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Got a degree? You could be a childminder

With Teach First he persuaded college graduates to work in inner-city schools. Now Brett Wigdortz wants to transform childminding, he tells Helen Rumbelow

I am told I need to wait a few minutes for Brett Wigdortz to arrive. OK, I say, I'll take a seat. Then I panic. Looking around, I realise I am in a north London start-up office so cool and populated by young people that there is no other option than to swing in a hanging chair. I sway and wonder, could this be the hippest childminding agency in the world?

Wigdortz arrives. He ticks all the "start-up founder" boxes of trainers, a deep American accent and a name like a tech entrepreneur in a sitcom. We retreat to a room built entirely of chipboard, where he tells me his story.

Wigdortz was a man with a familiar problem. His family had three children and two working parents — his wife with a career as an all-hours paramedic — and often no one was left holding the baby. Like everyone new to the parenting game in the UK, he was in for a rude shock when he looked at our childcare market. It manages to be super-expensive, super-hard to get hold of and not so fit for purpose, like some kind of designer handbag.

However, Wigdortz was not any normal dad. While at home he and his wife were stressed by cobbling together nursery, au pairs and childminders, at work he was the founder and leader of Teach First. This organisation lures the brightest graduates into giving two years of their youth, energy and optimism to teaching inner-city children.

Teach First had an improbable start. Wigdortz was 26, working on secondment to London for the American management consultants McKinsey, when he saw an intractable problem in our urban schools. With no background in education and only a few weeks living in Britain, he thought he had the idea to fix it. He was brilliantly young and naive. "It would all be really difficult," he says, "but I thought, going in, it would be easy."

Teach First is now the largest graduate recruiter in this country. Wigdortz is also the co-founder of Teach For All, an international organisation that replicates the model in 53 countries. It is a model that has been copied across the police, social services and the prison service. Some traditionalists in the field say that the idea is little more than flashy rebranding; others believe it is a revolution to change lives for ever.

Now in his mid-forties, Wigdortz wondered if he had a second big idea in him. Could he do a whole-sector revolution for the age group that you could argue need it even more — the infants in the years before they get to school? And in doing so help stressed working parents like himself. So Tiney, his childcare service, was born.

"To me it's this very simple civil rights issue that no one's talking about in such stark terms," he says. "Either

you get a good education or you don't have a lot of life opportunities."

The benefits of high-quality pre-school education are proven. But in this country it is infamously expensive. In London 25 hours a week at a nursery or with a childminder costs an average of £758 a month. Factor in a full-time job or another sibling and the cost quickly feels bankrupting.

However, as Wigdortz was to find out, something odd is happening. The UK market for formal childcare was valued at £5.5 billion in 2018. The population is growing, mothers are working more, demand is booming. Despite that, supply is falling. Between 2016 and 2018 the number of individual nurseries declined by 20 per cent, while in the five years to 2018 the number of childminders fell by 27 per cent. Harried parents scrabbling for nurseries won't need a report by the healthcare consultancy Laing Buisson, released this year, to tell them that it is estimated that the UK has a shortage of one million childcare places. What's going wrong?

"I started thinking," Wigdortz says. "I want to do something else that could create change and help children, and I got more fixated on this one problem. In Britain it's definitely a major problem, but it seemed every

“The thing we want people to realise is these are educators

country I went to, it was the same. Is there a new way to solve it?"

He thinks he can revolutionise childminding. When I first heard this, I thought it was a terrible idea. Childminding, despite some great individual practitioners, has a pretty poor image. It reeks of "second best" to nanny or nursery, cheaper than either. A depression hovers over the field, with many childminders abandoning ship. Then I realised, that's the point. Or rather, that's the low point — like urban teaching before this — at which Wigdortz likes to come in to start afresh.

"That's what got me excited about Teach First, something we can really grow and make system change," he says. "That's what we're trying to do with this."

The Tiney concept is to form a hybrid of nursery and childminder, or a string of "tiny" nurseries that combine the high-quality curriculum of an institution with the attention and family setting of a domestic home.

The two main issues, when they interviewed childminders and parents, was isolation and paperwork. Childminders didn't like the isolation,



and neither did parents. So Tiney trains its workers in "cohorts" that stick together and groups them in small neighbourhood collectives that meet at least weekly. In addition, they are in daily contact with headquarters, which supplies them with training and a checklist of educational play activities to complete each day.

It aims to recruit an elite group of childminders. Wigdortz brought with him a woman who was the head of selection at Teach First for 11 years. So far they have had 500 applicants and selected 100. This, he says, is the core of becoming a trusted brand for parents. If Wigdortz can make childminding aspirational, he may have pulled off the rebranding feat of his career. It starts with the very word "childminder".

"The branding's not great," he says. "I don't even like the word 'childminding', that doesn't sound like an educator. It doesn't sound like someone who's leading children. It sounds pretty passive."

What's better? "We're calling them 'tiny home-nursery owners' or 'tiny home-nursery leaders'," he says earnestly. I say that sounds terribly clunky.

"The thing we want people to realise is these are educators. They're not just minding children, it's a very active sort of role. So if any of your readers can come up with a good word for it..."

Please, *Times* readers, save the world from "tiny home-nursery leaders".

When Wigdortz was growing up in New Jersey both his parents worked,

his mother was a teacher and his father was in marketing. He and his brother were cared for by two sets of grandparents. A generation later and childcare had become a headache.

It was his wife who decided to cut her hours to accommodate the children, who now range in age between six and 13. Would he have considered it? "Yes," he says firmly, while also mumbling something about his wife being "more caring" than him. He took six months of leave from Teach First after the birth of his third child, during which he was the primary carer for all three, with no other childcare. "I loved it."

Wigdortz says that men in a similar position to him could now, via Tiney, earn £30,000 while staying at home looking after their own children. That's his earnings estimate for a childminder in London, caring for three children with "a couple more after school".

"It's the equivalent of a teacher salary," he says, but with the attractive bonus of being your own boss. Tiney says that it will take two months to train, mostly with online courses, followed by a five-day intensive course before a childminder starts and there will be inset days for continuing training. Tiney gets a cut of their income, of course (up to 10 per cent of the fees charged to parents).

Below: Brett Wigdortz



These businesses are classed as "B Corporations", which means they must balance purpose and profit.

Wigdortz says of starting Teach First that it helped that he was an outsider. "Sometimes being an immigrant makes things easier. I was very naive and I hadn't grown up in the British class system and the British political system. I didn't feel tribal about anything. I just saw it as a problem that needed to be solved."

In the same way I think it helps that he is a man. Tiney is recruiting above the average number of men as childminders, aided by Wigdortz and its 50 per cent male staff. The vibe of its marketing and website is for the tech-literate professional man or woman who probably has a young child, but may never have considered combining that with childminding.

While the men are gradually increasing in numbers in primary school teaching and nursing, in childcare the Daycare Trust estimates that there are fewer than 3 per cent of them, the same proportion as in Norway 30 years ago (Scandinavia has unsurprisingly upped those ratios since). You could argue that Tiney's ability to attract men into childminding will be a marker of the success of its rebranding. "It'd be so great for more men to do it," Wigdortz says. "It should be totally normal."

The few men who have signed up to Tiney so far have mostly been those who would like to be stay-at-home fathers; some are single parents. That's not the case for Ezra, 40. He works in the music industry, but, since the birth of his 18-month-old daughter, was going to cut back to look after her two days a week. That way he could share care with his wife, a clinical psychologist. He remembers looking after his elder child in a similar way, but being put off by the lack of men when he took her to playgroups. "It felt like I was intruding on such a female-dominated space," he says.

Ezra was attracted to Tiney because he saw on the website that the leader and other staff members were men. He would not have considered childminding normally, he says. At Tiney he will be trained with a couple of other men and will remain connected to them for support, as well as with his local chapter of other Tiney workers. It would have been easy for him to feel isolated as either a stay-at-home dad or male childminder otherwise. Also, doing it for only two days a week, he would have felt too daunted by the paperwork to become registered as a childminder.

"I'm still working in my normal career most of the time," Ezra says, "but this made total sense to me. I love all the training; as good as I thought I was with children, I think I want to develop more. I also like the fact that children are seeing a positive role model, to go against all the stereotypes in the media."

Wigdortz is older now. Unlike when he started Teach First, he knows this won't be easy. It might even be harder, now that he has to dash home at six to pick up the children. **tiney.co**