



Building Babies Brains



Julie is an independent consultant, speaker and trainer and an associate of the British Association of Early Education. Over the last 15 years she has created and led a wide range of professional development for those working with babies and toddlers.

This blog is for anyone who already has the privilege of working with babies or those who might be considering becoming a baby room team member.

The government has committed to extending funded early childhood education and care entitlements for working parents of two-year olds from April 2024 and for parents of all children from nine months of age from September 2024. This is due to be completed by September 2025.

This means that right across the country more parents of babies nine months and older will be entitled to a place for their baby in an early years setting or with a childminder. In the report 'Early years places and workforce need' the Dfe estimates that 70,000 new places are needed across the country by autumn 2025 (above the December 2023 baseline) and that around 35,000 additional staff will be needed by autumn 2025.

Keeping babies in mind

Amid this massive expansion, it's crucial to prioritise the developmental and emotional needs of babies. It is vital to ensure that anyone working with babies has the most up to date knowledge and understanding of how babies develop and learn. Understanding the role they can play in each child's development, learning and well-being which has the potential to last a lifetime.

In 2012 Professor Cathy Nutbrown's report stated that 'the quality of children's experiences are at the core of the Report and an important part of this is the status of the early years workforce in society. Early years carers and educators are professionals who need to be able continually to develop their knowledge, skills and understanding.' (Foundations of Quality)

This continues to be one of the highest priorities to support current and new workforce members who will be part of children's lives at a very important and influential time for development and learning. Practitioners will also need to be able

to offer support to parents as they leave their children in the care of others for what may be for the first time.

Professor Nutbrown's sends an emphatic message which is as important now as it was in 2012.

‘There cannot be compromise on quality and we must be unrelenting in our insistence on improving experiences for all babies and young children. They must have the best.’

This blog considers the importance of communication and connected relationships in building babies brains through the serve and return of everyday interactions as part of high quality provision.

Communication from the start

Whilst babies are in the womb they do not need to communicate their need to be fed, held, kept warm, cooled down, soothed or stimulated. All that changes once they enter the world and they quickly and effectively connect and communicate with their care givers. Babies are born with the amazing capacity to ensure that their care givers, notice and respond to them to meet their needs.

‘In their first year, babies need to experience warm, reliable adult support and sensitive, responsive interactions in quiet, familiar spaces. Sensitive and responsive caregivers are attuned to young children’ subtle cues, preferences and temperaments, and to how they change as they grow older and develop.’ (Sound Foundations)

Babies are fascinating, Take the time to become familiar with the ways each baby uses their body, facial expression, vocalisations to draw their carer in to figure out what is needed. Tuning into the babies’ cues shows the baby that they are safe, seen, heard, understood and can rely on their needs being met.

Connected relationships build over time

Building connected relationships with babies and their parents is at the heart of healthy development these connections make big difference to how the baby experiences their time with you. Being available to support the parent and baby in what is a very significant transition from home to your setting is critical. Being able to start and continue to communicate honestly and openly with parents is part of providing a positive experience for a baby settling in and finding a sense of safety and belonging where their needs are recognised and met.

‘Healthy development depends on the quality and reliability of a young child’s relationships with the important people in his or her life, both within and outside the family.’ (Young Children Develop in an environment of relationships)

Establishing a key person system which prioritises relationships is vital in ensuring that babies feel psychologically, emotionally and physically safe; this supports them to have a sense of belonging and helps caregivers to value each child’s

individuality. The key person provides the 'secure base' to explore from and 'safe haven' to retreat to. This enables babies to explore, learn about themselves and the world around them using their bodies and all their senses. The continuity and predictability provided by the key person is important in establishing routines which meet the child's individual rhythms and needs.

Building brains - Serve and Return

Over the last three decades there have been incredible advances in our understanding of how brains develop over the lifetime and growing understanding how rapid that development is in the first two years of life when relationships, experiences and environment have a significant impact on the developing brain. The growth of neural connections in the brain is said to be as many as one million every second. Being with and interacting with babies offers multiple opportunities every day to contribute to the strengthening of neural connections and building babies brains.

'What happens to a baby shapes their brain. The most important thing that happens to a baby is you! Everything you do when you are with a baby sparks connections in their brain, turning connections into pathways they can use again'

Adapted from Kate Cairns Five to Thrive

Every day there are so many opportunities to interact and contribute to the developing brains of the children you spend time with. The opportunity to engage in what is referred to as 'Serve and Return' is just like playing a game of table tennis. It is a simple and powerful way to contribute positively to early learning and development and build strong relationships and early communication and interaction. No equipment needed!

'Child adult relationships that are responsive and attentive – with lots of back-and-forth interactions build a strong foundation for all future learning and development.'

(5 Steps to Brain Building)

Games such as peek a boo or opportunities where the baby initiates a smile, or a wave or a vocalisation, the adult then follows and copies the baby allowing enough time for the baby to respond again. It is important to allow short pauses between the return and the next serve as a baby's brain works more slowly than an adult and is still building up speed through repetition and by strengthening neural connections.

These are just a few things that make a huge difference to the developing brains of babies and young children.

Over to you

- What do you consider are the most important aspects of working with babies?
- What qualities do you think a baby room team member needs?

What information, training or support do you need to develop your skills and knowledges as a baby room team member?

References and links to useful resources:

5 Steps to Brain Building

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/briefs/5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/>

Early years places and workforce need (Dfe 2014)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-places-and-workforce-need/early-years-places-and-workforce-need>

Five to Thrive KCA Training

https://www.kca.training/?info=five_to_thrive

Foundations for Quality- The Independent review of early education and childcare qualifications – Final Report (2012)

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a74af28ed915d0e8e39a315/Nutbrown-Review.pdf>

Sound Foundations - A Review of the Research Evidence on Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care for Children Under Three – Implications for Policy and Practice Sutton Trust (2014)

<https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/1sound-foundations-jan2014-3.pdf>

Young children develop in an environment of relationships. Working Paper 1 National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004)

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/working-paper/wp1/>

Additional information and websites:

‘Big Change Starts Small ‘Centre for Early Childhood Royal Foundation (2021)

<https://centreforearlychildhood.org/our-work/research/>

Brilliant Babies to Terrific Toddlers – A Tool for reflection (2024)

<https://www.strongerpracticehubs.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/docuemnt/29/Brilliant%20Babies%20to%20Terrific%20Toddlers%20-%20A%20Tool%20for%20Reflection.pdf>

Inspired by Babies – Baby room specific CPD

<https://early-education.rg.uk/julie-revels/>

Quality in the Baby Room: Actionable Findings from a Global Evidence Review.

Sakr, M., Bonetti, S. & Halls, K. (2025) ‘

www.thebabyroom.blog/report-1

What is attachment? A guide for early years workers on using attachment ideas in their day to day practice. Anna Freud Centre for Children and Families.

<https://www.annafreud.org/resources/under-fives-wellbeing/what-is-attachment/>

What Happens in the baby room Community Playthings

https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/training-resources/what-happens-in-the-baby-room?srsId=AfmBOog5O8IAWixHqTQM7VySShlcvrUgsoFPho3kXUwbznLG1zY_60kW