

**WOULD YOU PAY £15,000 A YEAR
FOR YOUR TODDLER TO FINGERPAINT
AND LEARN FRENCH?**

Welcome to the world of the
super-rich nursery

For a new breed of wealthy,
competitive parents, the race for top
schools starts before their children
are out of nappies. By Sally Williams





Emanuela Ferrero

Emanuela Ferrero's despair began when her son was three weeks old. Ferrero, 35, who works in communications for a global brand, was on maternity leave and living in Chelsea, in London. She had a nanny to look after Leopoldo, now two, when she went back to work and wanted to find a nursery school.

Ferrero thought she was being organised, applying for a nursery school when Leopoldo was still barely able to lift his head. In fact, she wasn't nearly organised enough. "I should have applied when I was pregnant," she says. "But I thought, 'Come on, it can't be that difficult.'"

She telephoned one nursery school. "They told me, 'We have a two-year waiting list, so you are already too late.'" She called another. "They said, 'Don't even bother coming in.'" She called another. They said the same thing. Leopoldo, aged three weeks, was turned down everywhere. "I was in tears. 'Oh my God, my poor baby will never get in anywhere,' I thought. 'I'm a disaster; I have ruined my child's opportunity to have a decent education.'"

Ferrero panicked. "I became obsessed. I was maniacally visiting nurseries." Because she couldn't drive – Ferrero had a caesarean

– she walked the streets of southwest London with Leopoldo in the pram. "It was a nightmare," she says. "I was hormonal. I was tired. I lost all the weight I gained through pregnancy because I was walking miles every day. I was desperate to put his name down at the nurseries.

"I got so obsessed, my mother-in-law used to tease me. She said, 'You cannot visit all the nurseries in London. Just pick one. It's a nursery. He will go there for a couple of hours a day. It's not the end of the world.' But it is actually the end of the world."

Nursery school is not compulsory. Toddlers can start at three at state nurseries and two

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and a half at private kindergartens, and stay until they begin school at four.

Ferrero knew there was huge competition at four for the "right" prep schools. But now she being told that the "wrong" nursery would limit that choice.

"I was shocked, because when I went to visit a nursery school, the owner said, 'What primary schools have you registered Leopoldo at?' I said I had no idea. 'He's three weeks old. I'm dealing with nursery school right now.'" She realised the admissions process was strategic. "I met expectant mothers registering their children who had done their homework, and had the whole educational path mapped out," she explains. "From nursery to university, basically." And to do that parents believe that spending a fortune on London nursery fees for their precious toddler to fingerprint five mornings a week is money well spent.

Ferrero registered at eight nurseries. Registering doesn't guarantee a place and the non-refundable registration fee can vary from £50 to £150. She says she spent around £1,000 on registration fees. Two confirmed a place straightaway; the others said they would let her know 10 to 12 months before Leopoldo was due to start. ➔

Emma Chandler,
with twins India
and Charlie



THE COST OF A CONSULTANT IS ON TOP OF NURSERY SCHOOL FEES – UP TO £10,000 A YEAR FOR THREE HOURS A DAY

4-11). For that, Lucy Fletcher, 25, school placement manager, will be your advocate, helping you choose a nursery and fill out the registration forms, which should be handed to the nursery school soon after having the baby. "Eighty to ninety per cent of nurseries say closest to birth registration," says Petty. (As do some preparatory schools, for example Wetherby pre-prep in London.) Some nurseries ask parents to register during pregnancy. Registration forms should be filled out before labour, with gaps for name and

Looking back, she now realises she became a little unhinged. And Ferrero is not the only one. Competition is so fierce for private nursery places in affluent parts of London – around 17 applications for one spot, according to one nursery – rich parents are paying over £18,000 just to secure a year's place. The growth of London as a financial centre and the subsequent influx of very wealthy foreign families – from Russia, the Middle East, United States, east Asia and southern Europe – has triggered a boom in demand for places at top private schools. The intense competition for entrance higher up the education ladder means the race for places starts sooner.

"London day schools are highly competitive, and this has trickled down to nursery school," says William Petty, director of tutoring at Bonas MacFarlane, a tuition company. "Not long ago you had your local nursery school, which was probably at the end of your road; you went in and filled out a form on the spot and they said, 'OK, great, can't wait to meet him or her when they start.' Now you can't just walk in and expect a place. There aren't enough places. There aren't enough prep schools; nurseries are even fewer."

The competition for nursery schools isn't just over the quality of the nursery school, but rather the schools which the nursery feeds the children to. More specifically the schools that have a reputation for their students gaining admission to Oxbridge. "People now find out where someone has gone to university, where they went to school, where they went to prep school and where they went to nursery and they follow the path and they want to put that together for the child – and the child is one day old," says the owner of one nursery. Parents believe that certain nurseries open doors. "Whether it's true or not, it's difficult to say, but it's a perception that's impossible to fight," says Petty.

In any event, the scramble for places has reached such extremes that the admissions process has been completely transformed. "I tried to register [at one London nursery] when I was 12 weeks pregnant; it still wasn't early enough ... Oversubscribed is not the word," writes one mother on Mumsnet. "I've been joking to my friends back home about the school situation in London," another replies. "You basically have to roll over in bed, say, 'Mmm, that was great, honey,' and get on the phone to schools."

The boom, uncoincidentally, has resulted in the appearance of educational consultants. Bonas MacFarlane charges £5,500 to "promote your best possible chances" to find a place in a nursery school – and the next stage, be it a pre-preparatory (pre-prep) school (for boys aged 4-8) or preparatory school (for girls aged

date of birth. As a result, contacting your educational consultant is a top priority after giving birth.

"I made the application call and required email at 3am from the labour ward just after giving birth," emailed one mother, who wished to remain anonymous, of getting her son into Wetherby pre-prep. "And all just to get on the interview list. We were successful in getting the place, but goodness me, I was surprised that that was what I had to concentrate on straight after a 22-hour labour."

Marina Byrne, 36, managing director of Educate Private, who used to run a corporate events venue, charges £3,000 to find a place in a nursery school (£8,000 for senior school), which includes research, organising visits, "managing all the paperwork" and reminding the family when to pay the deposit. Last year, she advised 40 parents looking for a place in nursery and/or a pre-prep.

Sabine Hook, 30, a former teacher, who is now an early years consultant with Holland Park Tuition & Education Consultants, charges £250 an hour plus VAT for advice. For a one-off fee of £1,500, she will also guide parents through the nursery-school admissions process, from research to securing a place. Last month, she worked for ten families. "The competition means parents need to work hard to impress the nursery, she says. For example, both parents should be present on open day visits. "They don't want to hear, 'Oh my husband couldn't get out of a meeting,' or 'My wife had a hairdressing appointment.'" What's more, you should write a thank-you letter – never an email – after the visit. "Just to make you memorable."

The cost of a consultant is on top of already expensive nursery school fees – anything up to £10,000 a year for three hours a day, rising to £15,600 for a full-time place. Then there are additional costs, such as the non-refundable registration fee, which ranges from £50-£150.

"It is a good business to be in," says Jane Ritchie, former headmistress of the Minors Nursery School in Notting Hill, west London (alma mater of Prince William and Prince Harry.) In 1990, the fees were around £200 a term; now they are £2,950. "The cost of nursery education has shot up," says Ritchie. "The type of people choosing private education has changed." She used to predominantly teach the children of the "upper classes". These have largely been replaced by the children of people in the financial industry. These parents have amped up and competed aspects of London life.

Ritchie took over the nursery from Jane Mynors, its founder, in 1990 and ran it for 21 years before selling it to the Alpha Plus Group in 2011. Alpha Plus owns a network of independent schools including Wetherby



Lucy Fletcher, of Bonas MacFarlane, advises parents for £5,500

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Pre Prep and Wetherby Prep, "and they send their leavers to Eton, Harrow, Winchester, St Paul's, King's College, Wimbledon," explains William Petty. "The six best boys' schools in the country."

"I think peer pressure between parents plays an enormous part in nursery education now," Ritchie says. "Parents are hugely competitive. They say to their friends at dinner parties, 'Where's little Johnny going to school?' And the answer is, 'He's three months old; we haven't really thought yet.' And everyone goes, 'Goodness! You've left it far too late.' People try and beat each other, therefore registration becomes even sooner. They have huge aspirations for their children. Many parents put nursery education and pre-prep education as a very, very high priority."

Miss Daisy's nursery in Chelsea, one of three private nursery schools owned by Daisy Harrison (a fourth opens in Knightsbridge in September), is situated off the King's Road.

Harrison, 38, a former prep school reception teacher, opened her first nursery school in Belgravia, in 2006. "I thought the children coming in from nursery were not really prepared for school – they weren't being taught to follow instructions, hang their coat on the peg, hold a pencil, the pleases and thank yous," she explains.

When Harrison opened the nursery in Chelsea in 2010, 20 per cent of her intake were international families. Today it is 60 per cent. "A lot of English families have moved out of this part of London, it's become so expensive," she says.

The nursery has 40 children: 20 in the first "nursery" year; 20 in the second "kindergarten" year. The younger children do a half-day and, from the age of three, can stay from 8.45am to 3pm, three times a week. Fees are £3,200 a term for a half-day; £4,400 for a full day. (A full day at the Kensington nursery will cost £5,200 a term.)

Children do French, singing, drama, cooking, football, art and craft. They learn how to hold a pencil, count up to ten, begin to write their name and know their shapes, colours and letter sounds. Fifty per cent of the children are "beginning to read" when they leave at four.

The big attraction of Miss Daisy's is also her track record of getting children into elite London prep schools, where an entrance assessment is taken a year before admission, at the age of three.

Harrison says she doesn't "teach to the test", because it's not about passing an entrance exam. "Schools are looking at the whole picture," she says. "They want to see the child who has nice manners, who follows instructions, who can concentrate and has potential." But she is proud of her placement record – in the entrance hall is a display of

the schools where the children are going on to – and as part of the topic of the week (“transition”) children are to come to nursery one morning wearing their new uniform. And Miss Daisy’s promotes the sort of personal qualities schools have a preference for. For example, children can distinguish themselves in the assessment, according to Petty, by a firm handshake. “Introduce yourself. Eye contact. ‘Hello, Mr Jones, my name is William, very nice to meet you.’ If a kid has his hands in his pockets – immediately out of the picture,” he says.

“The children shake my hand every morning,” confirms Harrison. “Right from the beginning, because when they visit their new school for their assessments, that is the number one thing the headmistress or headmaster will say, and if they are used to doing it here, they will do it.”

What about shy children? “We make it a wave and slowly encourage them. Some parents want them to do it desperately, and I say, ‘Don’t worry, they will get there.’”

Miss Daisy’s Chelsea offers 20 places each September. The non-refundable registration fee is £150. So how does she choose which children to take? “We do make a note if we get the registration form straight from hospital, because a lot of thought has gone into that, but do we make our final decision on it? No.” She looks at birth dates – “We wouldn’t want a whole class of summer birthdays” – and more subtle indicators of background. “Personal recommendation is the number one for me,” she says. “There are such lovely families here. They know what we’re about. They know what matters to us and I believe their friends will be the same.”

For admission in September 2013 there were 200 names on the waiting list, and only 2 places. (Eighteen places went to siblings.) This September there were 12 places (and again, around 200 on the waiting list). “People take it very personally, and it really is that we don’t have the space,” she says.

Parents are informed if they have a place a year before the child is due to start, when they are charged £1,000 deposit. Some nursery schools offer places 18 months or 2 years before. Parents pay a very large deposit, which is non-refundable.

“I’ve finally realised it’s not only first come, first served. It’s about how much you butter them up,” says Sienna, a former banker and now stay-at-home mum, married to a banker. They live in Notting Hill, where Sienna’s five-year-old son went to one of the “super-competitive” nurseries. She says the “Famous Five” nurseries are Acorn, Minors, Strawberry Fields (where pupils include Harper Beckham), Rolfe’s and Ladbroke Square Montessori.

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nursery every month, and sending letters, cards, photographs, cookies,” she goes on. “It’s excessive, but I understand that’s the way it goes. You’ve got to play the game. You must visit the nursery and tell them how much you love them. You have to show who you know, so you have to drop a lot of names. ‘Oh, I know so and so, who goes to the nursery.’”

“The other competitive thing,” Sienna continues, “is not just the nursery, it’s if you get a morning or afternoon place. Because when your kids are young they are still napping in the afternoon, and so you have to force them to drop their nap earlier than they necessarily would have to.”

Sienna – not her real name – writes an anonymous blog, Notting Hill Yummy Mummy, “chronicling the absurd but wonderful, ridiculous but sometimes inspiring, lives of Notting Hill residents”, and recently wrote a post about the competitiveness of nurseries in that part of London, where even celebrities are turned down. “One famous A-list fashion designer was rumoured not to have gotten a place because when she visited she wore big, oversized sunglasses and never smiled,” she

wrote. “I had to pull the post off the web because some of the mothers were slightly offended by it,” she explains. “What I wrote was factual. This is what they’re like. But the parents don’t like to be seen as so competitive, even though they are. There is a lack of insight, perhaps. They get carried away with it and don’t realise it’s not normal.”

Emma Chandler, 41, a stay-at-home-mum, who used to work in fashion, lives in Notting Hill with her husband, a venture capitalist, and their one-year-old twins, India and Charlie. She decided on schools while pregnant: Pembridge Hall (India) and Wetherby (Charlie), because she knew she was having a girl and a boy. There were a number of nurseries she was interested in. And she knew she had to register soon after birth. But the birth turned into a drama when she went into labour ten weeks early. “Obviously, the children weren’t very well and Emma had to stay in hospital,” says Marina Byrne, educational consultant and friend of Chandler’s, who acted as her emissary. “I stayed in contact with her husband the day they were born and contacted a lot of the schools on her behalf. Got the forms, brought them to her house, made sure the signatures were there and then dropped them off at the various schools,” she says.

In fact, Chandler found a nursery school without Byrne’s help. “My husband and I went about three weeks ago, met the headmistress, who said she’d filled about 97 per cent of the spaces for September 2015, and then they offered us two places.” She goes on, “We were really enthusiastic about it,” she ventures as to the reason why the twins were chosen. “And there was a bit of a Cliff Richard connection. The headmistress used to be his backing singer and he’s also a family friend of my in-laws, and that came up in conversation.”

Last summer, Emanuela Ferrero finally found a “very sweet” nursery for Leopoldo after recruiting Sabine Hook, who sent her detailed reports of nurseries and primary schools. “I am very happy with it,” she says.

The registration fee is £250, which is deducted from the first term’s fees. The cost is £1,000 for the first two terms for six hours a week, rising to £2,500 a term as Leopoldo increases his days. The nursery is an unofficial feeder school for the prep school that is ideally Leopoldo’s next destination.

The only snag is Leopoldo must be potty-trained. “No accidents at all, which is a stress, because my boy will be two years and three months when he starts, so I know my mission during the summer will be potty training. If I fail, he will miss a term and have to start in January. They said that,” she stresses. “They are being very clear about it.” ■