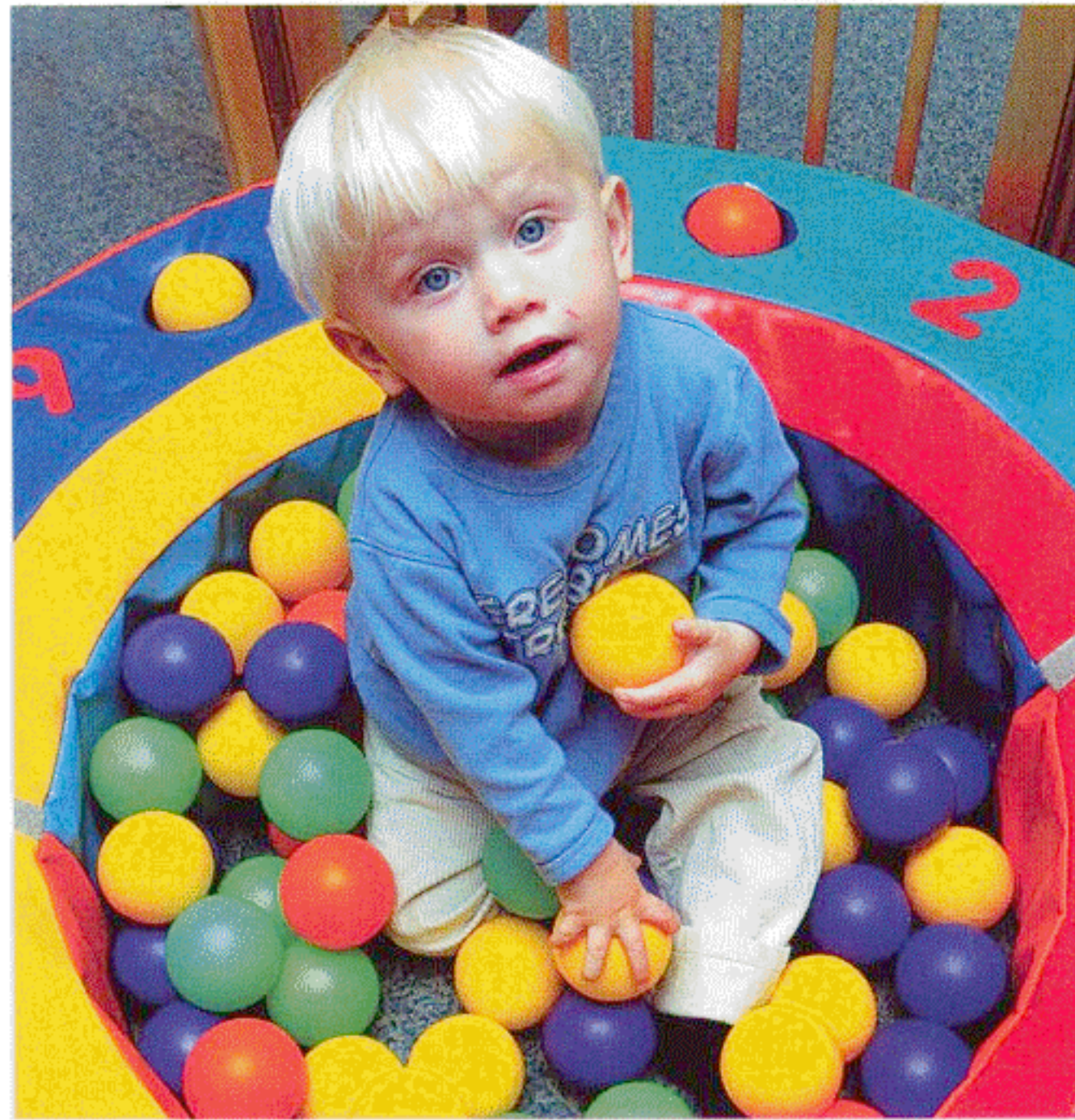
But the controversy over nursery care has raised questions over the efficacy of the current system, with Ofsted pledging to introduce more on-the-spot checks and short-notice inspections.

David Bell, the chief inspector of schools, has been the first to admit that Ofsted cannot be there all the time and has urged parents to do all they can to check out settings themselves.

But Stephen Burke, director of the Daycare Trust, says: "Parents should be able to rely on the Ofsted report as well as visiting and asking questions themselves."

Parents should automatically be given at least a summary of the Ofsted report when asking about a childcare place, he believes.

However, many childcare profession-



Most childcare settings provide at least a satisfactory service, says Ofsted

WHEN OFSTED TAKES ACTION

- Ofsted's childcare inspectors can read or copy records, take measurements, photos and sound recordings, inspect arrangements for children's welfare and interview childcarers and the children themselves
- In certain circumstances they can carry out surveillance
- In cases where there are child protection concerns Ofsted works with the police and social services
- www.ofsted.gov.uk

als agree there is a limit to what Ofsted can achieve.

This is why parents like Gary and Sara are turning to services like NurseryCam, a web-linked surveillance system specifically designed for nurseries and installed in nearly settings across the UK since its launch last year.

The providers that contact the company are usually good ones, says director Dr Melissa Kao, because they are confident that they "have nothing to hide".

Paul Wells, proprietor of the Cheeky Little Monkeys Nursery in Blackburn, has just had a NurseryCam system installed.

It was something he'd planned to do since setting up the nursery in February 2003 but he says: "After seeing that programme I felt I had definitely made the right decision."

"We had a survey done before we actually went ahead with it. The only issues the parents had were to do with security but once we assured them it was the same as internet banking they were happy with it."

Wells's nursery has also embarked on the National Day Nurseries Association's Quality Counts quality assurance scheme, one of 50 schemes accredited by the DfES.

According to Rosemary Murphy, chief executive of the association, quality assurance is one of the best indicators that a nursery is trying hard to raise its game.

However, she says the growing number, scale and variety of such schemes can be confusing for parents.

She says the driving force behind raising standards needs to be the nursery staff themselves, but claims this can only happen if staff are well-qualified and well-paid.

Her view is shared by Michael Freeston, the Pre-School Learning Alliance's director of training and quality. He believes it is up to settings themselves and umbrella organisations like the alliance to build upon the minimum standards set by Ofsted with quality assurance schemes like the alliance's Aiming For Quality programme.

Nord Anglia is one of the UK's largest nursery chains and owns Petits Enfants in Teddington, south-west London, one of the nurseries featured in the BBC investigation.

Andrew Fitzmaurice, chief executive of Nord Anglia, says the BBC undercover investigation occurred not long after Nord Anglia took over the nursery. Since then "significant improvements" have taken place at that nursery and across the board as the responsibility for operating procedures and practice for all its nurseries has been taken over by a new team.

He says: "We conduct our own internal audits. We don't wait for an Ofsted inspection. We have a team of people who are responsible for constantly going round our nurseries and inspecting for Ofsted and our own quality standards."

He adds: "We have got no more or less of a focus on quality than before. It was always the first thing on everyone's list. That is how you have a successful nursery. As well as it being the right thing to do it is good business practice."