

What happens in the baby room?

Supporting under-2s practitioners



By **Community Playthings** with **Sonia Jackson, OBE**



What happens in the baby room?

Many things can wait
Children cannot
Now is the time
Their bones are being formed
Their blood is being made
Their senses are being developed
To them we cannot say 'tomorrow'
Their name is Today

Gabriela Mistral



Working with babies

Working with babies and children under two is a career that demands great skill, positive attitudes and huge empathy for children and their families. The status of those choosing this profession should be recognised and respected.

Kathy Gouch and Sacha Powell



Baby room practitioners have a uniquely significant role, because they influence sensitive human beings during the most formative period of life. This is a tremendous responsibility and privilege.

Baby room practitioners develop some very special traits and master a host of complex skills: They are warm and responsive, capable of seeing through a baby's eyes and feeling through the child's emotions. They have a constantly deepening understanding of child development. They know how to playfully interact on the children's level. They ensure that provision stimulates learning and supports emotional well-being. They cheerfully care for children's physical needs. They reassure the parent who may be anxious about entrusting her little one to someone else. And they grow in confidence to discuss issues or suggestions with colleagues, including management and other professionals.

It's a challenging task. If you belong to the committed group aspiring to this vocation, this booklet is dedicated to you.

One of the most important aspects is communicating with parents. It is not easy for parents to share their child's babyhood with others, and practitioners need to acknowledge this privilege. When parents know that you value their input and love their child, a foundation of trust is established from which any question can be addressed. Your confidence that you are working in the child's best interest empowers you to discuss anything in a positive way. Mum and Dad might not understand why you choose everyday objects rather than commercial toys, for instance – so you need to take time to explain, and especially to share examples of their own child's development and learning.

Another essential skill is being able to sit back and enjoy the children! Where staff are relaxed and happy, babies are relaxed and happy too. Don't feel that you are not working if you aren't 'doing' something every minute. The babies truly are competent learners, and you need to spend some time peacefully watching and enjoying each one; that's how you really see their learning develop from day to day and get to know each individual.

Having worked with a number of very able practitioners and studied their interactions, I see that one key attribute they all possess is that they wonder at children. They are practitioners who are fascinated and delighted by children – how they think, what they say, what they do.

Julie Fisher





Being with young children draws on every mental, physical and emotional faculty; one must be attentive and caring at all times. Everything the practitioner says or does – including tone of voice and facial expression – has an impact on the babies. That’s why it’s important to leave personal difficulties at the door. If one has had a dreadful drive to work, for example, this must not be allowed to affect the children. Some settings enable staff to talk with peers before entering the baby room, to share and let go of problems so that one can be alert and positive. It is helpful too if the manager pops into the baby

room regularly to give an encouraging word or relieve a caregiver who may need a few minutes’ break or a cup of tea.

The term ‘practitioner’ does not fully convey the skill, warmth, care, challenges and rewards of the task – perhaps someday the sector will find a better term. Meanwhile, believe in the significance of your role, reflect on your practice, share ideas with colleagues, communicate with parents – and enjoy the babies!

Few people understand what a privilege it is to share in young children’s early experiences; and whilst the children may not remember our faces when they grow up, we will take satisfaction in knowing we made a difference.

Natalie Adamson

Tuning in

The child is wonderfully prepared for active learning from birth. Children approach the world with all senses open, all motors running – the world is an invitation to experience. Their job is to develop and test all their equipment, make sense of the confusing world of people and things and unseen mysterious forces and relationships, like gravity, number and love. **Jim Greenman**



Neuroscience advancements reveal the miraculous development of a baby's brain, confirming that the first years of life are the most crucial in development of mind, body and spirit. In a child's first two years, neurons are connecting at a more rapid rate than during the rest of life – so impressions at this stage are formative for a baby's entire future. Emotional and physical nourishment, sensory stimulation and sleep are more important in babyhood than at any other time.

Absorbing a host of impressions through all the senses is a baby's primary task. A person's entire life is not sufficient to erase impressions absorbed in childhood, because a child's whole being, like a large eye, is wide open.

Friedrich Froebel

Infants learn through all their senses.

The tactile sense awakens as a baby's mother caresses, cuddles and cares for him. As he gains control of his movements, he reaches up to touch her face while feeding. Babies feel with their feet as well and should be barefoot as much as possible.

The sense of sight is active from birth. Within the first hours, a newborn begins to study her parents' faces and look into their eyes. Babies' attention is particularly drawn to high-contrast patterns and to movement, so pictures in the cot, or a mobile overhead, can offer visual stimulation. Still better, if the cot or pram is placed beneath a tree, the baby will derive contentment from watching the interplay of light and shadow and moving leaves.

Classical music and birdsong are soothing for young children, and hearing a familiar voice speak, croon or sing is even better. Babies are not critical listeners, so you need not feel self-conscious – make up little songs as you care for them. It's exciting when babies discover their own voices and start making purposeful sounds, cooing in response to their mother and father or squealing in delight at an older sibling.

Infants discover through their sense of taste as they experiment with new foods or explore objects with gums and tongue. Margaret McMillan planted lavender and herbs in the nursery garden so children could experience pleasure through their sense of smell too, and we can follow her example.





It's amazing to see babies' motor co-ordination develop.

In the beginning they express happiness, sadness or interest with their whole body. Eventually, a baby becomes able to purposely move her limbs and lift her head. You may observe her studying her little fist as she deliberately moves it before her face. She gradually gains mastery of her body, working long and hard to get her big toe into her mouth, for instance. Learning to roll from front to back – and back to front – are milestones.

Typically, babies practice emerging physical skills over and over; this repetition strengthens neuron connections. Although infants should sleep on their backs, they also need 'tummy time' on firm surfaces where they work on such actions and eventually develop their own methods of inching forward to reach things that attract them.

As babies learn to crawl, they have a drive to actively explore; they will investigate every corner of the room, and practitioners must continually ensure that the environment is safe for these hands-and-knees expeditions.

Prior to walking independently, babies 'cruise,' grasping anything in reach for support. As long as they feel secure through their key person's nearness, crawlers and toddlers will pursue adventure. All this large-motor activity builds a vital foundation for intellectual development as well as physical well-being. Sally Goddard Blythe writes, 'Just as the brain controls the body, the body has much to teach the brain.'

Fine motor action too links directly to cognitive learning. One-year-olds have an impulse to handle things: to collect, fill, dump, refill, transport, stack and knock down... They enjoy putting small objects into larger ones and poking pegs (or fingers) into holes. They practice every action repeatedly. This is when individual schemas start to emerge.

Children communicate from the beginning. It is awe-inspiring to experience a newborn infant reaching out to connect with other human beings. Initially, communication takes place through eye contact, body language, crying and facial expression. There is nothing more distressing than young babies' cries or more delightful than their wide-open smiles

– both appeal strongly to our own emotions. It is crucial that an infant's outreaching coos and gurgles meet a heartfelt response from parent or key person, because our feedback brings out further 'conversation' from the baby. So put away those mobile phones, and talk or sing to your babies at every opportunity!

Infants communicate with one another as well. Even young babies develop social games, beginning with noticing each other and exchanging looks and squeals, followed by deliberate interactions like 'peek-a-boo.' Over time, babbling evolves into words, and gestures become purposeful. Often older children are expert at communicating with babies, so be sure to welcome them in the baby room.

Self-awareness begins as infants increasingly differentiate between themselves and other people and objects. This sense of self can only be established in relation to other human beings – babies actually learn who they are through our response. What a remarkable concept for the child, and what a serious responsibility for parents and caregivers! Emma Ackerman says, 'Babies feel their way into the world around them, searching for how they fit in. Our signals and responses help them find their way.'

The significance of interacting with a baby cannot be emphasised enough. Babies should be held, stroked, and caressed. They should be sung to, talked to, and smiled at. Most important, they should be loved unconditionally.

JC Arnold





We speak a lot about physically and mentally engaging young children, and this is important. But we also need to understand their need to occasionally disengage; so we must provide quiet areas and cosy spaces as well.

Clare Crowther

Babies' brains need time to process all these incoming impressions, just as their bodies need time to relax in order to sustain their amazing physical activity and growth. Rest and sleep are vital, and we must offer safe contained spaces for this. Cots are commonly used; many nurseries also provide other sleep options that babies can access independently when they feel tired or want to be cosy – Community Playthings' lovely Coracle for example.

Outdoor sleep seems to be on the increase, because of the benefits of fresh air. Natalie Adamson of Tops Day Nurseries says, 'Our settings find that children sleep longer and are more refreshed on waking if they have slept outdoors.' As we consider children's development across all areas, we must remember that every baby will grow and learn at their own pace. Even siblings are remarkably different from one another. Our role as practitioners is to respect, love and observe every child, and to provide what each needs to develop in his or her unique way.



Play and resources

Their irrepressible appetite for play propels children to explore and interact with the physical world around them. **Martin Maudsley**

As we have seen, babies engage life actively with all their senses and emergent physical abilities. This is their way of learning about the world into which they've been born. Much of their play (actually it's more like concentrated work!) consists of practicing their newly-won motor skills. These little people seem determined to do their utmost. For example, negotiating a slope or stair is a big challenge for a one-year-old, and he will repeat the action over and over.

Provision must therefore allow for action: for clambering up and down, over and under, in and out and through – and include possibilities for swinging, sliding and bouncing to stimulate a sense of balance. Community Playthings' Nursery Gym was designed with these principles in mind. (See video *The Nursery Gym in action at Pen Green*, referenced at back.)

Compact ToddleBoxes allow young children to navigate a variety of slopes, including shallow hills and valleys. One-year-olds like to balance along a ToddleBox 'road'. When the units are turned over, babies instinctively sit in them – and the 'hill' becomes a boat. A baby might seat herself in an upside-down square and observe the world from this niche that just fits her size and shape.

Balance is responsible for a child knowing where he or she is in space. A sense of physical security and balance is entrained through movement.

Sally Goddard Blythe



Young children have a deep biological drive for such experiences... Movement is how they learn about both their inner self and their relation to their surrounding world, developing mind, body and spirit as an integrated whole.

Jan White





A child who has mastered the ability to walk is on the move! We need to provide equipment for pushing, pulling, rocking and riding. Wheeled toys support toddlers' need for continuous motion and total body involvement. Pushcarts help new walkers gain practice and balance, and children love transporting things in them. Riding toys must be the right size for toddlers to straddle – and you'll want plenty, so that riding can be a social activity.

Block play is important for children's cognitive development. Their minds start to process concepts like gravity, shape and symmetry years before they learn such terms.

Block play usually begins with one-year-olds enjoying individual blocks – carrying them around, becoming familiar with their size and shape and 'feel', or using them to represent objects (for instance, driving a block 'car' or talking into a block

'phone'). Eventually children start to stack blocks, lay them in rows, or use one block to bridge two others. Even a ten-month-old may stack several blocks. Mini-unit blocks are best for babies.

It's helpful if an adult models block play at first but then steps back so children can make their own discoveries.

As well as learning through active play, much of under-2s' learning stems from their drive to investigate their surroundings with all their senses. This includes fun with water, sand and other malleable materials.

A sand-and-water table is essential. In spite of its name, it can be filled with anything from dry pasta to sloppy goop. Play around the sand and water table tends to be very social.

A Floor Easel will support early mark-making and finger painting, which are large-motor and sensory experiences at this age. Of course finger painting and mark-making also happen with children standing at a table or sprawled on the floor.



The treasure basket is a basic resource in any baby room. Inspired years ago by Elinor Goldschmied to nurture curiosity and learning, it offers a richer sensory experience than plastic toys (which always smell, taste and feel like plastic no matter what their shape or colour). The treasure basket is made of strong natural wicker and filled with everyday objects – a dried gourd, rubber tube, shaving brush, sponge, leather glove, nail brush, whisk etc. Think of the treasure basket as co-owned by child and key person: you can collect items with a baby's particular interests in mind.

While the child is engrossed with the treasure basket, your role is to quietly watch, either from nearby or with the baby in your lap. He will make eye contact or exchange smiles if he wants. When bringing a seashell or

lemon to his mouth, he perceives its texture, colour, scent and flavour. While shaking a bunch of measuring spoons, he enjoys the sound as well as the sensation in his arm and hand. (See reference to *People under Three* at back.)

The sort of manipulative actions typically seen during treasure basket play may be linked to a complex process of rule acquisition, categorisation, and developing mental files rather than simply exploration per se.

Sue Gascoyne

Heuristic play too is based on natural curiosity (heuristic means ‘to find out’). As babies grow, they move beyond just feeling and pondering things, to wanting to find out what can be done with them! Toddlers have an urge to manipulate objects and use them in combination, so practitioners collect a large supply of tins and lots of natural and found items: fir cones, conkers, jar lids, cardboard tubes, cotton reels, bits of ribbon or chain, etc. (Empty cello-tape rings are favourites – they’re easier to pick up than curtain rings, things can be poked through them, and they ‘click’ together as they’re a bit sticky.) Since young children like to sort and arrange, you’ll need large quantities of each item.

Because these materials are free of detail, children’s imaginations flourish. A child using a cardboard tube as trumpet, for instance, is demonstrating an active imagination. Einstein said ‘Imagination is more important than knowledge’. Not only does imagination add a rich dimension to children’s lives, it is also key to understanding the feelings of others. (For more about imaginative play with simple materials, see reference to *I Made a Unicorn* at back.)

For the heuristic play session, a large floor area is freed for perhaps an hour, and staff make heaps of the objects and give several tins to each child. When a toddler makes an interesting discovery (such as noticing the sound produced by treading on

lids), she may repeat the action to test the result. Alison Gopnik describes babies as true scientists, constantly conducting experiments, testing their ideas, and building understanding.

Although each child is engrossed in individual investigation during heuristic play, they are aware of one another and will often copy each other’s actions or play side by side. Afterward, they help pick up the bits; clean-up too is a game – especially if you clap your hands and say ‘well done!’

Accordingly, play resources for under-2s can be quite basic; few ‘toys’ are needed. And always remember that you, the practitioner, are the children’s most valuable resource.



Singing and nursery rhymes

Babies will imitate the timbre and cadences of adult speech before they learn to talk, as if they are practising the melody of a song for which they do not yet have the words. This is the vocal equivalent of building a library of sounds from which a vocabulary of language will be constructed. **Sally Goddard Blythe**



Music is a language the youngest children understand. Even a newborn can be soothed by song, and hearing Mum's voice croon or sing is part of the bonding process. When a mother sings to the baby in her arms, his whole body receives and internalises her rhythms.

Lullabies are probably the oldest form of song and can be found in every culture. Their lyrics, like those of nursery rhymes, are often 'nonsensical' as they were never intended for adult ears ('When you wake you will have cake, and all the pretty little horses...').

Parents and caregivers also use songs or chants for play, dandling the child on their knee to a tune or rhyme: 'Trot, trot to market to buy a pound of butter, Trot, trot home again, Drop her in the gutter!' Babies love the accompanying rhythm, clapping, tickling and bouncing. Other jingles go with bath time, dressing time ('This little piggy went to market') or washing up after meals ('This is the way we wash our face').

Working with under-2s, I realised I was constantly singing about things we did or saw. Some were songs I'd grown up with; others I made up. There are songs about rain, flowers and bugs; there are songs for celebrations and songs to reassure us in scary situations, like when meeting a big dog.

Kathy Kurtz, practitioner

Here are some collections of poems, songs, finger games or nursery rhymes that young children enjoy:

Mother Goose's Nursery Rhymes, Chancellor Press, 1986

Poems to Read to the Very Young, selected by Josette Frank, Random House, 1977

Sing through the Day, Eighty Songs for Children, compiled by Marlys Swinger, Plough Publishing, 1999

This Little Puffin, Nursery Songs and Rhymes, compiled by Elizabeth Matterson, Penguin Books Ltd, 1969



If you sing, routines like nappy change become an opportunity for quality time with an individual child.

Singing engenders a sense of community, so it definitely belongs in every nursery. It is very important for even the youngest children to feel their connectedness with others, including their connectedness with older children in the centre who love to come to the baby room to visit, play and sing with the babies.

I was surprised at what an early age the babies began to join the singing. Most joined songs they recognised with a loud 'ahhh...' when they were between ten and twelve months old, sometimes swaying to the beat. At around 20 months, many started filling in the last word of each phrase. Jennifer, nearly two, did not talk at all – but she 'sang' on perfect pitch!

Mary Barth, practitioner

Environment

The physical environment in a setting impacts directly on the quality of practice, making environment a critically important component of a birth to three curriculum and one that practitioners need to plan for and review regularly.

Julia Manning-Morton

The way your environment is arranged can make the difference between babies feeling secure or anxious. It can make the difference between staff feeling relaxed or stressed. So it's important to give careful thought to creating a positive enabling environment for children and adults alike. Because under-2s are involved mainly in sensory exploration and physical action, you will probably want to divide your

baby room into four activity areas: safe-crawl area, active play area, quiet area and wet area.

When deciding where to set up these four activity areas, consider location of doors, sink and nappy change. Where do parents enter? Where is the exit to the outdoor provision? Which is the most protected corner of the room? Through staff discussion, it should not be difficult to sensibly locate activity areas.

It's good to define the activity areas with physical boundaries, to prevent cross-traffic and to provide a feeling of security for the babies. (They can feel insecure in a wide-open room.) Creating these boundaries with shelving serves two purposes: room division and storage. This is important as storage can take a lot of space.



Safe-crawl area

for non-walkers. This area should be spacious so children can practice their motor skills, but contained for their protection. Boundaries of the safe-crawl area can be formed with storage shelves and clear Perspex panels, with gates for entry.



Active play area, with maximum floor space and a Nursery Gym on which toddlers develop their physicality, their spatial awareness, their sense of balance – and have fun! ToddleBoxes support active play; and some simple role-play furniture, dolls, small-world materials and blocks complement this area as well. Some settings provide for active play in a covered-play space outdoors.

Quiet area where children relax and spend cosy time with key person and books. For settings without a separate sleep room, the quiet area doubles for sleep.





Wet area, located near the sink. Include malleables and sand for sensory exploration, as well as Floor Easel and basic art supplies. The wet area doubles as mealtime area in most baby rooms.

Toddlers gain a sense of independence if they can access materials themselves and help pack up, so most shelves should be child-accessible and clearly labelled with simple pictures. Transparent trays help children understand what belongs inside.

Their storage should be:

- Safe
- Located where they need it
- Obvious and understandable
- Pleasing to the eye

You will probably also want some storage out of the children's reach. Wall-mounted shelves and

shelves with doors are good for storing materials that you don't want babies to access.

Use movable shelves so they can be shifted occasionally – your team may want to make an activity area larger or smaller as the children reach new stages of development or if new children come with different needs. Community Playthings shelves have retractable wheels that hide away when not needed.

Furniture should be child-sized and sturdy, with rounded edges. Chairs must be stable, and it's best if children's feet reach the floor so they can sit comfortably at meals. A 20cm distance from chair seat to table top is good. Chairs with sides give extra security to babies – but they should not be put into chairs till they have learned to sit.

Meeting staff needs is also very important. We all fulfil our tasks best when we are comfortable. Here are some aspects to consider:

- Materials stored conveniently
- Furniture easy to rearrange
- Equipment designed to avoid excessive lifting (e.g. nappy-change unit with steps)
- Seating – you'll want low adult-scale chairs so staff can comfortably interact at child level. Gliders and settees are lovely too as they support the cuddles that strengthen attachment between key person and child.

The whole environment should stimulate babies' interest; however, we do not want to overstimulate them. Elements that work beautifully in moderation may be overwhelming in excess.

Colour is one example. For years, conventional practice dictated that children should be surrounded by brilliant colours, but in fact it's difficult to relax in such an environment. Today we know that a calmer colour scheme fosters a more peaceful atmosphere (brightness can be provided with fabrics, children's paintings, or interesting artefacts). An excess of mobiles and dingle-dangles overhead can also become visually wearing.



Noise is another over-stimulating element, especially in settings with high ceilings and hard surfaces. Fabrics, drapes, cushions and rugs can help absorb sound in such situations.

Toys and materials in excess lead to clutter. Not only is too much choice overwhelming for babies, but valuable floor space becomes crowded with 'stuff' (and maintaining and sanitising the paraphernalia becomes strenuous). Fewer materials, tidily arranged, give the room more tranquillity and 'breathing space'.

We want to create a truly enabling environment. Where children relax, they play and learn.

Wherever children relax, meaningful play, communication and learning flourish – and there are many ways the physical environment can help. Natural light, wall hangings, wicker baskets, wooden furniture and living plants add harmony. For a high-ceilinged room to seem less institutional, one can hang ferns, fabrics or strings of lights. The baby room should be peaceful and aesthetically lovely, because young children appreciate beauty even if they cannot articulate it.

Getting the environment right is an on-going process. As a team, get down on the floor periodically and discuss how the room 'feels' from the babies' perspective. Your own childhood memories can help: Where did you feel safe and happy as a child? Many of us would answer, 'beneath a special bush in the garden' or 'under my Granny's kitchen table'. Young children love intimate nooks.



It's really important to provide small, defined spaces in your environment. During a busy day a small space can offer children a place to retreat to, a place to recharge, a place to just 'be', to reflect and process what's going on around them.

Elizabeth Jarman

In a child-friendly room, the environment itself becomes your best assistant. It's the same outside. Siren Films' DVD set *All about the Outdoors*, with supporting notes by Jan White, demonstrates the learning that babies and toddlers gain from the outdoor environment. It's lovely to watch even the youngest respond to the feel of the breeze and the movement of light through leafy branches.

One-year-olds learn so much from the up-and-down of slopes and uneven ground; the sensory experience of puddles, sand, mud, gravel, grass and leaves; the mystery of dropping pebbles into water. Every type of play can happen outside. So can routines like meals and sleep. As Jan White says,

'Human beings were designed to be outdoors!'

I used to park babies' cots beneath a tree, where fresh air and birdsong lulled them to sleep. I'd bring the tub out too so they could splash freely. One baby became very quiet during his bath; following his eyes, I realised he was watching swallows swoop overhead.

Helen Huleatt



Conclusion

The rewards of working with babies are many: the joy of seeing them learn and thrive, experiencing their trust, forming strong relationships with parents, building teamwork with colleagues. These benefits provide motivation to keep sharing ideas and reflecting on practice. They strengthen our confidence to make constructive changes in environment, resources and routines. You are on the forefront of making a positive impact on the lives of the new generation. Go for it!



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Who are we?



Community Playthings produces solid wood furniture and play equipment. Our products are developed to support children's play and creativity. We design and manufacture at workshops in East Sussex and Kent. You can find free training resources and our full product line at:

www.communityplaythings.co.uk





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