

Baby room brilliance

Michael Jones explores what is needed to support staff in achieving best practice when carrying out the most responsible job of all in the early years – caring for other people's very young children.

IN MY work as an advisor, trainer and writer, I am always looking for the 'magic ingredients' that make up the very best practice when working with young children. This is especially important when we look at what needs to be provided for the youngest children in our daycare settings – those who are under two-years-old. As leader of three Every Child a Talker (ECaT) projects I often led activities in 'Baby Rooms'.

I observed a very wide variation in physical conditions, including the actual size of the rooms and resources available for the adults and children to share together. While there is a legal requirement for there to be a minimum ratio of one adult to three children, some managers stuck rigidly to this, while others were more flexible.

How the staff interacted with the children differed, with some seeing positive communication with little children as their key purpose, while others restricted their work to meeting the children's physical needs. Significantly for me, there was wide variation in the staff's experience and confidence in carrying out their role.

I have to say that my own success at leading activities in baby rooms was sometimes woefully inadequate. Often, what I had planned just did not work. In discussion with staff I came to realise that I did not know the children well enough; for example, that Josh needed a sleep, or that Amy was hungry and Carlo was feeling 'slightly poorly'. But when I asked the staff how they knew when a tiny child is a little bit unwell, they would say, 'we just know'.

If I had not been so anxious about my feelings of failure as an advisor, I would have seen all along that here was my magic ingredient for best practice: Adults knowing the children they care for really well, so that they 'just know'.

Why is it important that adults 'just know'?

Sue Saunders, manager of Bedford's Training and Assessment Centre, on her course *Caring for babies: the big picture*, explains in detail: 'Children need loving, kind, sensitive adults upon whom they can depend. Children can place their trust in adults when the children's needs are met and when they become attached to a small number of key people in their lives. It is through experiencing warm caring relationships that the children learn about themselves

and other people. Effective settings place the highest importance on planning to meet children's needs by helping the child to develop relationships – especially with a key person. People who work in baby rooms should be the highest qualified and most experienced staff in the setting.'

Unfortunately, many baby room staff will admit that they lack experience and that they do not have access to appropriate training. So what does best practice look like, and what type of training can be offered to help practitioners achieve it? I went to Lewsey Children's Centre Nursery in Luton to find out.

Karen White, Baby Room Leader and deputy manager Sarah Simpson, had both attended a Luton-based training course, called 'Baby Matters'. The course was led by early years consultant Janet Kite, along with Maggie Harris, who is now working as specialist health visitor for Infant Mental Health in the London Borough of Enfield.

Their course had been significantly influenced by the work of the Northamptonshire Baby Room Project. Both courses empower and inspire practitioners to enhance their practice, by focusing on the link between healthy infant attachment and the impact this has on brain development.

In Luton, setting managers and practitioners attended three half-day training sessions over a nine-month period, with tutors visiting the settings in between. Each session had a taught element, looking at how the nature of attachment can either stimulate or impede infant brain growth.

One of the key books for discussion throughout *Baby Matters* was *Why love matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain* by Sue Gerhardt. This book makes a direct link between a baby's experience of healthy relationships with adults in early life and the growth of their brain. Social interaction, for example, can generate the biochemical reactions that facilitate a high level of neural connections and brain growth. Put simply, playing, talking and singing with babies makes their brains grow.

Babies' feelings and reactions change continually – particularly in response to their physical needs. Sue Gerhardt argues that there is 'the absolute necessity for small children to have someone continuously available that notices their feelings, and who can help regulate them'. She argues that a baby's cries of mental pain when distressed have an important function. They create stress for the parents or carers, who will then



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do their best to find out what is wrong. Gerhardt emphasises that the key attribute of the baby's parent and/or carer is that they should be 'tuned in and emotionally available to the child'.

If we agree with this, then we can see that the work the practitioners carry out is not only highly responsible, but also potentially physically and emotionally draining. This is why it was so important that the manager or a senior member of staff accompanied the adults from the baby room on the course. As Janet Kite puts it: 'If you want to influence practice then you need those who are influential (the managers) to be on board.'

The second component of Baby Matters involved supporting practitioners to take a fresh look at how they observe children. This included setting up a 'Discovering Me' book to help reflect on how a child might feel, as well as making a note of behaviours that could be easily observed, such as laughing and crying. They also encouraged adults to acknowledge how a child is feeling, particularly when they are distressed, and to verbalise for them how they might feel. So, if an infant is crying because mum has just left, it would be better to hold the child and say: 'Yes, Mummy has gone and you are very upset. But Mummy will come back. Let's have some

fun together with your favourite noisy toy.' This is preferable to ignoring the child's feelings and distracting her with a noisy toy.

Considering that the ages of children in baby rooms can range from as young as six weeks to up to two years, there needs to be a range of resources that will meet children's individual needs. When thinking about very young babies, Sue Saunders, in Bedford, states: 'The best resources for babies are people.'

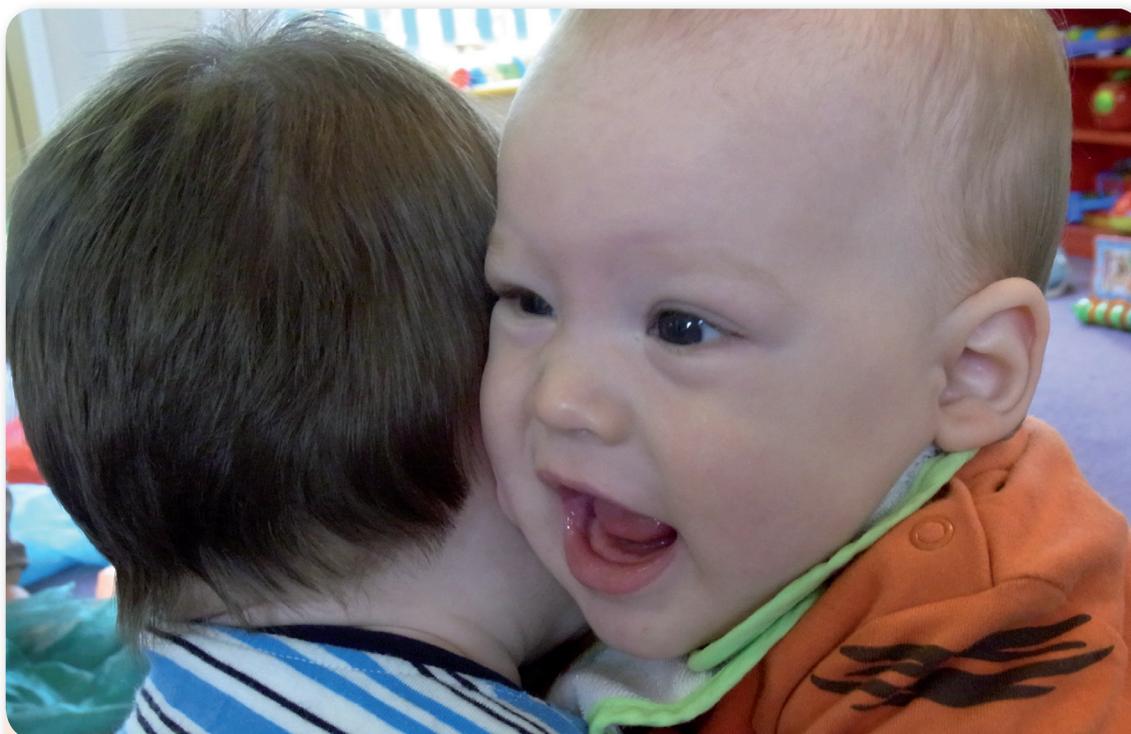
Resources in baby rooms vary enormously. Some seem to have a predominance of brightly – coloured plastic toys that make an artificial noise when a button is pushed. These have limited value, and it is better to provide resources that children can explore and have a range of possibilities. These could include collections of natural and man-made objects, such as pine cones, corks or my particular favourites – jam jar lids.

During each of the taught sessions in Baby Matters, the tutors set up a display on a particular aspect of good practice, such as play with natural materials, and practitioners made resources that they could use straight away with the children.

Each setting was given £200 to develop or invest in resources. A popular activity was the creation of black and white, and highly contrasting, materials that appeal particularly to young babies, as well as



Adults need to be 'emotionally available and tuned in' to babies – ideally it will be the most experienced staff that work in baby rooms



Through experiencing warm and caring relationships they can learn about themselves and other people

making resources made from 'warm' colours that stimulate feelings of calm and relaxation.

An important aim of Baby Matters was to support practitioners in their communication with parents. Parents can often feel very vulnerable; particularly, for example, when leaving their children for the first time after maternity leave. Parents may not necessarily share the same beliefs as practitioners about their children; some parents may need to be supported in their understanding that, 'if I play and talk with my baby then he will grow in confidence and learn'.

It takes a confident and experienced practitioner to be able to engage parents in dialogue about aspects of childcare in the home. 'Experience' is a key word that appears in any discussion about what works for very young children in daycare settings. Here, we are referring to the need for an experienced team leader who can provide guidance and be a positive role-model to both staff and parents. Managers play a vital role in ensuring that staff are well supported and trusted to do their job well. Above all managers need to recognise the many skills involved in working with the youngest children, and to ensure that staff have access to the best training and resources.

If adults are the best resource, then one important management decision is to have a flexible approach to staff numbers in the baby room, and to see a ratio of one adult to three children as the bare minimum – increasing the number of adults based on the children's changing needs.

Next steps

Baby Matters is still going strong in Luton, with the addition of a session called 'Baby outdoors'.

Maggie Harris and colleagues in Enfield are setting up a similar course, called B-ME (Baby Matters in Enfield). The Northamptonshire Baby Room project has expanded and now includes a course for parents.

I was able to see the legacy of Baby Matters at Lewsey Children's Centre Nursery, where there was a very generous adult-to-child ratio, where staff provided a wide range of individual and group activities within a predictable routine and where, above all, the children are very happy. Not only do the staff 'just know' when a child is ill, but they have the insight into feelings and development, and are clearly 'tuned in and emotionally available'. **eye**

Useful resources

- To find out more about Baby Matters in Enfield (B-ME) contact Maggie Harris, London Borough of Enfield. maggie.harris@enfield.nhs.uk
- To find out about the Northamptonshire Baby Room Project, visit www.northamptonshirebabyroom.org

References

Gerhardt S (2008) *Why love matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain*. Routledge: London

Key points

- The magic ingredient for best practice in baby rooms is 'adults knowing the children they care for really well'
- People who work in baby rooms should be the highest qualified and most experienced staff in the setting