


# INFANT MENTAL HEALTH IN THE BABY ROOM

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## INFANT MENTAL HEALTH – WHAT IS IT AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?




Infant mental health is much more than whether a baby seems happy or settled in your setting. It refers to a baby's capacity to form secure, trusting relationships and to experience, express and eventually learn to manage their emotions.

The first 1,001 critical days – from conception to second birthday – lay the foundation for everything that follows. Our emotional wellbeing, physical health, learning capacity and relationship templates are all informed by our earliest days. As staff working in a baby room, you are in a powerful position to shape baby's early experiences and relationships which supports their mental health both now and in the future.

Infant mental health research consistently shows that the quality of relationships between babies and their caregivers is the most important factor in infant wellbeing. While you are not usually the primary caregivers for babies in your care, you remain significant in helping babies develop their capacity to relate to others. Time in a baby room can be easily taken up by the many practical tasks; feeding, nappy changes and supporting little ones to sleep. But equally as important is a baby's need for a nurturing, responsive caregiver. Warmth, comfort, predictability and emotional availability are not "extras" but central to supporting a baby's wellbeing.

When babies receive consistent, loving and sensitive care they learn that the world is a safe place. They begin to trust and to feel safe in your care. This enables them to begin to explore their worlds. For many babies you will become another trusted, supportive adult, adding to the loving relationships they have at home. Your attuned interactions strengthen healthy brain connections, supporting their emotional, social and cognitive development. Sadly, not all babies receive this type of care at home. For these babies, your role becomes even more powerful. Providing nurturing, responsive care can help build new neural pathways and offer them a different model of relationships, influencing their development and later outcomes.

## CARE BEYOND THE PRACTICAL



It can be challenging at times to meet the needs of all the littlest ones in your care and be reassured that perfection is not required! As baby room practitioners you can use the following principles to support a baby's mental health:

- Offer responsive care for emotional as well as physical needs: notice baby's signals for comfort and care, as well as those for nappy changes and milk. Needing comfort is a valid and important need for all humans, especially babies who get much of their reassurance and soothing from physical touch with supportive adults.
- Be warm, gentle and validating: babies and toddlers' problems often seem minor to our big adult-sized problems, but to them – experiencing this for the first time – they really do feel like a big deal. Be gentle and warm as you comfort the babies in your care.
- Be consistent: babies benefit from consistent routines and caregivers. This doesn't mean rigid schedules as babies also need to explore in a baby-led way. But having familiar people greet them when they arrive, using a familiar room and having a gentle (but flexible) rhythm to the day can help them to feel safe and secure. This helps babies to use you and your setting as a 'secure base' to explore from.
- Use the everyday: with much of baby care taken up with practical aspects, this is the best time to incorporate interactions that build a baby's brain. Singing during nappy changes, smiling during milk feeds and watching warmly while they explore a new toy or drift off to sleep are all valid ways of supporting infant mental health.

## SHAPING THE FUTURE AND SHAPING FAMILIES

The care you offer to babies in your setting shapes their futures – helping them build their capacity to relate to others and build positive lives. Parent-infant relationship challenges are more common than often understood and early years practitioners are often the first to notice that a family may need additional support. You may be in a position to signpost or refer families on to other services for more support. By modelling warm, attuned interactions, you also show parents what responsive care looks and feels like, which can sometimes be as impactful as a formal referral.

Dr Charlotte Dunster-Page is a Clinical Psychologist and the Founder of Born to Bond CIC. She offers training, supervision and consultation to professionals working with babies and their caregivers. This income then funds direct therapeutic support for families in Scarborough.

## JOIN US TO DISCOVER MORE

Charlotte is delivering training for Early Years settings in early 2026, dates below.

**Scarborough: Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> February 2026**

**York: Feb date TBC**

**Hull: Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> March 2026**

To book your place or to find out more please email [natalie.sph@childhave.n-yorks.sch.uk](mailto:natalie.sph@childhave.n-yorks.sch.uk)

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## THANK YOU FOR READING

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charlotte is a Clinical Psychologist and founding director of Born to Bond CIC. She has extensive experience in the NHS, including leading in a parent-infant relationship service and supporting Health Visiting Staff. Charlotte offers training, consultation and supervision to health and education staff around infant mental health, baby sleep and perinatal mental health. The income from these activities funds parent-infant relationship therapy for Scarborough families.