

A good start

Experiential Play's **Alice Sharp** discusses how nurseries in Scotland helped vulnerable parents engage with their babies...

In recent years our company, together with early years consultants, managers and practitioners, has been considering different approaches to encouraging parental involvement at children's centres in Glasgow and Ayrshire. More specifically, we wanted to reach out to and support some of the more vulnerable families in these areas. Research from both Strathclyde Police's Violence Reduction Unit and WAVE (Worldwide Alternatives to Violence) emphasises the importance of positive parenting during children's very early years in order to help them break out of a cycle of negative behaviour into which they may have been born, and we felt strongly that it was our responsibility as early years practitioners to respond to this, and become part of the drive to reshape our society, and our youngest children's future.

From our earliest discussions, however, a clear theme began to emerge: that all families have their ups and downs and there will be times when every family, not just those in extreme circumstances, could use some help. As stated in The Parenting Report, "parenting is the most difficult job that most of us will ever do, but for which many parents do not feel adequately trained or prepared." Fortunately, skills such as active involvement, talking and playing together and reflective listening can be taught and learned (and, at the very least, it's always good for mums and dads to be reassured they're doing the right thing!)

Positive parenting means using warmth, love, respect, consistency, good communication and empathy in the way parents engage with their babies. The Tickle Giggle baby programme we have developed is a series of ten 30–40 minute play sessions that facilitates and encourages such interaction. Importantly, the classes also highlight that nurturing a relationship between baby and parent can be fun!



How the programme works

The sessions follow a fixed format, and each parent/baby is provided at the start with a 'Wonderbox', containing 15 sensory items (e.g. curtain tassels, silk scarves, fingers puppets) to experiment with and support their play. To begin with, there is a little rhyme and a gentle 'hello' song – to which even the most hesitant of parents are responding within three weeks. The practitioner leading the group then demonstrates a few 'tuning in' games before inviting parents to try these with their baby.

The main part of the session involves four sensory games, which follow a different theme on each occasion – bonding, physical, listening, watching etc. We chose a sensory focus because developmentally, this kind of play is vital, enabling powerful connections to be made in the brain about this fabulous world in which the baby finds himself. From birth, children discover the world by tasting, touching, smelling, listening, looking, and moving around. With typical babies, toddlers and young children, playing with toes and fingers is pleasurable, exploring objects is exciting and experimenting with resources is hugely stimulating – and because it feels good, the behaviour is repeated. Through sensory play, children learn to concentrate and manage their emotional responses to sensory input. If this is shared during a calm, reflective experience with a loving, focused adult then everyone reaps the rewards.



Bringing it home

During the sessions, leaders take the opportunity to highlight thinking connected with the activities, which can be taken back into family life. For example:

1 "When she is awake and eager to satisfy her natural curiosity, opportunities should be offered to encourage her to respond to her world."

2 "It is vital that your young baby feels the security of love offered by you or anyone else who takes the role of carer. Cuddling and physical closeness can offer this sense of love."

3 "It is important that, as you build these close bonds, you talk to your baby and respond as she 'talks' back to you. Tickle her and whisper to her, repeat her name and yours. When she murmurs or giggles in response, then talk some more."

4 "Your baby's early practice at listening and responding will encourage her to develop an understanding of the language and vocabulary that she will soon be expected to master."

5 "Use your voice to caress, encourage, support and engage your baby whenever possible."

6 "When sharing these intimate moments with your baby, it is important to create a warm, caring and quiet atmosphere that allows her to focus on you and the surroundings with which she is interacting."

7 "When talking to her, maintain eye contact and wait for a response. Always try to talk to your baby face to face, bending to her level whenever possible. If she is lying on a mat, lie next to her; if she is sitting in a bouncy chair, sit opposite her on the floor."

8 "While talking to her, maintain physical contact by gently touching her, cuddling or stroking her face or arms. This close contact will help to create a strong bond between you and your baby, as well as providing a feeling of comfort and security."

9 "Always be enthusiastic when talking with your baby – she will enjoy your time together more. Be patient and offer your baby lots of time and attention. This will help you to get to know her and how she communicates."

The groups we have run so far have been focused on mothers and babies under the age of one year. Some practitioners have carried out the sessions with one parent and their child in the nursery, in a parent's room or in their own home. We have been requested to set up a group for dads and babies by some of the mums, but also directly by the fathers. The potential is limitless, and the benefits are for all involved: the bond between parent and baby grows stronger; parents become more unified; and relationships between families and early years practitioners improve. However, of most importance is the emergence of a happy, stimulated baby who is blossoming into the positive person she was born to become.

