

# smalltalk

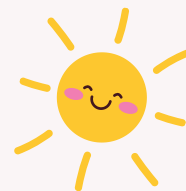
Early Years Wales members' magazine

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## Quality practice for babies and our youngest children in the first 1,000 days

- Settling-in routines that transform baby care
- Protecting babies' development in digital times
- Nutrition that heals, nurtures and stabilises
- Why repeating builds confidence and learning
- Tiny scientists exploring through playful STEM





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Cynnig  
Cymraeg





## Welcome to your April 2026 edition of *smalltalk*



Babies are finally at the centre of national conversation in Wales, and this issue of *smalltalk* arrives at a moment of real political significance. As political parties begin shaping their early years commitments ahead of the 2026 Welsh Government election, there is growing recognition of the vital importance of the 0–2 age range. With parents' voices shaping national frameworks and increasing focus on the first 1,000 days, the expertise of those working closest to babies has never mattered more.

This edition brings together a wide range of voices, including practitioners, researchers, leaders and partners, to explore what quality practice for babies in the first 1,000 days truly looks like. We open with Leo Holmes, who sets the political backdrop by outlining **what the next Welsh Government must prioritise** to ensure high-quality practice for babies and children under two. This call for national ambition is echoed in the work of Cwm Taf Morgannwg, where the co-created **Baby and Toddler Voice Statements** demonstrate how even the youngest children can shape local systems and influence decision-making (page 5).

Relationships form the heart of quality practice, and several contributors explore this from different angles. Dr Sara Bonetti and Kayla Halls (page 10) share insights from their Nuffield-funded research into **what makes baby rooms truly high-quality**, offering evidence that complements the lived experience of practitioners. **The BEAR team** deepen this relational focus by highlighting the importance of early attuned relationships and the practical strategies that help adults tune into babies' cues (page 12). Alongside this, articles on settling-in processes, the role of **experienced key workers**, and the value of strong partnerships with parents show how everyday routines become the building blocks of secure attachment.

The environments in which babies grow also receive careful attention. **Dr Gemma Goldenberg** examines how noise, both indoors and outdoors, shapes children's attention, communication and wellbeing (page 32). **Sue Atkins** explores how families can protect presence, movement and connection in an increasingly digital world (page 29).

Nutrition and safe sleep are addressed through contributions from sector specialists, including **trauma-informed approaches to supporting care-experienced babies** (page 22) and insights from CIW inspectors who have completed Lullaby Trust training (page 25). Together, these pieces remind us that quality is holistic. It is about emotional safety, physical wellbeing and the conditions that allow babies to thrive.

Pedagogy in the earliest years is another strong thread running through this issue. **Dr Stella Louis** unpacks the power of repetition and schemas, showing how "again, again" moments build deep learning and emotional security (page 26). Amber Ogunsanya-William explores how **culture, play and early literacy** intertwine (page 19), while Sandra Beale champions **playful STEM experiences** that nurture toddlers' natural curiosity (page 42). Articles on **phonological development** and the power of picture books further enrich this pedagogical landscape, offering practical strategies grounded in research and everyday practice.

We also highlight the systems and settings that support babies and those who care for them. The **ECPLC framework** (page 48) is explored as a tool for strengthening quality across Wales, while Ely and Caerau Children's Centre provides a powerful example of **community-rooted practice shaped by Froebelian principles**, deep listening and strong family partnerships (page 45).

Taken together, these contributions paint a compelling picture of a sector that is reflective, research-informed and deeply committed to giving babies the strongest possible start. As Wales looks ahead to the upcoming election, the contributions in this issue highlight a simple truth: the quality of babies' early experiences must remain a national priority. The decisions made now will shape the conditions in which our youngest children grow and thrive.

To discuss the topics featured in this or previous issues, or for suggestions and contributions for future articles, please feel free to email [charlotted@earlyyears.wales](mailto:charlotted@earlyyears.wales) / [smalltalk@earlyyears.wales](mailto:smalltalk@earlyyears.wales)

**Thank you for reading  
Charlotte – Editor**



### Meet the contributors



**Dr Sara Bonetti and Kayla Halls (page 10)**

Dr Sara Bonetti is an independent researcher and Visiting Scholar at Middlesex University. Her work focuses on early childhood policy, leadership and quality. She is Co-Investigator on the Nuffield-funded project on high-quality baby room provision. Kayla Halls is a Research Fellow at Middlesex University specialising in early years workforce and 0–2 provision. Her current work includes the baby room quality project and evaluating Creative Futures' Sound Start programme.



**Hannah Munkley (page 16)**

Hannah is a Welsh Language Support Worker for Early Years Wales. Her main role is to deliver Little Movers, Little Speakers sessions for parents and babies. Hannah is a qualified primary school teacher, who's taught in Wales and China. She's also currently a Welsh and English tutor. Travelling and reading as much as possible are Hannah's main joys in life. She's passionate about working with children and inspiring in them a deeper connection with the world around them.



**Dr Gemma Goldenberg (page 32)**

Dr Gemma Goldenberg is a psychologist and education expert with over 20 years of experience in nurseries, schools and educational research. She is the Deputy Director of ISEY (the Institute for the Science of Early Years), where her work involves translating the latest research into practical tips for educators, leading child development research projects and providing training for early years organisations across the UK and globally.





# How the Next Welsh Government can Ensure Quality Practice for Babies and Children Under Two

Written by: Leo Holmes, Head of Policy and Advocacy

The first 1,000 days – from pregnancy to a child’s second birthday<sup>1</sup> – is a period of rapid physical and cognitive development that lays the foundation for lifelong health and wellbeing. Getting this stage right can help break cycles of disadvantage and contribute to “a happier, healthier, fairer future for Wales.”<sup>2</sup> By supporting children during this critical window, the next Welsh Government can advance its social justice goals and ensure future generations grow up in a society that truly values early development. This article explores four key points from the Early Years Wales manifesto<sup>3</sup> that are central to ensuring quality practice for babies and children under two.

## Reform of Parental Leave and Support

Reforming parental leave is essential to quality care in the first two years. During this time, babies depend on consistent “serve and return” interactions with caregivers, where responsive exchanges build neural pathways, language skills, and secure attachments. These early relationships form the foundation for lifelong learning and emotional wellbeing.

Current policies that prioritise rapid return to work risk undermining this crucial developmental stage by placing economic productivity above child wellbeing. Maternity and paternity provisions often fail to recognise parenting in the first two years as a long-term investment in health and development. Expanding parental leave would allow families to provide the stable, responsive care that research shows leads to the strongest developmental outcomes, outweighing short-term economic concerns.

## Ministerial and Leadership Accountability

Greater ministerial accountability is vital to embedding quality practice for babies and young children. Appointing a dedicated Minister for Children would ensure that the needs of Wales’ youngest citizens are represented at the highest level of government. Currently, it is difficult to argue that children’s interests consistently shape policy decisions.

A dedicated minister would require policies across all departments to be assessed through a child-development lens, ensuring that early years considerations are central rather than secondary. Given the foundational importance of the first two years for brain development and attachment, embedding leadership responsibility at ministerial level would make quality practice a non-negotiable standard.

## Terminology Reform

Renaming the Children’s Commissioner for Wales as the “Babies and Children’s Commissioner for Wales” may appear symbolic, but it carries significant policy implications. Explicitly naming babies highlights their distinct developmental needs and ensures they are not overshadowed by issues affecting older children.

Babies cannot advocate for themselves and are entirely dependent on adults to safeguard their wellbeing. By including “babies” in the Commissioner’s title, the Welsh Government would strengthen accountability and ensure that this critical stage of life receives focused attention in legislation and policy decisions.

## Focus on the First 1,000 Days

Prioritising the first 1,000 days requires both awareness and action. Increasing public understanding of this developmental window enables families and professionals to make informed decisions that support optimal outcomes. It also strengthens the case for early intervention and targeted government investment.

In practical terms, this means improving parental leave, health visiting services, childcare provision, parental mental health support, and financial assistance. By embedding the first 1,000 days into national policy, the Welsh Government can ensure that every baby has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of background. Quality practice for children under two must be reflected not only in rhetoric, but in sustained and meaningful support from pregnancy to age two.

### References:

- <sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/40CybT1>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/4binmf5>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://bit.ly/46yONyA>

To download and read the manifesto in full visit:

● <https://bit.ly/4ujkMNA>

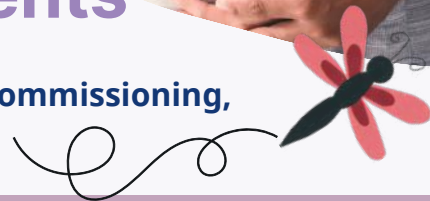
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# Giving Babies a Voice: How Cwm Taf Morgannwg Co-Created the Baby and Toddler Voice Statements

Written by: Elle Mcneil, Head of Planning and Commissioning,  
Cwm Taf Morgannwg Health Board



In Cwm Taf Morgannwg (CTM), a quiet but powerful movement has been growing — one that places babies and toddlers at the heart of decision-making. The CTM Baby & Toddler Voice Statements are the result of two years of collaboration, research, practitioner insight and parent partnership. Here's the story of how they were created, and how they are already changing practice across the region.

## Why Babies' Voices Matter

We know the first 1,000 days shape a child's future health, relationships, learning and emotional wellbeing. Babies experience joy, stress, curiosity and comfort long before they can speak — and their non-verbal cues are rich with meaning. Yet historically, babies' perspectives have not always been central to policy and practice.

The [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) makes it clear: all children have the right to express their views in decisions that affect them, and this includes babies. CTM recognised that if the system truly wanted to deliver rights-based, responsive care, it needed a way to help practitioners hear the voices of babies and pre-verbal toddlers.



## Planting the Seeds: The Early Years Transformation Programme

Work began through the Welsh Government-supported Early Years Transformation Programme. Within the Parent Infant Relationships workstream, CTM partners identified a gap: a shared, accessible way to express what babies and toddlers need from their adults, environments and communities.

[Scotland's Voice of the Infant pledge](#) offered inspiration, presenting a model for articulating infant needs in a rights'-based way. Combined with evidence from [World Association for Infant Mental Health \(WAIMH\)](#) and the Parent Infant Foundation on early relational health, momentum began to build for a CTM-specific resource.

## A Turning Point: The Parent Infant Relationships Conference

In October 2023, the Parent Infant Relationships Conference brought together more than 120 practitioners across health, early years, social care, education, perinatal mental health and the third sector.

During a facilitated workshop, the room was invited to “think like the baby”. Staff explored three simple prompts:

- What should I (the baby) expect from my grownups?
- What do my grownups need so they can care for me well?
- What should my environment give me to help me thrive?



Hundreds of post-it notes and flip-chart statements were generated — full of empathy, insight and professional expertise. These were later analysed and grouped into themes that would shape the first draft of CTM’s Baby & Toddler Voice Statements.

Staff feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with many describing a meaningful shift in how they perceived babies’ rights and perspectives.

## Co-Production in Action: The Task & Finish Groups

Between January and March 2024, 25 representatives from across CTM took part in four Task & Finish Groups to refine the statements. Each session was supported by specialists in children’s rights, perinatal mental health and infant development.

Through these sessions, the group:

- agreed to use the terms baby (conception–12 months) and toddler (12–24 months) to reflect the first 1,000 days
- chose trusted grown-up as inclusive language for anyone caring for a child
- selected the final name: **CTM Baby & Toddler Voice**
- Cross-referenced every statement to the UNCRC and [the NEST/ NYTH principles](#)-referenced every statement to the UNCRC and

This collaborative approach also tested wording with parents through engagement with parent-infant groups and via maternity services to ensure the final statements were practitioner informed, parent informed and rights-informed.



## Launching the Voice of the Baby

CTM University Health Board (CTMUHB) formally adopted and [launched the CTM Baby & Toddler Voice Statements in March 2025](#). Meet-and-greet sessions were held at local baby groups across Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Bridgend, where families could explore the statements and meet staff behind the work.

They emphasised how these statements help ensure babies’ emotional worlds and perspectives are recognised in decisions that affect them.

## What the Statements Say

The final set of 15 statements are grouped into three areas:

### 1. What I Need

For example:

- I need to be kept clean, warm and have healthy food and shelter.
- I need you to understand how I communicate and respond in a warm and loving way.
- I need a safe place to play, learn and have fun

### 2. What My Trusted Grown Up Needs

- access to help and information “in the right way, at the right time, and in the right place”
- support to care for their own emotional health

### 3. What We Need From Our Community

- safe green spaces
- good transport
- environments that welcome babies and families

Each statement reflects both rights-based principles and real-world practice needs. [You can read the statements here](#).-based principles and real-world practice needs. **(All links to references made in this article can be found in full at the end).**

## The Difference They're Making

### Supporting families and communities

Parents said the statements helped them understand:

- their baby's need for connection, play and emotional presence
- the importance of local support networks

how wider environments (public spaces, transport, community groups) shape infant wellbeing

### Shifting professional practice

Staff across CTMUHB who took part in training and information sessions about the Statements and 1<sup>st</sup> 1,000 days agenda reported:

- greater sensitivity to babies' emotional worlds
- increased understanding of infant rights

improved ability to consider a baby's perspective in decision-making

### References:

- <https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>
- <https://www.gov.scot/publications/voice-infant-best-practice-guidelines-infant-pledge/>
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## Changing organisational culture

Teams are reframing documents, policies and training to explicitly include babies — not only “children and young people”.

This can be seen in small ways within services and teams where they look to embed taking a rights'-based approach to services, such as a recent coproduced review of CTMUHBs neonatal therapy service which included specific work to give a voice to the baby.

It can also be clearly seen at a regional level, with the newly launched *Whole System, Whole Heart* regional strategy that aims to “...**improve outcomes for babies, children, young people and their families living in Cwm Taf Morgannwg...**”.

### A Voice That Will Continue to Grow

The CTM Baby & Toddler Voice Statements demonstrate what's possible when a region listens deeply to its youngest citizens — and to the adults who care for them. This work reminds us that babies are not “too young” to have a perspective. They communicate constantly; our role is to tune in.

As CTM continues embedding the statements across services, settings and communities, one message remains central:

**When we listen to babies, we build healthier futures — for children, families and the whole community.**





# Importance of time and experienced key workers

Written by: Sam Day, Level 2-5 Assessor Cam Wrth Gam

As a mother of three, I know that there's nothing that can bring tears to the eyes more than saying goodbye to your little baby. A small child, who is also in tears as they try to escape the arms of those responsible for them for the next few hours.

When leaving a baby at the nursery, or a child at the classroom door, the pain is the same. Questioning between the tears and the confusion 'why am I doing this?' and then hearing the Key Worker's voice saying 'Everything will be fine, give them ten minutes and they'll settle'.

As an inexperienced practitioner, the baby who settled down without a tear and the caregiver or parent that left without looking back, was such a relief. The easy babies! As a mother of three, and an experienced practitioner, foster parent, early years and education assessor, the easy babies, and parents who don't look back, are the ones that cause me the greatest concern.

## Trust

During work periods or breaks, being able to trust the key worker of your baby, is extremely important. The process of co-caring for the baby, between the parent or guardian and the key worker, is essential. This creates an opportunity to get to know the baby, and for the attachment to extend further than the parents and family.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child clearly states in Article 3

*'Everyone who works with children should always do what is best for each child.'*

(Ref: <https://www.childcomwales.org.uk/uncrc-childrens-rights/uncrc/>)

Creating a close relationship with the baby and the wider family is essential in doing what's best for each child.

Trust and co-caring do not happen in a half-hour session on a quiet Friday afternoon. Co-caring, trust and extending the bond between the child and key workers, takes time. Several sessions are required. Sessions that reflect the usual pattern of care and the child's daily routine. The parents and practitioners need to share the care jointly during these sessions. These periods when staff can shadow the parents, and learn care routines, are so important before care is transferred to the key worker and the baby is ready to start nursery.

When babies move from foster care to adoptive parents, the transition period takes at least a week, with co-care taking place in the early days. Sometimes during this week, the new parents move in to live with the foster carers. This helps the child to create a new attachment.



## At the nursery

At the nursery, it is important for the parents to see the care and love that the child will receive during the session.

When considering the care that babies need, it is essential to have experienced childcare practitioners. Practitioners who have emotional intelligence and a professional commitment to caring for the babies in their care. Practitioners who invest time and energy daily to give the babies the best opportunities to thrive.

Meeting the daily needs of small babies is very challenging. Daily, the key worker has the most important job in meeting the baby's care and holistic development needs. Getting to know the baby is essential, their unique personality, and what is important to them. Also, in terms of growth and development, the best way to meet their needs.

National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years:

**Standard 6:** Working in partnership with parents clearly identifies the importance of a close relationship with parents and guardians.

**'6.5 Details of what their child has achieved during the day, including any significant event or change in behaviour, are shared with parents.'**

**6.6 When caring for children under 2 years of age, there is a daily system for the exchange of information between the parent and the key worker. This includes information about the child's changing developmental and care needs and routines.'**

(Ref: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2025-09/national-minimum-standards-for-regulated-childcare.pdf>)

## Key workers

Key workers need time to create a special connection with the babies in their care. This does not happen by chance. To learn about the daily routine, likes and dislikes, and what is important to the baby and the family, time must be invested. Managers need to recognise this transition time, giving staff specific opportunity to build a strong bond with the child and family.

## About Sam

Sam Day is a Level 2-5 Assessor working for Cam Wrth Gam, Mudiad Meithrin's national training provider. Sam started her career as a nursery nurse in her local primary school, returned to education to study for a degree in Early Childhood Studies. Following this Sam managed Mudiad Meithrin first Early Years Integrated Centre and has worked in many roles caring for babies and young children for more than 30 years. Sam was a foster carer and has adopted twins with complex needs, as one of her current roles she delivers psychoeducational training on neurodiversity and meeting the education and care needs of children who experience the world differently.

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- [www.theplayfulpsychologist.com/post/attachment-and-daycare-can-children-still-thrive-in-childcare-settings](http://www.theplayfulpsychologist.com/post/attachment-and-daycare-can-children-still-thrive-in-childcare-settings)
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# How Settling In Shapes Quality in the Baby Room

Written by: **Dr Sara Bonetti and Kayla Halls, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Middlesex University**

**Achieving high-quality provision in the baby room of English nurseries is the largest study about quality in baby room provision carried out in England to date. With a focus on what quality practice looks and feels like for under twos in nursery provision, the evidence from this research project resonates across the UK. In this article, the team shares their learning about settling in for Early Years Wales.**

Settling in is often described as a short phase at the beginning of a baby's nursery journey. However, how a setting approaches it tells us a great deal in terms of how quality is understood and enacted in the baby room. When settling in is rushed or poorly supported, it can place strain on everyone involved. When it is planned carefully, it can lay the foundations for secure relationships, calm environments and confident practice.

**From our work, one theme emerged loud and clear: how many babies are settling in at the same time matters.**

To read more on the work Sara and Kayla are doing visit: [thebabyroom.blog](https://thebabyroom.blog) Or scan the QR code above.



## Why staggered settling in matters for babies

Babies who are new to a setting may cry more, need holding for longer, or struggle to engage with play or rest. This is not a “problem to be fixed”; it is a normal response to a major transition. However, it does mean that babies need time, space and consistent one-to-one support from (soon to be) familiar adults.

When several babies are settling in simultaneously, it's much harder to provide attuned care. Educators are pulled in multiple directions, routines are disrupted and the overall atmosphere of the room can become unsettled. Even babies who were already settled can be affected by increased noise, distress and changes to the rhythm of the day.

Staggering when babies settle in allows educators to support the development of secure attachments, helps babies learn that adults in the room are responsive and reliable, and enables a calm, predictable environment. In other words, it creates the conditions in which babies can feel safe enough to explore, play, and learn.

## Why staggered settling in matters for families

Settling in is a significant emotional moment for parents and carers. For many families, this may be the first time they are separated from their baby. Feelings of anxiety, guilt, relief, and uncertainty often sit alongside practical pressures, such as returning to work or managing entitlement hours.

A staggered settling in process can support parents by giving them time to build trust in the nursery and the adults who will care for their baby. When educators are not overwhelmed by multiple new starters, they are better able to communicate with families, share observations, and respond to concerns. This can help parents feel reassured that their baby is known, understood, and emotionally supported.

Clear, confident messaging about the importance of a gradual settling in can also reduce tension around hours and expectations. When families understand that a slower start is about wellbeing rather than restriction, they are more likely to view settling in as a shared process rather than a hurdle to get through.

## Making staggered settling in possible

High-quality settling in is not something educators can deliver alone. It requires support at multiple levels. For babies, this might include incorporating familiar objects, photos, or sounds from home, and ensuring that their cues are noticed and responded to consistently. Settling in should be treated as a responsive process, rather than a fixed timetable, empowering settings to make decisions based on what babies need in the here and now.

For educators, it involves thoughtful scheduling, opportunities to reflect, and practical support from managers or additional staff during particularly demanding periods. Managers play a key role in creating these conditions for staggered settling in. This includes listening to baby room staff about what feels manageable, planning ahead where possible, and recognising settling in as a skilled, ongoing relational process.

For families, it means opportunities to share information about routines, preferences, and worries. It is also about open communication, especially in contexts where early education hours are framed as an entitlement. Clear explanations about how settling in works, what babies need, and how quality is prioritised can help shift expectations away from “hours used” and towards “transitions supported”.

## Why staggered settling in matters for educators

Quality in the baby room is inseparable from educator wellbeing. Supporting a distressed baby requires emotional presence, patience and empathy. Doing this repeatedly, for multiple babies at once, day after day, can be exhausting. In very large baby rooms, it may be almost impossible to avoid multiple babies settling in at the same time. Smaller groups or multiple smaller rooms within a setting make these transitions easier.

When settling in is staggered and well planned, educators feel less overwhelmed and more purposeful. They have the time to observe, respond thoughtfully, and reflect on what each baby needs. Rather than simply coping, they can take pride in supporting a baby through a significant life transition and in building trusting relationships with families.

From a management perspective, this also matters for staff retention. A settling in process that is constantly experienced as stressful or unmanageable contributes to burnout. A process that feels intentional and supported can be a source of professional fulfilment.

## Questions for reflection

Settling in offers a powerful opportunity for thinking about quality in the baby room. It may be helpful to reflect on the following:

- How does the number of children settling in impact babies, staff, and the overall atmosphere?
- How flexible is your settling in process? For example, how do you decide when a new baby is ready to increase their time in the room?
- How are expectations about settling in communicated to families?
- What support do educators receive during periods of transition?



**By slowing down and paying attention to settling in, we can learn a great deal about what quality really looks like for our youngest children – not as a checklist or a policy requirement, but as a lived, relational experience in the baby room.**



# Building Early Attuned Relationships **BEAR**

## Awareness raising training for Wales focused on the first 1000 days

Written by: Dr Liz Gregory, Wales Development Lead  
and Dr Nicola Canale, Clinical Associate, Parent Infant Foundation

### Why raise awareness?

Research outlining the importance of sensitive, responsive, and nurturing relationships for babies is well established. There is significant evidence to support the crucial role that early relationships play in laying the foundations for mental health and wellbeing from infancy, throughout childhood and into adulthood. Early relationships are also associated with a range of additional outcomes, including social, emotional, cognitive and physical development, school attainment, future employment prospects, and relationship stability.

The Parent-Infant Foundation, supported by the National Lottery Community Fund, undertook a survey that highlighted the need to raise awareness of the importance of early relationships across the first 1000 days' workforce. This led to the development of co-produced training aimed at raising awareness and ensuring everyone working or volunteering with families understands why these early relationships matter; and the role we can all play in supporting them.

### Co-Production

The yearlong co-production journey to develop the training involved integrating the views of parents, the early years workforce, and experts in parent-infant relationships and trauma informed practice. Attention was given to the perspective of the baby, drawing on the Pledge for Babies, recently launched here in Wales, to ensure their views and needs were prioritised throughout. Welsh language and culture were also important considerations, and all resources are bilingual. The expertise of a creative agency was secured to produce resources that are of a professional quality and reflect the values of the training.

## The training - Introducing BEAR

The co-production work resulted in the creation of 'BEAR' (Building Early Attuned Relationships) - a three-hour, in-person training resource aimed at 'Trusted Adults' working across health, education, social care and the third sector. It assumes no prior knowledge regarding the importance of attuned relationships during the First 1000 Days.

'Trusted Adults' is Nyth/Nest terminology referring to the role everyone in services, including volunteers and the wider community, can have in supporting a new family on their journey through the First 1000 Days and beyond. BEAR emphasises how every connection can help a baby and their parents to feel a sense of belonging, and why it is 'the little things' that often make the biggest difference to families during this 'golden opportunity' in a baby's life.



## Training content

From the outset care and attention is given to creating a sense of belonging and comfort in the venue. Generally, we are good at asking if babies are hot, cold, tired, or hungry, but we can forget to do that for ourselves. Snacks and refreshments, blankets, fans and fidget toys are all provided during the training, and movement breaks are built in. Of course, we are often less good at thinking about a baby's inner emotional world, and it is this that lies at the core of BEAR.

The structure of the session is purposely simple, with baby voice, parent voice, video clips and activities all helping to bring the content to life in a practical way. The focus throughout returns to the relationship between the baby and the parent or carer and how to notice and support their connection.

By the end of the session participants should have an understanding of how a baby's brain develops during the first 1000 days, the role early attuned relationships play in supporting that development, and the importance of pattern and rhythm, including routine, reading, music and play. Participants learn firsthand what makes the biggest difference to parents during this stage of family life, and the role we can all play in supporting them. Participants also have an insight into how to observe a baby's relationship with parents or carers and gain an understanding of when more specialised help for a family may be required.

## Piloting BEAR across Wales

The awareness raising training has been piloted across all seven regions of Wales, reaching 175 attendees in total. A wide range of agencies, services and practitioners working across the first 1000 days were represented (55 distinct job roles in total). The evaluation has been overwhelmingly positive.

- 96% of attendees were somewhat likely or very likely to apply the knowledge or skills learnt in the training to their work in the next week, and 92% provided examples of how they will use what they have learned in their work.
- 99% of attendees left the training somewhat or very aware of the importance of early attuned relationships, and somewhat or very aware of the key things to consider in observing and supporting parent-infant relationships.

## Resources

There is a suite of resources to accompany the training, including:

- a short film
- a lullaby in both Welsh and English with male and female voices
- a book written from the voice of the baby summarising key learning points
- a postcard with the BEAR Essentials
- a crib sheet for professionals with key prompts to notice in their work with families
- a BEAR keyring with training takeaways, again from the perspective of the baby.

A link to the film and lullaby can be found on the Parent-Infant Foundation YouTube channel here <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/our-work/what-we-do/bear/>.

Or scan the QR code



Brilliant training.

So calm and gentle, very informative, and easy to understand and follow. Loved the presentation and how it was all connected together and flowed. Lovely to see and hear real life experiences.



This training is so important. It provides time for reflection and discussion and the messages need to be rolled out to anyone working with children in the First 1000 days.

## Next steps

Co-production and the evaluation of the pilot both highlighted the importance of BEAR training being an in-person event. Indeed, it is designed to be as much about the experience of coming together as a workforce focused on the first 1000 days, as it is about the content. Inevitably this limits how quickly it can be disseminated, and by whom. As a starting point a 'train the trainer' session has been held with Parent-Infant Network Cymru (PINC) - a group of professionals across Wales with expertise in parent-infant relationships, and the Parent-Infant Foundation is in the process of developing a strategy to support the roll out further. Look out for updates on the website. <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/our-work/what-we-do/bear/>





# How Working in Partnership with Parents and Carers is Vitally Important: Transitions, Language, Culture and Baby Practice

Written by: Glenys Jones, Glennie's Childminding Service, Aberdyfi, Gwynedd



**Within my setting, my policy clearly states that for babies and young children to receive high-quality care and early learning tailored to their individual needs, a close partnership between myself and parents or carers is essential. Parents are a child's first and most important educators. They know their child's routines, preferences, cultural practices and unique ways of communicating. My role is to support and build upon that knowledge.**

Effective partnership depends on meaningful two-way communication. When parents share information about feeding, sleeping patterns, development and emotional wellbeing, I can provide care that truly reflects each child's needs. In return, I offer daily feedback, observations and regular conversations so parents feel involved and reassured. This shared approach creates consistency between home and my setting, helping children feel secure and understood.

## Transitions

Starting with a childminder is a significant milestone for both baby and parent. For many children aged 0-2 years, it may be their first experience of separation from their primary caregiver. Without sensitive handling, this can lead to anxiety and distress.

Carefully planned transitions are therefore vital. I offer gradual settling-in sessions, beginning with visits alongside parents and slowly building to short periods alone, half days and eventually full days when the child is ready. Comfort items such as a favourite blanket or teddy are welcomed, and familiar routines are established to mirror home life.



Positive transitions support emotional wellbeing and allow babies to feel safe enough to explore their new environment. When children feel secure, they are more able to engage in learning, social development and communication. Throughout this time, I remain patient and responsive, recognising that each child adjusts at their own pace.

## Why Language and Culture Matter in Baby Practice

Language and culture are central to a child's identity and sense of belonging. Even before they can speak, babies absorb the sounds and rhythms of the language around them. Supporting a child's home language shows respect for the family and strengthens the child's developing identity.

Simple actions — learning key words, pronouncing a child's name correctly, and sharing cultural songs or traditions — help families feel recognised and valued. Embracing a child's cultural background promotes inclusion and belonging within the setting.

## Nurturing Relationships: Helping Babies Feel Safe, Seen and Valued

Nurturing relationships are the foundation of healthy development. Babies rely on attentive adults to meet both their physical and emotional needs. Predictable routines, warm interactions and sensitive responses help children feel safe and secure.

By observing babies carefully, even before they have words, I respond to their cues and support their emotional wellbeing. Every child deserves to feel valued as an individual, with achievements celebrated and self-esteem encouraged.



After 26 years of working in partnership with parents, I understand that one size does not fit all. Each child and family is unique. By adapting my approach and maintaining strong, respectful partnerships, I create an environment where children feel settled, secure and ready to thrive.

FREE COURSE



# Investing in the Very Best Start: Supporting Babies and Toddlers

A Free Online Course from The Open University and Early Years Wales

Foreword by: Dr Jane Dorrian, Programme Leader  
- Early Childhood, Senior Lecturer, SFHEA

## Every Baby Deserves Our Deepest Understanding

Quality practice is not just about what we offer children, it is about how deeply we understand them, and the free, online course 'Supporting Babies and Toddlers', written by the Open University and Early Years Wales has been designed to equip everyone with the expertise required to provide the best experiences for our youngest children. Giving babies the highest-quality practice possible is investing in children's futures, giving them the very best start.

## Laying the Foundations for a Lifetime of Learning

Working with babies and the youngest children is one of our most important responsibilities. A baby's earliest months and years are not a holding space where we are waiting for development to happen, ready for "real learning" later on—they are the foundation on which every future skill, relationship, and curiosity is built. The course supports practitioners to develop the high-quality practice essential to building these foundations.

## Shaping Brains, Nurturing Potential

When we engage with babies we are shaping the architecture of their developing brains. Warm, consistent relationships help babies feel safe enough to explore, experiment, and communicate long before they have words. Rich sensory experiences, thoughtful routines and environments designed with care allow babies to develop agency and confidence.

They are expert communicators when adults take the time to observe, listen, and interpret. They tell us when they need something, when they are overwhelmed, and when they are eager for connection. Our role is to slow down, tune in, and respond effectively, and the course can help everyone to do this.



Access the free course here:  
<https://bit.ly/4srx3xG>



## Why Enrol?

This free course helps practitioners:

- Build understanding of current research into child development and brain growth
- Recognise schematic behaviours and how they shape enabling environments (indoors and outdoors)
- Understand attachment and the role of the key person
- Strengthen partnerships with parents, including the home learning environment

Develop confidence in observing, assessing, planning and recording to support next steps in learning

## Course Overview

**Title:** Supporting Babies and Toddlers

**Level:** Introductory (Level 1)

**Study Time:** Approximately 12 hours

**Cost:** Free

**Format:** Online, flexible learning

## Who is it for?

Early years practitioners, childminders, students, leaders, and anyone working with babies and toddlers who wants to deepen their knowledge and strengthen everyday practice.

## Take the Next Step

Babies are not preparing for learning - they are already learning. This course supports you to provide the responsive, informed, high-quality care that builds strong foundations for life.





# Am Hwyl a Sbri!

## Have fun moving and chatting with your baby in Welsh!

Written by: Hannah Munkley, Welsh Language Support Worker

Have fun moving and chatting with your baby in Welsh! Little Movers, Little Speakers, Early Years Wales' six-week programme is designed to nurture a love of movement and communication between parent and baby while practicing Welsh.

### Movement and communication help develop speech and language acquisition

There's nothing more contagious than a baby's smile. Witnessing the bond strengthened between a parent and their infant through communication and movement is truly special, almost magical to watch.

The Little Movers, Little Speakers sessions practice skills essential for baby's development to give them a chance at the best start to life. The research by Dr. Sally Payne's from the Royal College of Occupational Therapists suggests that developing a child's physical strength through movement can directly improve their ability to communicate. For example, the stronger a baby's tummy muscles enable them to sit up independently. This in turn frees brain space for them to reach for objects in the environment around them, which allows for them to concentrate on communicating with their grown up. The more attention babies can give to the world around them leads to their development of words and acquisition of language.

### Build your self-confidence to use Welsh with your biggest cheerleader.

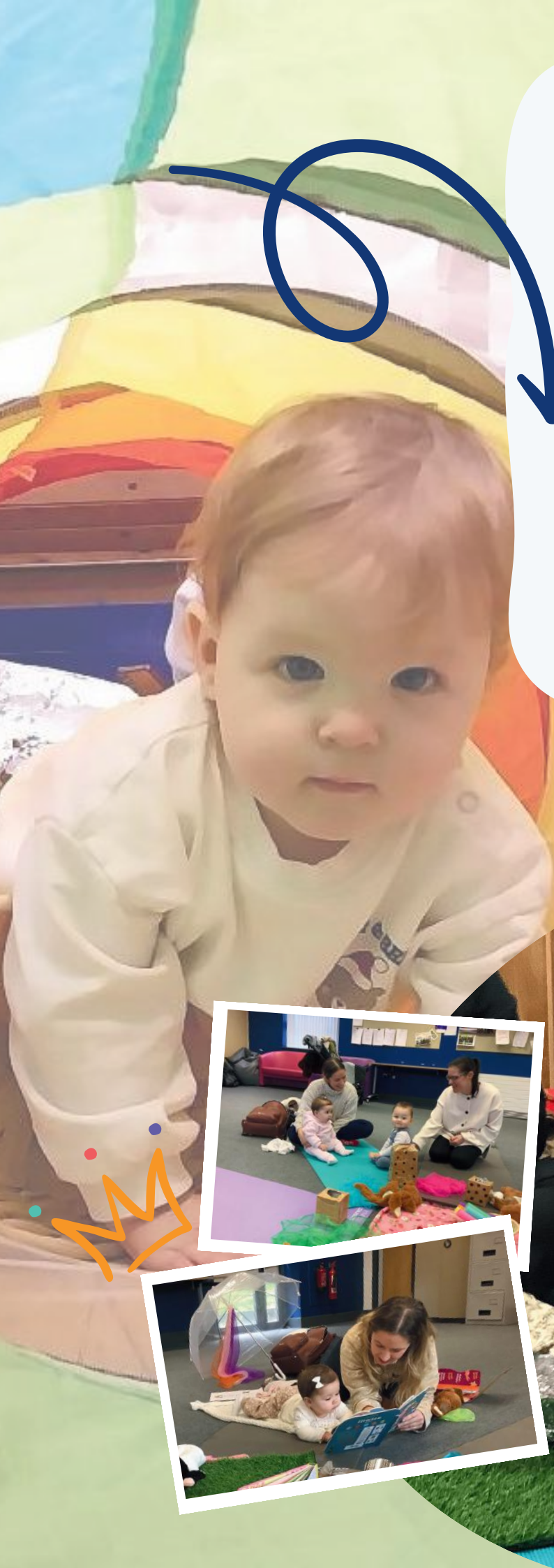
During these sessions parents get the chance to bond with their baby through Welsh. Whether they're complete beginners or maybe they're dusting off their GCSE Welsh skills, everyone's welcome to join in. Parents come and develop new friendships whilst laughing, learning and chatting with other parents who are most likely just as 'wedi blino' as they are.

Little Movers, Little Speakers is a welcoming and safe space, here to help parents learn some phrases relevant to baby. Parents are also introduced to a range of Hwiangerddi (Welsh nursery rhymes) whilst using movement to further encourage their baby's development.

### What can a bilingual brain do for your baby?

*Cymraeg for Kids* have encouraged introducing Welsh to babies early on to increase their opportunities and choices later in life. Academically, bilingual children tend to think more flexibly and creatively, are better at analysing data and multi-tasking and find it easier to learn additional language and show empathy towards other cultures. Other benefits for bilingual children include the opportunity to explore two cultures, fostering a strong sense of belonging, not to mention an additional skill leading to better job opportunities for them as adults.





## Belonging

Creating a sense of belonging is fundamental to a child's development and introducing them to a language and culture early on is an excellent way to support this. These sessions are also a lovely way to create a sense of belonging amongst parents, who may learn things they didn't know about Wales and the Welsh language; actively taking part in the sessions may help parents connect with their own Welsh culture. From feedback collected, parents who've attended the sessions have relayed how they've enjoyed getting to know other parents and their babies in a relaxed environment. Parents can feel a sense of belonging within the group where they feel comfortable to share experiences, tips, ask questions whilst having a good laugh. This sense of belonging not only promotes the infants' mental health but that of their parent.



*It has helped me learn Welsh phrases and songs for my baby. I wouldn't have done this had I not attended. A little bit of Welsh has become part of my daily routine now.*

Quote from a parent





## Cymraeg 2050 Strategy

Aiding the target set by the Welsh Government's initiative to reach one million Welsh-speakers by 2050, Early Years Wales are actively working to support parents to nurture confidence in their decisions to enrol their children in Welsh-medium schools.

Many parents are actively choosing Welsh medium education for their children with over 65,000 children attending Welsh-medium or bilingual schools. The Little Movers, Little Speakers sessions are designed to support non-Welsh speaking parents to start speaking and singing in Welsh to their baby. The sessions can also give parents more confidence and offer them peace of mind in making their decision regarding their child's future education.

Little Movers, Little Speakers sessions can be a starting point or a reintroduction to the Welsh language and are a great way to help parents bond with baby in Welsh.

### Outline of the six-week programme

Over the course of the programme parents will learn:

- to ask 'How are you?' and respond
- numbers and colours
- to ask baby what they want
- vocabulary related to daily routines
- to tell baby 'I love you'

Plus, festive sessions around Christmas time, Saint Dwynwen's Day and more.

Parents are then provided with a handout with all the new vocabulary and phrases, songs sung during the session and a challenge to practice with baby at home.

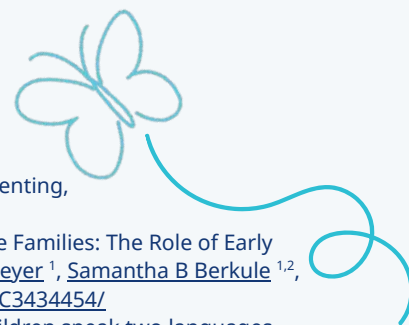
### References:

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- 'Infant Communication and Subsequent Language Development in Children from Low Income Families: The Role of Early Cognitive Stimulation', National Library of Medicine, [Carolyn Brockmeyer Cates](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Benard P Dreyer](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Samantha B Berkule](#)<sup>1,2</sup>, [Lisa J White](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Jenny A Arevalo](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Alan L Mendelsohn](#)<sup>1</sup> <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3434454/>
- 'Continuing with Welsh-medium education Your child is growing up in a world where most children speak two languages - why not give your child the chance to do the same.' Cymraeg in Education, Welsh Government <https://www.gov.wales/cymraeg-education/schools/continuing-with-welsh-medium-education>

During sessions, many parents have expressed their doubts in whether to choose Welsh-medium education which include, can they support their child with homework? Will they understand the reading books? Will parents' evenings be held in Welsh?

In this relaxed and open space, parents can discuss these concerns with each other. Usually, new parents get the chance to chat with parents who have older children attending Welsh schools. Those parents have had very positive experiences and can see how bilingualism benefits their child. Many have even started to pick up some language with them along the way. The hope is that by the end of the six-week sessions, parents feel more comfortable to chat and sing to baby in Welsh and feel more confident in any decision they make regarding their child's future.

**Overall, parents have provided feedback stating that they feel more confident to use Welsh with their baby, feel welcomed and comfortable in the setting, have enjoyed getting to know other mothers and enjoyed experiencing their babies interact with each other. Parents have stated that they now use Welsh in their daily routines and want to continue with their own language learning. One mother has started attending Welsh classes at her daughter's primary school and said that these sessions were a great starting point for her.**





# Culture, Cuddles and Early Literacy

## How Babies Learn Through PLAY

Written by: Amber Ogunsanya-William  
Inclusive Play Worker and Consultant

Did you know that every baby from Tottenham to Trinidad, from Lagos to Luton, from St Lucia to South London arrives already fluent in one universal language? Not English. Not Spanish. Not Yoruba, Twi, Patois or Punjabi.

### It's PLAY.

Before babies can say a single word, they're already having full blown conversations with us through wriggles, giggles, coos, kicks, eyebrow raises, and that dramatic baby pause before a smile (you know the one, the "I'm about to charm you into giving me anything I want" pause).

This is their language. This is how they say, "I'm curious... I'm excited... I'm learning you... I belong here." And honestly, if babies could talk, they'd probably add, "Also, I expect snacks, cuddles, and entertainment on demand and yes, I fully intend to keep you awake tonight."

And when we respond, when we wiggle back with a coo, or pull a silly face, we're not just playing. We're building their brain, their confidence, and their sense of cultural identity.





## Peekaboo... But Make It Cultural!

Peekaboo is one of the oldest baby games in the world. Every culture has its own version, from “*Coucou!*” in France to “*Katchi Katchi!*” in parts of East Africa to “*Bo-peep!*” in old English nursery rhymes. But when we sprinkle culture into it, when we bring in the fabrics, rhythms, and stories of our families, it becomes something even more magical. It becomes a whole sensory celebration, a tiny cultural festival happening right there on your lap.

Imagine lifting a bright Caribbean headwrap that still smells faintly of coconut oil and sunshine, and your baby’s whole face lights up before you even say “*boo.*” Picture a Ghanaian kente cloth with colours so bold and joyful that your baby’s eyes widen like they’ve just seen fireworks. Think of a sari scarf that floats like a cloud, drifting slowly down as your baby reaches up with those determined grabby hands. Or a tartan shawl that feels like a warm hug from a Scottish granny who insists you take leftovers home. Then there’s the Nigerian \*gele structured, regal, dramatic turning your peekaboo reveal into a full royal entrance. And of course, the St Lucian madras fabric, bursting with island brightness, practically doing half the performance for you.

Babies LOVE this one. The colours alone make them kick like they’re ready for a morning on the Gros Islet strip. And if all else fails, grab your favourite carnival bandana, because nothing says joy like a baby’s first taste of carnival energy.

Suddenly, peekaboo isn’t just a game. It becomes sensory play, cultural pride, early literacy, connection, belonging, and memory-making all at once. Babies don’t just see the fabric, they feel the story behind it. They feel the warmth of the Caribbean morning breeze in that headwrap. They feel the history woven into the kente. They feel the softness of the sari, the strength of the gele, the brightness of the madras. They feel the love of generations who wore these fabrics before them. And trust me, babies LOVE a dramatic reveal. They’re basically tiny theatre critics. They sit there like, “Yes, yes, the performance was adequate... but next time, please add more flair.” And when you do a big, joyful “**PEEKABOO!**” they act like you’ve just won an Olivier Award.

**\*Gele:** a traditional Nigerian headwrap, often worn for celebrations and special occasions. It’s bold, expressive and full of cultural pride.

## Five Top Tips for Parents, Families and Practitioners Who Want to Try Cultural Peekaboo

- 1 Choose fabrics that make you feel fabulous.** If the cloth makes you smile, your baby will feel that energy. Grab the scarf your auntie only wears at Christmas, the carnival bandana that still has glitter on it, or that kente cloth you’ve been saving for “a special occasion.” Guess what, this is the special occasion.
- 2 Milk the suspense like you’re on a West End stage.** Slow... the... reveal... right... down. Babies LOVE drama. That tiny pause before “*boo*” is basically their version of binge-watching. Stretch it out. Raise an eyebrow. Give them the full theatrical experience.
- 3 Add your cultural soundtrack.** Hum a lullaby from home. Add a little **\*\*soca shimmy.** Whisper “*Where’s Daddy gone?*” in your home language. Babies don’t care if you’re off-key they think you’re Beyoncé anyway.
- 4 Let the baby be the director.** If they want the scarf closer, give it. If they want it faster, go for it. If they grab it and try to eat it... well, that’s babies for you. Follow their lead like you’re in an improv class. They’re the boss.
- 5 Repeat it like you’re stuck in a loop, because you are.** Babies adore repetition. If they want the same peekaboo 27 times, congratulations, you’re doing brain building through play. And yes, you will do it again. And again. And again. Welcome to the encore tour.

**\*\* Soca:** an energetic music genre originating from Trinidad and Tobago, rooted in calypso. It’s joyful, rhythmic and made for dancing, perfect for carnival and community celebrations.



### See also:

You Can’t Be What You Can’t See: Championing Children’s Voices Through Representative Play, *smalltalk*, (December 2025) pg 16 - 19



## The Science Behind the Magic (Woven into the Story)



Here's the beautiful part; this isn't just cute. It's brain building and the science absolutely backs you up. When you play peekaboo, you're not just waving a cloth around. You're literally shaping the architecture of a baby's brain in real time. The **UK's National Literacy Trust** has found that babies who experience rich, playful interactions in their first year go on to develop stronger language skills and more confident communication. And the **NHS Start for Life campaign** reminds us that simple back and forth games the "I do something, you respond" magic help build the neural pathways babies need for attention, memory, and early language. And of course the show-stopper! **By age three, a child's brain is already 80% developed.**

That's not a typo - eighty percent. This is recognised across UK early years guidance and sits right at the heart of the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings, which champions playful, responsive interaction. So when you lift that madras cloth and your baby squeals with delight, you're not "just playing." You're doing exactly what the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings promotes: nurturing early communication skills, building secure and responsive relationships, and establishing the foundations for lifelong learning through play-based, experiential experiences — all woven naturally into everyday routines, even before snack time.

And because it's the **National Year of Reading**, therefore reading with babies isn't really about the book at all. It's about the experience. When you read, role play, or tell a story, whether you're roaring like a lion, whispering like a fairy, or dramatically gasping at a picture of a duck you're giving babies a front-row seat to language in action. You're showing them that stories are alive, words have power, and books are basically tiny adventures waiting to happen.

When we bring culture into reading using our home languages, family stories, favourite songs, or characters that look like our communities we're not just reading. We're giving babies a sensory dictionary, a cultural library, a rhythm to grow into and a story to belong to. We're building their early literacy with love, heritage, and joy... one silly voice and dramatic page-turn at a time.

**Reading starts long before children can read. Stories start long before children can talk. And literacy begins the moment a baby looks at you like, "Go on then... what happens next?"**

### Best Books to Read with Your Baby

#### 0-3 months Go bold or go home

Tiny babies adore high-contrast magic. Think black-and-white patterns, bold shapes, and simple images that make their little eyes go wide with wonder.

#### 4-6 months Bring on the textures

Rough, bumpy, fuzzy, squishy... if it feels interesting, they're hooked. These books turn reading into a full sensory adventure (and yes, they will absolutely try to taste the pages).

#### 7-9 months Big faces, big feelings

One large image per page is perfect. And faces? Babies study them like they're solving a mystery. Smiley faces, surprised faces, animal faces, all winners.

#### 10-12 months Let the games begin

Flaps to lift, tabs to pull, mirrors to admire themselves in, pop-ups that make you jump... interactive books are pure baby joy.

#### 12-18 months Wiggle, point, repeat

Choose books that get them moving, pointing to body parts, copying actions, making sounds, joining in. This is the age where storytime becomes a full-body experience.

#### 18-24 months More words, more wonder

Now they're ready for books with a few more sentences per page. Leave a little pause and let them finish the line, they LOVE feeling like the co-author

### Three Fun Ways to Bring Baby Storytime to Life

1

**Read like you're the star of your baby's favourite TV show.** Big expressions, silly voices, dramatic pauses, go all in. Babies LOVE animated storytelling. If you feel slightly ridiculous, you're doing it perfectly. To them, you're prime time entertainment.

2

**Treat the baby like your tiny co-author.** If they grab the book, flip the pages out of order, point at the same picture again and again, or loudly babble over the plot... that's not disruption, that's collaboration. They're helping shape the story. Think of them as a very enthusiastic editor with zero respect for narrative structure but excellent instincts.

3

**Turn storytime into a mini adventure.** Use props, make sound effects, tap the rhythm on their tummy, or act out the characters with your hands. Babies adore movement and surprise. A simple "whoosh," "roar," or "pop!" can turn a quiet page into a full-blown adventure. And in the National Year of Reading, nothing says "future book lover" like a baby kicking their legs because you made the cow go "**MOOOOO!**" a bit too loudly.

# Supporting Care-Experienced Babies and Toddlers Through Effective Nutrition Practices in the Early Years Sector



Written by: **Beth Preece, Registered Nutritionist (Public Health)**

The way that the earliest years of life shape health and overall well-being is well established in research, Welsh policy and everyday practice. For babies and toddlers who have faced adversity, including those in foster, kinship, or adoptive families, consistent, high-quality nutritional care at home and in early years settings contribute to lifelong health and emotional well-being. But how do practitioners turn this knowledge into daily actions that truly support children?

Read on to discover how trauma-informed nutrition transforms practice for some of our most vulnerable children. I share my experience as a Registered Nutritionist and an adoptive parent about how big feelings can show up at mealtimes and actions that can help.

## The First 1000 Days Age Range: Where Nutrition Meets Attachment and Regulation

Good nutrition is a key pillar of the first 1,000 days framework, shaping brain development, immune function, growth, emotional well-being and later physical and mental health. In the first two years of life, every feed or meal is an opportunity for nourishment, an attachment interaction and an emotional regulation opportunity. When feeding happens reliably, the little one's nutritional needs are met and their brain neural pathways develop based on the expectation that when an adult provides food, they experience fullness and can feel calm again.



## Nutrition and Care-affected Families

For babies and toddlers in care or adopted, this crucial period may have been shaped by a range of experiences that impact nutrition and feeding interactions with caregivers:

- Pre-birth exposure to stress, trauma, alcohol use, substance use or maternal under-nutrition
- Early experiences of neglect, instability or inconsistent caregiving.
- Parental finances or housing conditions may limit the availability or access to infant formula or nutritious and appropriate foods.
- Multiple transitions between birth family, foster care, kinship or adoptive families.

### Impact on Feeding Experiences and Behaviour

Such experiences can shape how a child receives feeding, the introduction of solid foods, and their ability to recognise hunger and fullness. For some, mealtimes may be accompanied by strong emotions: fear of not getting enough to eat, confusion due to inconsistent rules across different environments, or distress when food is removed. These factors may also affect their tolerance for waiting and how they experience transitions in childcare settings.

This may look like:

- Very fast feeding, overeating beyond the point of fullness, and preoccupation with food running out.
- Distress during mealtimes, even if more food is forthcoming, and strong reactions to associated changes in routines, caregivers, or the environment.
- Selectivity with food, a restricted diet, or anxiety about trying new foods.
- Wishing to control what they eat.

## Creating Thoughtful Food Environments

Childcare settings help build a sense of predictability and safety through how they plan, talk about and carry out feeding. Children explore food best when they feel secure and connected to the adult and setting providing it.

Key supportive principles include:

### Safety and predictability

- Keep feeding routines as consistent as possible: similar times, similar order of care.
- Ensure that the same key workers feed or are present during mealtimes, especially when babies and toddlers first come to the setting or when there has been recent change.
- Create a calm environment at mealtimes.
- View the feed / meal as a transition and prepare in a developmentally appropriate way.

### Trust and attunement

- Responsive feeding: watch closely for early hunger and fullness cues and adjust pace accordingly.
- Support trusting relationships with Early Years Practitioners and healthier eating behaviours by avoiding pressure to eat certain foods or amounts.
- Use warm verbal and non-verbal communication during feeding.



### Reflective Practice

By recognising how past adversity can influence a child's behaviour and experiences around feeding, we are encouraged to ask:

“What might this little one have already learned about food, and how can we provide a more supportive, nurturing and nutritious experience here?”

### Age-appropriate feeding that meets dietary requirements

In line with the Welsh Government Best Practice Standards for Food and Nutrition in Childcare Settings and in accordance with current dietary recommendations:

- Safely prepare and handle breast milk and formula, and provide a calm, responsive feeding environment for babies.
- Work collaboratively with parents and carers to support the introduction of solid foods.
- Ensure that all meals and snacks provided are nutritious and well-balanced.
- Respect and accommodate each child's cultural background, medical requirements, and individual dietary needs.

## Choice, control and collaboration

- For older infants, offer simple choices and involve them in food routines: two bibs to choose from, a choice of which food to try first, allow them to bring plates to the table.
- Two-way communication: involve carers in planning feeding: asking “What does feeding look like at home right now? What helps?” and be consistent with what already works.
- Respect families’ culture around food, mealtimes and feeding practices.
- Keep notes on how much is eaten, preferences, emotions and triggers that can be shared with families and professionals to support continuity.
- Show understanding in booklets for parents and carers by acknowledging that starting nursery, changing rooms, or shifts in family life can temporarily unsettle babies and toddlers at mealtimes, and the collaborative approach that the setting uses.

## Supporting staff development

- Have feeding policies that bring together the Welsh Government Best Practice Guidance Nutrition Standards for childcare settings with trauma-informed principles.
- Use the key person approach to feeding to offer a steady anchor, including this as part of role descriptions.
- Start supportive conversations with carers and parents if changes have been noticed.
- Embed trauma-informed reflection into staff training, induction and supervision.



## Further reading

Gibson, P. and Carter, J. (2025) Helping adopted children and children in care find their voice in the Early Years. Small Talk, December 2025.

Trauma-informed Wales Website: A Societal Approach to Understanding, Preventing and Supporting the Impacts of Trauma and Adversity. Available at: <https://traumaframeworkcymru.com>

Public Health Wales The first 1000 days: a golden opportunity to build a fairer future Available at: [phw.nhs.wales/topics/the-first-1000-days-programme/resources/the-first-1000-days-a-golden-opportunity-to-build-a-fairer-future-infographic?ts=1771324675362](https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/the-first-1000-days-programme/resources/the-first-1000-days-a-golden-opportunity-to-build-a-fairer-future-infographic?ts=1771324675362)

Social Care Wales (2023) Trauma-informed approaches Evidence Summary. Available at: <https://insightcollective.socialcare.wales/evidence-summaries/trauma-informed-approaches>

World Health Organisation (2018) Nurturing Care for Early Child Development. Available at: <https://www.who.int/teams/maternal-newborn-child-adolescent-health-and-ageing/child-health/nurturing-care>.

Welsh Government (2018) Best Practice Guidance Food and Nutrition Standards for Childcare Settings. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/food-and-nutrition-guidance-childcare-providers>.

## A Family's Story

Our daughter came to us as a baby. By the time I returned to work, we felt she was ready to start in a day nursery with careful introductions. It was at mealtimes that her difficulties around transitions emerged most clearly. Her key worker noticed that she would refuse to come to the table or become upset as the plates were served. She always ate something but had distinct likes and dislikes.

The descriptions of how she behaved and what food was offered, helped us recognise together that it was not just typical fussy eating but activating feelings around a change in environment and carer.

Together, we planned strategies to build her sense of security at nursery:

- Having her key worker close by.
- Extra preparation time and use of visual cues.
- Acknowledging and validating her feelings, using gentle re-assurance.
- Using her comforter as a transitional object.
- Sharing with us not only what and how much she ate but her emotions during mealtimes to help us work together.

## Conclusion

By intentionally weaving trauma-informed nutrition into daily food routines, practitioners in Early Years Settings create environments where every child feels safe, valued, and supported, especially those who have experienced early adversity. Early Years Practitioners are already putting these approaches into practice, striving to create nurturing environments that foster both physical and emotional well-being. I'm always happy to talk and share resources with settings or services who want to embed trauma-informed nutrition into their practice, you can get in touch at [www.cariadfamilynutrition.co.uk](http://www.cariadfamilynutrition.co.uk).



# Specialist Training on Safe Sleep Practices for Babies

The Childcare and Play Team have recently completed specialist training delivered by the Lullaby Trust, focusing on safe sleep practices for babies. This was commissioned to support ongoing professional development and further enhance the induction programme for newly appointed inspectors.

Prior to the training session, CIW worked in collaboration with the Lullaby Trust to design a bespoke program. This ensured the training was specifically tailored to the regulatory responsibilities of the team and was linked to the most current guidance and best practice. As a result, inspectors are now better equipped to identify effective practice and to make informed, proportionate recommendations regarding safe sleep arrangements. The team remains committed to signposting providers to relevant, evidence-based information through inspection and during quality meetings.

## Inspector Feedback

**"A really informative session that clarified clear sleeping guidance for babies, which should be applied at all times, at home or in any setting."**

**"A very informative session and so useful to pass on to childcare practitioners and parents."**

## Key Benefits for Inspectors

- Increased confidence in having conversations with providers regarding safer sleep options.
- A deeper understanding of the reasoning behind the current guidelines.
- Awareness of the dangers associated with not addressing issues arising from poor sleep practices during inspection.
- Knowledge of the different types of pods and sleeping arrangements.
- A recognition of the importance of signposting to the Lullaby Trust organisation.



# Again, Again!

## Unpacking the Power of Repetition in Early Learning



Written by: Dr Stella Louis, Early Years Consultant

### The Power of Repetition

Schemas are repeated patterns of behaviour that help children make sense of the world. They're like building blocks for learning and development. Repetition is like a cosy blanket for babies and young children - it provides comfort and reassurance. They love doing the same things over and over, whether it's singing a favourite song, playing a game, or hearing the same story.



## Repetition: A Key to Learning and Development

When children spend all their time putting bricks in the truck, this is not purposeless it's actually crucial for their development. Repetition helps build strong neural connections in their brains, which is essential for learning and mastering new skills.

Repetition plays a significant role in language development, motor skills, and even emotional stability. When children repeat actions or hear the same words, they're reinforcing patterns and connections in their brains, laying the groundwork for future learning.

## Understanding Schemas



Adults often get bored with repetition, but for babies and young children, it's a whole different story. They thrive on it! With limited life experiences, repetition is their way of exploring, discovering and experimenting. It's like a never-ending adventure where they get to practice and perfect their skills and abilities.

Repetition helps build strong neural connections in their brains, which is essential for learning and development. It's not just about doing the same thing over and over; it's about refining skills, developing coordination, and boosting confidence. Plus, it provides a sense of security and predictability, which is super important for their development.

## Familiarity and Security: The role of Schemas

Schemas play a big role in child development. They are always adjusting and changing in light of their experiences and responses from others. Babies and young children tend to prefer what's familiar - it gives them a sense of security and structure. Even when they're curious about new things, they still crave predictability. Repeating familiar activities, like going on a favourite walk or playing with a favourite toy, is very reassuring for them.

This isn't about being stuck in a rut; it's about feeling secure and confident. When babies and toddlers recognise something familiar, they get a boost of emotional pleasure. It's like they're thinking, "Ah, I know this!" And they happily go back to it again and again, no worries about being bored or inhibited. When observing babies and young children, you see how much joy they get from repetition. It's a key part of how they learn and make sense of the world.

## Exploring space and boundaries: Isla Rae's journey

The photos show Isla Rae's interaction with space, positions and boundaries. Which links with trajectory and positioning schemas. The first photo where she is sitting observing. She seems to be deciding or preparing to interact with her environment. Isla Rae actively engages with her surroundings using purposeful movements and positions: sitting, walking, kneeling. She is enacting a familiar routine. She uses strong trajectory schema in her movements walking back and forth confidently. Exploring boundaries through the gates, following leafy pathways. Navigating and interacting with surfaces - i.e. walls and pavements and objects - i.e. the bins. Sitting on the wall, kneeling and moving near cracks and confined areas - deliberately placing herself in spaces in relation with objects and boundaries. The recurring theme of transitioning, positioning and trajectory movements between spaces.

### Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Shirley Jno Baptise for her insightful analysis and photographs of Isla Rae's schema development, which informs this article.



## Schemas on Repeat

The schematic way is how we all learn best. Babies and young children are completely schematic. When we're trying to master something new, repetition is key - whether it's a computer programme, a password, or a new skill. The thing is, adults have more experience and strategies to help us commit things to memory, so we might not always realise how powerful repetition is. But babies and young children are using this exact same strategy when they play with a toy over and over - they're learning, practicing, and mastering new skills.



Schemas give us a glimpse into children's thinking, and it's clear that repetition makes things more manageable for them. Plus, it gives them a huge confidence boost - they feel successful and in control when they can do something familiar. It's a simple but powerful way to support their self-esteem. Here are three common schemas:

### Trajectory Schema

A 9-month-old baby exploring the trajectory schema might be fascinated by throwing toys or objects, like a soft ball or a stuffed animal, and watching them move through the air or roll across the floor. They might:

- Drop a toy from their highchair and giggle as it falls
- Throw a ball and track its movement with their eyes
- Push a toy car or block and watch it roll away
- Experiment with dropping different objects from different heights

Through these actions, they're learning about cause and effect, gravity, and the path an object takes when it's thrown or dropped - all part of the trajectory schema



### Rotation Schema

A 12-month-old exploring the rotation schema might be fascinated by turning things, like:

- Twirling around in a circle, holding onto a parent's hand
- Spinning wheels on a toy car or bike
- Rotating a knob or dial on a toy
- Twisting and turning their own body to look at things from different angles

Through these actions, they're learning about how things move and change when rotated, and developing their understanding of spatial relationships and problem-solving skills



### Transporting Schema

A 24-month-old exploring the transporting schema might be fascinated by:

- Carrying a basket or bucket filled with toys or blocks
- Pushing a toy buggy or truck around the room
- Moving objects from one place to another, like taking toys from the living room to the kitchen
- Using a spoon or cup to transfer imaginary "food" or "drink" between containers
- Loading and unloading a toy truck or car

Through these actions, they're learning about spatial relationships, adding, taking away, increases in quantity, problem-solving, and developing their fine motor skills.

### Key messages

- Repetition provides comfort and security
- Schemas support learning and development
- Familiarity is reassuring
- Repetition builds confidence
- Schemas give insight into thinking





# The First 1,000 Days in a Digital Age: Protecting Presence, Connection and Development

Written by: Sue Atkins President: Montessori UK and Parenting Author, Broadcaster & Host of the “Navigating the Digital Jungle” podcast



The first 1,000 days of life are a period of extraordinary growth. Brains are being wired at a breathtaking pace. Language, attachment, movement, emotional regulation and curiosity are all taking shape through everyday interactions with loving adults.

It has long been understood in early childhood that babies and toddlers thrive through warm relationships, responsive caregiving and rich real-world exploration.

What is new for today's generation is that this critical developmental window now sits within a digital landscape that did not exist for previous generations of parents.

The Children of the 2020s report<sup>1</sup> highlights what many practitioners are already noticing — digital media and screen exposure are entering children's lives earlier and more pervasively than ever before.

The question for early years professionals isn't whether technology is here to stay — it clearly is — but how we can support families to protect what matters most in a child's earliest years: connection, development and presence.

This is not about blame. It is about balance, understanding and gentle guidance.

## Reference:

<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/4sMoihU>

## Why the first 1,000 days matter so much

In the first years of life, babies' brains are shaped by serve-and-return interactions: eye contact, babbling back and forth, facial expressions, shared attention and responsive caregiving. These micro-moments build neural pathways for language, emotional security and social understanding.

When a baby points to a dog and an adult says, “**Yes, that's a dog! Look at its tail wagging,**” thousands of neural connections are strengthened. When a toddler is comforted, mirrored and responded to, they build the foundations of regulation and trust.

Screens, by their nature, can't replicate this relational loop. Even the most beautifully designed digital content cannot replace a human face, a voice responding in real time, or the sensory richness of the real world.

The risk is not simply “screen time” in isolation — it is *what screens replace*.

If screen use displaces conversation, shared attention, movement, play and connection, then development may be affected. If it is occasional, intentional and balanced within a relationship-rich environment, the impact looks very different.

This nuance is important when supporting families.



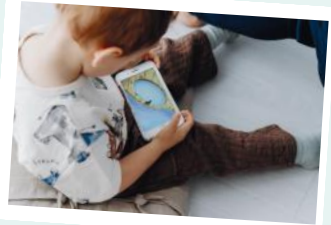
## What we are seeing in practice

Across early years settings and parenting work, several themes are emerging:

- Babies in pushchairs or highchairs with phones positioned in front of them
- Toddlers becoming accustomed to constant background media
- Parents feeling pressure, guilt or confusion about what is “right”
- Increased use of screens to manage busy family life
- Concerns about speech, attention and regulation in some young children

Many parents are not intentionally choosing screens over connection. They are navigating modern life — work demands, exhaustion, limited support networks and an overwhelming volume of advice. Screens can feel like a lifeline in difficult moments.

**Our role as early years professionals is not to judge but to support, inform and empower.**



## A Montessori lens on the first 1,000 days

Montessori philosophy offers a helpful framework for thinking about early development in a digital world. At its heart is the belief that children learn through real experiences, movement, sensory exploration and meaningful connection.

For babies and toddlers, this means:

- Being fully present with the child
- Supporting independence through real-world activity
- Encouraging exploration of the physical environment
- Valuing slow, attentive interactions
- Protecting concentration and curiosity

From a Montessori perspective, the earliest years are about building a relationship with the real world first — textures, sounds, faces, voices, nature, objects and movement. Digital media can easily interrupt that relationship if it becomes dominant.

**However, Montessori is not anti-technology. It is pro-development.**

The question is always: *What does this child need most at this stage?*

In the first 1,000 days, the answer is overwhelmingly: connection, language, movement and presence.



## Supporting parents without shame

Parents often receive polarised messages: either “screens are harmful” or “screens are inevitable.” Neither is particularly helpful. What families need are practical, compassionate conversations.

Here are some approaches early years professionals can use:

### 1 Start with curiosity, not judgment. Ask open questions:

- “How are screens used at home at the moment?”
- “What feels helpful about them?”
- “What feels challenging?”

Listening first builds trust and allows for realistic support.

### 2 Focus on what to do, not just what to avoid. Instead of only saying “less screen time” we can suggest:

- Talking through daily routines with babies
- Singing, reading and storytelling
- Face-to-face play
- Outdoor time
- Device-free mealtimes

Parents respond well to simple, doable ideas.

### 3 Reframe screens as tools, not default. Screens can be used intentionally rather than habitually. For example:

- Occasional video calls with family
- Shared viewing with an adult present
- Avoiding screens during feeding, settling or play

It is the how and when that matter most.

### 4 Support adult behaviour change. Babies are highly attuned to adult attention. When adults are frequently on phones, even for valid reasons, interactions can become fragmented. Gentle suggestions can help:

- Keeping phones away during playtime
- Creating small “phone-down” windows
- Noticing how often we reach for devices

When adults shift habits, children benefit immediately.



## Practical guidance for early years settings

Settings can play a powerful role in shaping conversations around early development and digital use.

Consider:

- Sharing research in accessible, non-alarmist ways
- Offering parent workshops or short information sessions
- Modelling device-free interactions in the setting
- Encouraging language-rich, play-based environments
- Creating clear but supportive policies around screen use

Most importantly, keep communication collaborative. Families are far more likely to engage when they feel respected rather than corrected.

### About Sue

Sue Atkins is a parenting author, broadcaster and President of Montessori UK. She helps parents and early years professionals navigate modern childhood with confidence and balance. Sue hosts the Navigating the Digital Jungle podcast and creates practical resources and training to support calm conversations around technology, behaviour and wellbeing. She is developing new CPD resources for early years settings focused on families in the digital age.

## A balanced message for modern childhood



We are raising children in a digital age. Technology is woven into daily life and is not going away. But the earliest years remain fundamentally human.

Babies do not need apps.

They need faces. They need voices. They need time. They need connection.

If we can help families protect presence and interaction during the first 1,000 days, we give children the strongest possible foundation — not just for learning, but for wellbeing, relationships and resilience.

The goal is not perfection. It is awareness and intention.

By working together — parents, practitioners and communities — we can ensure that in a fast-moving digital world, our youngest children still receive what they have always needed most: attentive adults, real experiences and a childhood rooted in connection.



### Useful links:



[www.navigatingthedigitaljungle.com](http://www.navigatingthedigitaljungle.com)



[www.thesueatkins.com](http://www.thesueatkins.com)



# Too Loud to Learn? Rethinking Noise Indoors and Outside in the Early Years



Written by: Dr Gemma Goldenberg, Institute for the Science of Early Years (ISEY)

Early Years settings are lively, social and busy places. Noise is an inevitable part of young children playing, exploring and communicating together. Yet growing evidence suggests that the type, intensity and acoustic properties of noise in Early Years environments can significantly influence children's language development, attention and wellbeing - particularly for younger children, and especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Klatte et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2021).

Understanding why children struggle to learn in noisy environments, and how indoor and outdoor noise differs, can help practitioners make small, realistic changes that better support children's communication and learning.

## Why noise affects young children more than adults

Listening in noise is a complex cognitive task. When a child hears speech in a busy room, their brain must separate the adult's voice they are trying to listen to from all other sounds: other children talking, toys clattering, chairs scraping, and sound echoing around the space. This process is far less efficient in young children than in adults (Newman, 2009; Erickson & Newman, 2017).

Infants and toddlers can struggle to recognise even their own name when there is background speech (Newman, 2009). Children's ability to filter out background sound improves gradually with age, meaning that the younger a child is, the quieter the environment needs to be for them to understand speech, or the louder the adult's voice needs to be relative to the surrounding noise.

When noise levels are high, listening requires more mental effort. This increased listening effort leaves fewer cognitive resources available for memory, attention and learning new words (Howard et al., 2010; Osman & Sullivan, 2014). Over time, repeated exposure to noisy environments can also elevate stress levels, further undermining concentration and self-regulation (Evans, 2006; Wass et al., 2019).



## Indoor noise: volume, reverberation and chatter

Indoor Early Years environments are often acoustically challenging. Many nurseries and reception classrooms are open-plan, with hard floors, high ceilings and limited soft furnishings. These features increase reverberation (the persistence of sound as it reflects off surfaces) causing speech sounds to blur together and become harder to distinguish (Manlove et al., 2001).

Research consistently shows that background chatter is particularly disruptive for language learning, more so than non-speech sounds (Lamotte et al., 2021). This is because speech-like noise directly competes with the speech children are trying to understand. In preschool settings, where talk and collaboration are encouraged, this creates a tension: the very behaviours that support social development can unintentionally undermine listening and language learning if acoustics are poor.

Studies in childcare settings show that improving indoor acoustics can lead to measurable gains. Maxwell and Evans (1999) found that installing sound-absorbing materials in a preschool improved 3–5-year-olds' pre-reading skills and increased the likelihood that children spoke in complete sentences. Experimental work also shows that children learn new words more accurately when listening conditions are clearer (Riley & McGregor, 2012).

### Who is most affected?

Noise does not affect all children equally. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with weaker early language skills, children who are non-native speakers, and children with SEND are disproportionately affected by poor acoustic conditions (Bhang et al., 2018; Klatte et al., 2013).

This matters because early language differences tend to widen over time. Children who struggle to hear and process language in the Early Years are at greater risk of later difficulties in literacy, learning and wellbeing (Fernald et al., 2013; Thompson et al., 2021). Noise therefore acts as an equity issue, potentially amplifying existing disadvantage.



## Outdoor noise: why getting outside supports language and communication

Acoustically, outdoor environments differ fundamentally from indoor ones. Without walls and ceilings for sound to bounce off, noise does not reverberate in the same way. Although outdoor play can still be noisy, the quality and intensity of that noise is different.

Research comparing matched indoor and outdoor activities found that children's noise levels were lower outdoors, even in urban settings with road traffic noise. Importantly, indoor noise levels were associated with increases in children's heart rates, suggesting rising stress, whereas outdoors children's heart rates were not linked to noise levels. Even when outdoor environments became noisy, something about being outside appeared to buffer children from the stressful effects of noise (Goldenberg et al., 2024).

Because outdoor environments involve far less reverberation than enclosed indoor spaces, speech signals are less acoustically distorted and overlap less with background sound, supporting children's ability to focus on and understand a particular speaker (Klatte et al., 2013). Children also typically have more physical space to move away from competing noise sources, allowing them to regulate their auditory environment more easily. This may help explain why outdoor learning is often associated with improved attention, reduced stress, and more sustained social interaction and communication (Atkinson et al., 2025; Goldenberg et al., 2024).

Research on children's language use across environments suggests that children often produce richer, more expressive utterances in outdoor and natural settings than indoors (Richardson & Murray, 2017). This work indicates that outdoor classrooms, when intentionally designed and supported by practitioners, can be particularly conducive to high-quality language use, combining the benefits of space, sensory richness and social interaction (Richardson, 2020).



## New research from ISEY: why this matters now



Despite strong evidence from school-aged children, very little research has examined noise in Early Years settings, particularly for toddlers. This gap is now being addressed through a new Nuffield-funded research project led by the Institute for the Science of Early Years and Youth (ISEY) at the University of East London.

The project will involve children aged 12–24 months across ten nurseries in disadvantaged areas. Using wearable microphones, cameras and stress monitors, researchers will examine how moment-to-moment changes in noise and communication clarity relate to children's language comprehension and production. Crucially, the study will also test low-cost, practical interventions- including simple acoustic adaptations and practitioner communication strategies - to identify what makes the biggest difference in real nursery environments.

Rather than aiming to eliminate noise, this research focuses on understanding which aspects of noise matter most, and how everyday practice can mitigate negative effects.

## Practical implications for Early Years practice

Supporting children's listening and communication doesn't require silence. Instead, it involves being intentional about acoustics both indoors and outdoors.



### Indoors, practitioners can:

- Reduce reverberation using soft furnishings, rugs on walls, curtains and fabric panels (Manlove et al., 2001).
- Minimise unnecessary noise, such as using felt pads for scraping chairs, stick in liners for boxes of loose toys and rubber guards to stop slamming doors.
- Be mindful of background adult talk during language-rich moments such as story time and phonics.

Increase speech clarity through slower pace, exaggerated mouth movements, gesture and visual support, which can aid word learning in noise (Riley & McGregor, 2012).

### Outdoors, practitioners can:

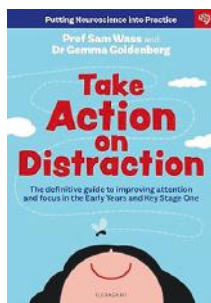
- Use space strategically, spreading groups out to reduce competing noise.
- Provide quieter outdoor spaces where children may be more likely to communicate.
- Position listening-heavy activities away from traffic or busy bottlenecks.

Across both contexts, offering choice and flexibility is key. Quiet corners, small-group work, and opportunities to move between noisier and calmer spaces support self-regulation and inclusion.

## Conclusion

Noise is an unavoidable part of Early Years settings, but its impact is not unavoidable. For young children, particularly those facing disadvantage, the acoustic environment shapes how well they can hear, attend, communicate and learn. Indoor and outdoor spaces offer different acoustic affordances, and understanding these differences allows practitioners to use space, pedagogy and communication more effectively.

As new research from ISEY begins to fill long-standing gaps in our understanding of noise in the Early Years, practitioners are well placed to start acting now - creating environments that are lively, playful and socially rich, while still supporting every child's right to hear and be heard.



**Gemma's award-winning book Take Action on Distraction is a neuroscientist's guide to attention in the early years and is full of practical tips to support focus and concentration in young learners.**

Order your copy today from:  
<https://amzn.eu/d/07wXOseB>

Meithrinfa Cwtsh y Clos Nursery are based on a small holding in rural Carmarthenshire. This is what Gwenllian Stephens the nursery owner and manager had to say in response to Gemma's article:



*We find when the nursery gets busy and noise levels increases babies and toddlers can feel overwhelmed and get unsettled. Going for a walk or playing outside is quite literally like a breath of fresh air. The children can calm down and regulate themselves ready for the next activity. Being based in rural Carmarthenshire, the children have immediate access to birdsong, tractors and farm animals – listening to the activity going on around them outdoors helps them not only to learn but to self-soothe. There's no need for calming music when you have countryside noises!*



# Early Intervention in the First Three Years: Supporting Children with Additional Learning Needs and Their Families

Written by: Hannah Newton, Graduate Mental Health Support Worker, and Dr Emma Johnston, Clinical Psychologist- Service Lead, Llygad: Early Years Experience Team

Early childhood is a critical period for development, particularly for children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN). Early intervention provides timely support to children and families, helping to strengthen key developmental skills and prevent later difficulties. This article explores the role of early intervention in supporting children under three, highlighting how approaches such as Portage, E-PATs, and parent peer support are embedded within the work of the Llygad team.

## What is Early Intervention?

The Early Intervention Foundation (2021) describes Early Intervention (EI) as:

Early Intervention means identifying and providing effective early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes. Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life. Early intervention can take different forms, from home visiting programmes to support vulnerable parents, to school-based programmes to improve children's social and emotional skills.

Essentially, EI aims to prevent problems later in life by providing support and tools early on, before difficulties escalate.

Research tells us that early intervention can:

- Protect children from harm
- Reduce the need for referrals to child protection services
- Improve children's long-term outcomes
- Improve home and family life for both children and their families/carers
- Support children to build skills and strengths that prepare them for later life

(Haynes et al., 2015; Early Intervention Foundation, 2021)

## Why should we use Early Intervention when supporting children with ALN?

Theory suggests that when support is provided early for young children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN), it can positively change their developmental trajectory (how behaviour and development change over time).

Early intervention focuses on key **pivotal developmental skills** - social behaviours that can lead to the development of new skills without each one needing to be directly taught. When these pivotal skills are strengthened early for children with ALN, other developmental abilities are more likely to emerge more naturally and with less intensive support as the child grows.

If these early skills are not supported or developed early on, there is an increased risk of later difficulties, including challenging behaviour and mental health concerns for children with learning disabilities. Early intervention that focuses on pivotal developmental skills therefore plays an important role in **preventing later difficulties**.

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** and the **SEND Code of Practice** both highlight the rights of children to access appropriate early support and intervention.

### How we use Early Intervention within Llygad

Llygad (based within Cardiff and Vale University Health Board) provides psychologically informed support to families of children aged 0–5 with emerging learning disabilities, neurodevelopmental concerns, or global developmental delay.

As a team, early intervention principles are embedded throughout all the support provided to the families we work with.

The long-term aims include:

- Preventing the development of behaviours that may become challenging over time
- Reducing reliance on multiple services that can become costly and complex
- Improving parents' understanding and confidence in supporting their child
- Supporting improvements in parental wellbeing

### Portage Intervention

The **Portage model** closely reflects early intervention principles in several important ways. In many respects, Portage is an early intervention approach in its own right. It is grounded in the understanding that the earlier support begins for children with developmental delays or disabilities, the better the long-term outcomes are likely to be.

Portage provides support within the home environment, with parents and carers acting as active partners in their child's learning and development. The approach focuses on **empowering families** through play-based learning and developmental support rather than working with the child in isolation.

Through the use of structured developmental checklists covering areas such as communication, self-help, motor skills and cognition, Portage supports children across multiple developmental domains before difficulties become more entrenched.

Practitioners work with families to develop **small, achievable targets** tailored to the child's current level of development. By building skills and supporting families early, particularly when children are aged 0–3, Portage helps establish strong developmental foundations.

Portage practitioners also act as a bridge between families and other services, helping to create a **multidisciplinary network of support** around the child and family that reflects wider early intervention models.

### Early Positive Approaches to Support (E-PaTS)

The **Early Positive Approaches to Support (E-PaTS)** programme offers a preventative, evidence-based approach for families.

Developed by **Nick Gore** and **Jill Bradshaw** at the **Tizard Centre** at the **University of Kent**, the programme draws on leading UK research into autism and intellectual disabilities.

E-PaTS was developed collaboratively with families from the outset, drawing on parents' lived experiences and reflections on the types of support that would have been most helpful during the early years of raising a child with developmental delays or learning difficulties.

The programme recognises that families of children with additional needs often face challenges that extend beyond typical parenting experiences and therefore require tailored support.

E-PaTS provides relational, evidence-based early intervention support for parents and carers of young children with additional needs. Importantly, a formal diagnosis is **not required** to access the programme, and families are able to self-refer.

At its core, the programme aims to:

- Promote family resilience
- Reduce parental stress
- Equip families with practical tools to support their child's development

This empowers parents to support their child confidently as they grow and develop, while also reducing the likelihood of families requiring more intensive support from statutory services later on.

## Embedding Parent Lived Experience in Early Intervention

Early Intervention (EI) can also play an important role in supporting the mental and physical wellbeing of parent/carers and families of children with additional developmental needs.

In November 2024, Nikki Chard joined Llygad as a Parent/Carer Peer Mentor, bringing valuable lived experience that is embedded throughout the team's work. Nikki has a 16-year-old son with autism, sensory processing differences and significant communication and language delays, and believes that the earlier families receive support, the greater their opportunity to thrive.

**Nikki also contributes to the team by co-producing and co-facilitating training for professionals who work with families of children with additional developmental needs.**

Early Intervention is the key to fully understanding and supporting correctly our children's communication attempts, sensory experiences and behaviours. The sooner this can be put in place and adopted by home and school for continuity the better. This can be achieved through early signposting and support, access to information that is holistic and timely for families, and delivered in a way that is coherent and understandable to them.

We shouldn't underestimate the power of the support that parent/carers can gain through peer networks, whether this is through parental groups, online communities or peer-to-peer services. This support can help meet the emotional and physical needs that often arise when raising a child with complex difficulties. There is nothing quite like the empathy from another parent who simply 'gets it'. The longer families remain unsupported, the greater the likelihood that their needs will escalate, potentially leaving them reaching crisis point.

## Conclusion – What Difference Do We Make by Working This Way?

As a team working with families of children aged 0–5, we recognise that this is a crucial developmental period where early intervention, thoughtful support and well-attuned responses can genuinely change a child's developmental trajectory. By providing early intervention, we support families who are trying to understand and make sense of their experiences. This can help reduce feelings of confusion, self-blame, guilt and isolation.

By holding the whole family in mind, we are able to strengthen parental confidence and promote the attuned relationships that children need in order to thrive.



**You might be interested in:**

[www.portage.org.uk/about/what-portage/portage-model](http://www.portage.org.uk/about/what-portage/portage-model)

[www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/what-we-do/projects-and-research/early-positive-approaches-to-support-e-pats/](http://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/what-we-do/projects-and-research/early-positive-approaches-to-support-e-pats/)



Llygad can be accessed through referrals from health professionals (e.g. Health Visitors, Speech and Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists) or via Cardiff Gateway and Vale Family Compass for children aged 0–5 living in Cardiff and the Vale of Glamorgan.

For further information, please contact the team at: [llygad.eye.cav@wales.nhs.uk](mailto:llygad.eye.cav@wales.nhs.uk)



# Listening, Playing, Growing: The Heart of Early Phonological Development



Written by: Kelcie Stacey, Early Years Education Officer

Foreword by: Julie Powell, Head of Training, Learning and Development

**We know that the journey toward phonological awareness begins from the moment a baby is born. This early stage is a special time in which babies naturally start to build the foundations for later speech and language development. Long before they speak their first words, babies are already tuning into the rhythms, songs and playful patterns that shape the language around them.**

For practitioners, guiding children through this progression - from simple awareness of sound to the emergence of clear, intentional speech - is both a privilege and a responsibility. To support you in recognising and nurturing each step of this journey, we have mapped out the developmental pathway in a clear and accessible way. Our aim is to help you feel confident as you observe, encourage and celebrate every milestone along the continuum of phonological development.

## Supporting Phonological Growth in Four-Year-Olds

At four years old, children are becoming increasingly confident communicators. They are curious about words, playful with sounds and eager to share their ideas through conversation, stories and imaginative play. This stage marks a crucial point in their phonological development: the ability to hear, recognise and manipulate sounds in spoken language, which lays the foundation for early reading and writing.

Through playful, meaningful interactions, adults can intentionally nurture both receptive language (listening and understanding) and expressive language (speaking and sharing). Simple, everyday strategies, such as singing rhymes, playing sound games, modelling richer sentences and exploring stories together, help children tune into the sounds within words. When children can recognise rhymes, clap syllables and blend or segment simple sounds, they are building essential skills that support confident literacy development.



# Nurture sound and language skills through:

## Playing with Sounds

- Clap out syllables in words.
- Notice and identify rhymes.
- Explore alliteration e.g. "silly snake"

Sound play strengthens phonological awareness, a vital step towards reading and writing.

## Use Songs, Rhymes and Word Games

- Sing nursery rhymes and chants.
- Play rhyming matching games.
- Try "I spy with my little eye something beginning with..."

Repetition helps children internalise sound patterns and expand vocabulary.

## Blending and Segmenting Words

- Break words into sounds (segmenting): "b-a-t."
- Combine sounds to make words (blending): "b-a-t makes bat."

Start simple and gradually increase complexity.

## Encourage Storytelling and Picture Talk

- Ask open-ended questions about stories and pictures.
- Encourage children to predict what happens next.
- Invite them to recount events or tell short stories.

Model correct pronunciation gently and emphasise sounds in words.

## Extend Speech Through Modelling

- Child: "cat"
- Adult: "Yes, a black cat!"

Adding one or two words models richer sentence structure and highlights sounds.

## Use Playful Repetition

- Repeat key words and phrases during play and routines.
- Revisit favourite songs and stories.

Multiple exposures reinforce understanding and pronunciation.



## By Age 4, many children are beginning to:

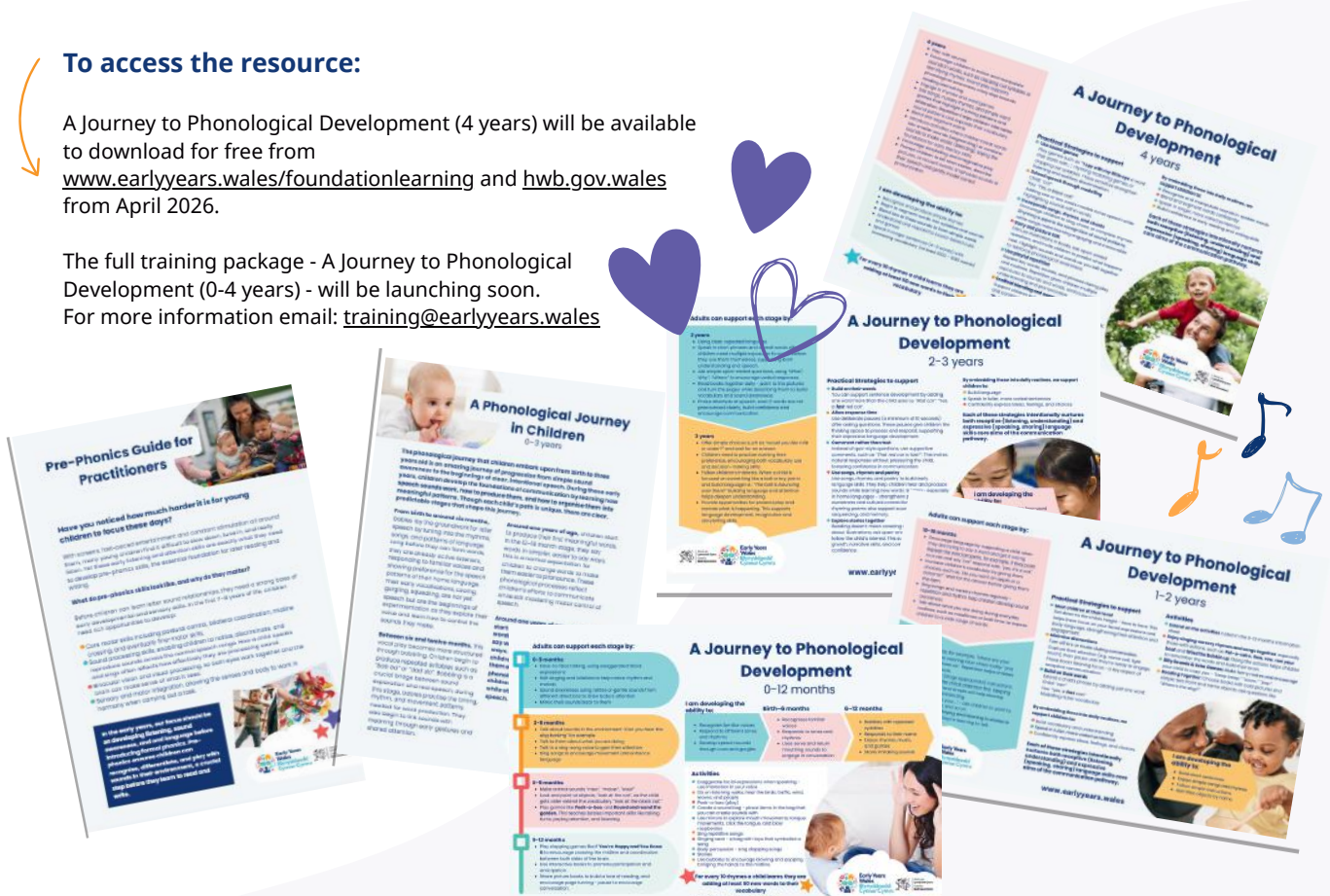
- Recognise and produce simple rhymes
- Segment words into syllables and simple sounds
- Blend two or three sounds to form simple words
- Understand and respond to sound-based games
- Speak in longer sentences, 4 - 6 words
- Use an expanding vocabulary (approximately 1000-1600 words)
- Build confidence in early reading and writing skills

Supporting phonological development at this stage is about keeping learning playful, responsive, and rooted in meaningful interaction because every conversation counts.

## To access the resource:

A Journey to Phonological Development (4 years) will be available to download for free from [www.earlyyears.wales/foundationlearning](http://www.earlyyears.wales/foundationlearning) and [hwb.gov.wales](http://hwb.gov.wales) from April 2026.

The full training package - A Journey to Phonological Development (0-4 years) - will be launching soon. For more information email: [training@earlyyears.wales](mailto:training@earlyyears.wales)





# The power of picture books and story time for children's language development



Evidence shows that reading brings profound and wide-ranging benefits that can have a lifelong positive impact on children's lives. In particular, reading supports children to meet early development milestones and have better speech and language development and literacy skills. Regular shared reading is linked to a wide range of language and literacy outcomes, including larger vocabulary, better oral language skills, print awareness, word identification and comprehension.

Lucy Rowland is a Speech and Language Therapist and an Author of many picture books including *There's No Such Thing as DRAGONS*, illustrated by Katy Halford. A new bilingual edition, *Does Dim Fath Beth A DREIGIAU / There's No Such Thing as DRAGONS*, adapted into Welsh by Tudur Dylan Jones and published by Rily, is being gifted to all children in Reception classes in Wales in the Spring term 2026 as part of the BookTrust Cymru Pori Drwy Stori programme. BookTrust spoke with Lucy about why reading with children is so important in helping them learn language.

## On why picture books specifically support children's language development so well, Lucy says that:

**"Picture books are made to be read aloud, and children learn words best when:**

**They hear them often.** Repetition is key in language learning and picture books often use repetitive refrains so that children hear the same phrase or sentence many times ("We're going on a Bear Hunt. We're going to catch a big one...") How many of us have reached the end of a picture book only for a child to shout 'AGAIN!' so that we must immediately turn back to the start? Favourite picture books are often requested again and again and again... so children hear the words in them A LOT!

**Adults respond to them.** Being at the child's level and sharing attention by looking at the same book, adults are in a great position to respond to what the child is pointing at, looking at, or saying. You don't have to read the book word for word. It's fun to go off-piste a bit and follow what the child is interested in too.

**Words are about something they can see, hear or experience.** Picture books, of course, are full of beautiful illustrations and these support children's understanding of the words they hear. Some novelty books also include sound buttons and 'touch and feel' elements to further support vocabulary and concept learning. What better way to understand 'sticky' than to touch some 'sticky mud'? (Thank you, Peppa Pig!)

**Story sacks are a great way of exploring picture books;** children love the toys and props, and these can really help to bring a story to life and enhance the child's understanding of the language. And don't forget, if you don't have toys or props, using actions and gesture is a brilliant way of visually reinforcing new words too!

**Meaning is clear.** Reading aloud gives us so many opportunities to perform stories. We can whisper the word 'whisper'; speak in a scared voice or in an angry voice. We can gasp, gulp, giggle – and really act out the meaning of these new words for children. So let your inner actor out and do those voices!

After all, children learn language best when they are HAVING FUN – and picture books are certainly great for that!"

You can read the full article on our website [www.booktrust.org.uk/powerofpicturebooks](http://www.booktrust.org.uk/powerofpicturebooks)



## Bookstart in Wales

Through Bookstart, BookTrust Cymru supports families across Wales to read together regularly.

Every child in Wales is entitled to receive two Bookstart packs before the age of three. These are normally gifted to families by their Health Visitor and include an exciting bilingual book, a card finger puppet, a guide to sharing stories together and a leaflet encouraging families to visit their local library.



## Exciting news!

Our newest addition to Bookstart is for families of newborn babies and available as part of the Welsh Government-funded Baby Bundle programme.



The **Bookstart Baby Bundle Book**, a bilingual cloth book with black and white images and various materials for babies to explore, part of the Baby Bundle Box provided to eligible families.



The **Bookstart Baby** pack, usually gifted at the 6-month Family Health Review




The **Bookstart Early Years** pack, usually gifted at the 27-month Family Health Review

## Additional support

Selected organisations such as Flying Start and Cymraeg i Blant support families by gifting the Bookstart Toddler pack, which includes two brilliant bilingual books, a card finger puppet to bring the stories to life and accompanying advice and activities.



The **Bookstart Toddler** pack, gifted to families of children aged 1-2 years old who may benefit the most from receiving this additional programme.



**BookTrust Cymru**  
Ysogyl plant i ddarllen  
Getting children reading

**BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. Each year we reach over 1.4 million children and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We work with every local authority, delivering evidence-informed programmes that make a measurable difference to children's reading behaviours.**

**Our work is rooted in the belief that every child, especially those from low income or vulnerable family backgrounds, deserves the chance to enjoy reading and all the lifelong benefits it brings.**

**In Wales, BookTrust Cymru works to inspire a love of reading in children because we know that reading can transform lives.**

To find out more about BookTrust Cymru and how we support partners in Wales:

Follow us on Facebook  
[@BookTrustCymru](https://www.facebook.com/BookTrustCymru)

Check out our website  
[booktrust.org.uk/about-us/booktrust-cymru/](http://booktrust.org.uk/about-us/booktrust-cymru/)

Get in touch  
[booktrustcymru@booktrust.org.uk](mailto:booktrustcymru@booktrust.org.uk)

Find out more about the benefits of reading  
[www.booktrust.org.uk/resources/reading-benefits](http://www.booktrust.org.uk/resources/reading-benefits)





# The importance of STEM in the very Early Years

Written by: Sandra Beale, Founder of Toddler and Early Years STEM

When we think of the early years, STEM isn't usually the first thing that comes to mind. We think of sleepless nights, long walks or drives to soothe a crying baby, tummy time, reading, and all the gentle rhythms that shape life with a 0-2-year-old. Science rarely appears on that list. Yet I've always believed that very young children are natural scientists — curious, observant, and eager to explore how their world around them works.

I got the opportunity to try out my belief when my middle son was 9 months old. I decided to gently encourage him towards science experiments, simple things like using a pipette to squirt vinegar on a tray of coloured bicarb. It was fascinating to watch his reaction as the vinegar and bicarb bubbled and popped and colour spread. Very soon he was using the large child friendly pipettes to squirt vinegar himself and create mini-coloured volcanoes all under my supervision. Slowly I added a few extra things like mixing paint and bicarb and letting him paint on large pieces of paper in a large tray and then pouring vinegar carefully through a sieve over the paint to make the painting fizz and bubble. All very messy and delightful for a very young child.

This soon led to creating self-inflating balloons where the gas from the reaction of the vinegar and bicarb led to balloons inflating. It was during one such experiment, that visiting friends asked that their babies take part as well.

Soon my dining table was surrounded by curious toddlers and their parents, exploring science with joyful intensity.

We carried on with a range of experiments including rescuing small toys frozen in ice with large tweezers, small bowls of warm water and pinches of salt. Adding food colouring revealed the tiny fissures forming as the ice cracked — a perfect visual of how materials change.

Over time, we explored everything from buoyancy and gravity to light refraction, hydrogen bonds, and displacement and many other aspects of STEM— all through simple, playful experimentation. I talked to the children as I worked, introducing vocabulary and encouraging them to test their own predictions. What would happen if we pumped a balloon full of holes? Would a pom-pom sink or float? How does a marble behave differently in water?

Eleven years on, I still see that same spark in the babies and toddlers who come to my sessions. Their excitement is as pure and joyful as a child hugging a favourite teddy. Science belongs in the early years — not as a formal lesson, but as an invitation to explore, discover, and wonder.

And the best part is that you don't need specialist equipment or a science background to bring STEM into the early years. Simple, playful experiments can spark huge curiosity. Here are a few ideas you can try at home or in an early year's setting.

## Useful links:



[toddlerandearlyyearsstem](#)



[Toddler and Early Years STEM](#)

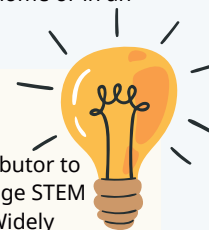


[50 Fantastic Ideas for STEM activities](#)

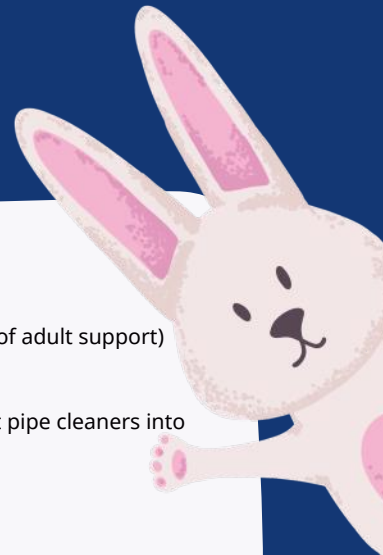


## About Sandra

Sandra Beale is a BBC STEM freelancer, contributor to Nursery World and smalltalk, and a Silver Badge STEM Ambassador with over 200 hours of service. Widely recognised as Britain's leading toddler STEM expert, she creates playful, hands-on science experiences for babies and preschoolers. With a background in Psychology, she began in advertising and award-nominated experimental film before founding Toddler and Early Years STEM 11 years ago. Her programme now runs in libraries, homes, nurseries and community venues. Sandra is the author of 50 Fantastic Ideas for STEM Activities (Bloomsbury) and is developing a dedicated Toddler STEM YouTube channel.



# Some easy to do experiments you could try this Spring



## Bunnies on a Zip Line

### You will need:

- String or wool
- Pink or yellow pipe cleaners
- Scissors

### Watch a video of the experiment in action here:

<https://bit.ly/3OZ8gCK>



### What to do:

- Invite the children to gather around the table (with plenty of adult support) and explain that you're going to make a simple zip line.
- Show them a picture of a real zip line, then help them twist pipe cleaners into little bunny shapes.
- Attach the bunnies to the string.
- Ask an adult to hold one end up high while the other end is tied securely to a chair.
- When the adult raises their hand above their head, the bunny will whizz down the line.
- When they lower their hand, the bunny slows or stops.
- This playful setup introduces the idea of **gravity** in a way young children can see and feel.

Older children might enjoy extending the activity by racing two bunnies side by side.

## Levitating Chicks

### You will need:

- A large yellow or red feather
- Paper clips
- Sticky tape
- String or thread
- A magnetic wand
- Scissors

### Watch a video of the experiment in action here:

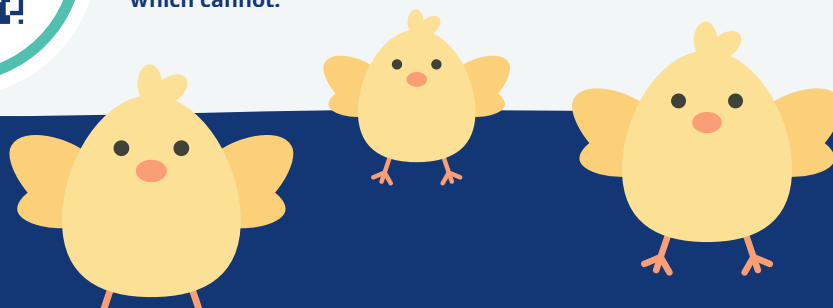
<https://bit.ly/4sBjr2W>



### What to do:

- Once again invite the children to gather around the table with plenty of adult support.
- Explain that you're going to make a feather "float" in mid-air.
- Cut a piece of string about 30cm long and tie one end to a paper clip.
- Tape the other end securely to the table. Attach the feather to the paper clip.
- Hold a magnetic wand just above the paper clip and gently lift.
- When you move the wand an inch away, the feather and paper clip remain suspended in the magnetic field, appearing to hover.
- This simple setup introduces children to **magnetic suspension** in a playful, hands-on way.

Older children might enjoy testing which materials can be suspended, and which cannot.





## Fizzing Eggs

### You will need:

- Bicarb
- Egg shapes or Egg Cookie Cutters
- Food colouring in different colours
- Pipettes
- Small bowls
- Vinegar
- Large tray or trays

### What to do:

- Invite the children to gather around the table with plenty of adult support.
- Explain that you're going to make colourful eggs that fizz and pop.
- Place the egg-shaped cutters on a tray and spoon in the bicarb so it fills the shape.
- Let the children decorate their "eggs" with drops of food colouring.
- Give each child a pipette and a small bowl of vinegar.
- Show them how to squeeze the pipette to suck up the vinegar, then gently squirt it onto their egg shapes.
- Watch together as the vinegar reacts with the bicarbonate, creating bright, bubbling patterns.
- To make it more fun and interesting, line the tray with white paper before you begin. As the colours fizz and spread, the paper captures the beautiful, marbled patterns and egg prints which the children can keep.



Watch a video of the experiment in action here: <https://bit.ly/4sMPME4>



## Transferring of Colour

### You will need:

- Medium-sized pebbles
- Food colouring as many colours as you can get
- A clear bowl of water x 3 or 4
- A tray x 5 or 6
- White A4 paper for each tray



### What to do:

- Invite the children to gather around the table and make sure you have plenty of adult support.
- Place three clear bowls or tubs of water in the centre so everyone can reach.
- Give each child a tray; if you're short on trays, encourage them to share in pairs.
- Lay a sheet of white A4 paper in each tray.
- Add a few drops of different food colouring directly onto the paper — you can invite the children to help choose and squeeze the colours.
- Next, give the children a handful of pebbles and ask them to gently drop the pebbles onto the coloured spots.

- As they roll and move the pebbles around the tray, the colours begin to spread and blend, creating beautiful patterns across the paper.
- Children can experiment with rolling quickly, slowly, or changing direction to see how the colours transfer and mix.
- Once the pebbles are covered in food colouring, ask the children to drop them into the bowls of water in the centre of the table. Watch as the colour begins to come away from the pebbles and transfers to the water.

**You can extend the activity by offering different objects such as pompoms or marbles. Ask the children to drop these into the water too and observe what happens. Do the colours behave differently on soft materials compared to smooth ones? Which objects sink or float?**

**These small comparisons spark curiosity and encourage children to make their own predictions.**





# A Centre in the Heart of the Community

Written by: Annamaria Bevan, Head Teacher, Ely and Caerau Integrated Children's Centre and Dr Sarah Fitzgibbon, Principal Educational Psychologist (Cardiff Parenting & Play)



Ely and Caerau Children's Centre is an integrated centre for babies, children and their families, serving the whole community. The Centre is open 50 weeks a year and provides childcare from 6 weeks to 4 years, nursery education (term time only), wraparound care, holiday club provision and daily community groups. A thriving dads' group meets every Saturday morning, co-facilitated with Cardiff Flying Start Parenting, strengthening family connection and community engagement.



## A Froebelian and Relational Approach to Listening to Babies

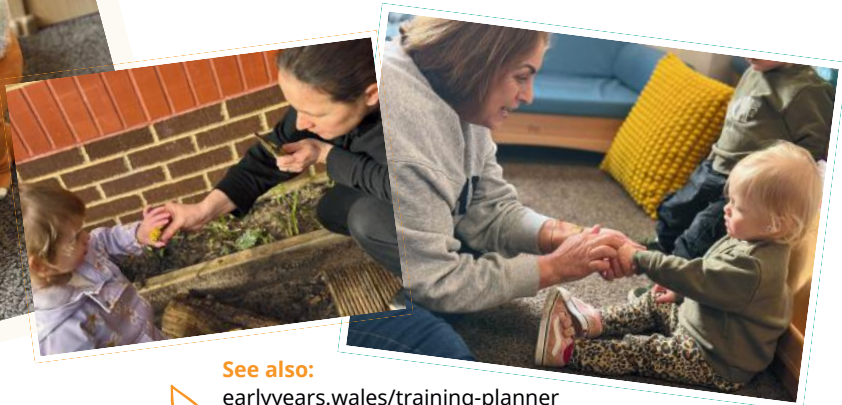
Practice within our baby room is underpinned by **Froebelian principles**, which shape pedagogy across the Centre. These principles align closely with the **Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care** (ECPLC) framework for Wales, which we are embedding and reflecting upon within everyday practice.

We adopt a slow, unhurried approach to learning, recognising the importance of time, space and secure relationships in early development. Care within the baby room is strongly informed by attachment theory and further strengthened through guidance and professional support from the psychology-led Parents Plus team in Cardiff.

## Baby Room Practitioners

Our practitioners are supported through ongoing professional development to ensure babies are nurtured by knowledgeable, reflective educators. This commitment extends beyond statutory requirements and training is carefully selected to deepen understanding of how babies build relationships, form secure attachments and develop through responsive interactions.

Staff engage in high-quality professional learning through the **Early Years Wales training** programme, Froebel Trust resources and other research-informed development opportunities, including from partners such as Cardiff Parenting. Regular supervision further supports reflection and ensures that learning is meaningfully embedded into everyday practice with babies.



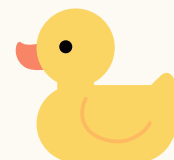
See also:

[earlyyears.wales/training-planner](https://earlyyears.wales/training-planner)

[froebel.org.uk/about-us/froebelian-principles](https://froebel.org.uk/about-us/froebelian-principles)

[gov.wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-ecplc](https://gov.wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-ecplc)





## Tuning in to Babies as Individuals

We learn about each of the babies that comes to our setting through observing their individual behaviours and understanding these in terms of early child development. Babies are totally reliant on adults, and it is our role to be sensitive and responsive to what they are telling us. Babies show us about their attachment style through their behaviours, movements, eye gaze, initiation of touch and vocalisation and it is our job as adults to respond to them with their stage of development, attachment style and communication preferences in mind.

The role of the adults is to mentalise the baby and understand the different states, or behaviours displayed, that show us how they are feeling in the setting and in the moment. We are here to show warmth and attunement and not over burden babies with language, intrusive touch or our behaviours – it's easy to miscue and become intrusive as an adult by invading a baby's space without an invitation or picking them up and moving them without listening to their voice. Through learning and reflection, we are striving to listen more to baby voice.

As the **Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan** for Wales reminds us,

***"I experience and build positive relationships when I am loved, nurtured and valued by...familiar adults. Developing a sense of belonging is central to shaping who I am and who I can become."***

Every interaction contributes to a baby's sense of security and identity.

### Enabling Adults

Adults work collaboratively to plan environments, experiences and thoughtful staff deployment. Babies are offered a range of carefully considered indoor and outdoor spaces with varied lighting, sounds and heights (e.g. for crawlers and toddlers), including both enclosed and open areas to support exploration, rest and connection.

Before babies are able to move independently, we tune in to their gaze and gestures, ensuring we respond to cues rather than adult routines. As the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care Plan for Wales reminds us,

***"I experience and build positive relationships when I am loved, nurtured and valued by...familiar adults. Developing a sense of belonging is central to shaping who I am and who I can become."***

Every interaction contributes to a baby's sense of security and identity.

As babies begin to move independently, our role is to be emotionally and physically available; creating safe, enabling spaces that allow them to explore with growing confidence. Through reflection and supervision, we remain mindful of how our own attachment experiences shape our responses, supporting us to stay attuned and emotionally present.

*Music, art, nature, and sensory experiences are offered as invitations. Mobile infants access these independently, while non-mobile babies are gently introduced, with adults carefully observing responses to determine whether engagement feels right in that moment. Outdoor play is always available, supported by thoughtful adult deployment that enables free movement between indoors and outdoors.*

### Creating Warmth Through Communication and Cultural Identity

In the baby room, practitioners communicate with the awareness that babies are always part of the communicative environment. We do not "talk over" the heads of children; tone, volume and attention remain calm, respectful and attuned.

A practice that we call, "*Nurturing our culture*" is central to transition. We learn about each baby's home languages, significant relationships and family celebrations so these can be reflected within our environment, strengthening connections between home and setting. Family photographs are displayed at child height, enabling babies to revisit important people independently. In line with the ECPLC's emphasis on identity, language and culture, we recognise that feeling seen and represented underpins wellbeing and belonging.



## Listening to our babies

We are discovering that listening to babies goes far beyond responding to cries or meeting basic needs; it is a pedagogical act that requires time, attentiveness and emotional presence. Practitioners observe carefully and ask: How does this baby communicate curiosity? What does their body tell us when they feel overwhelmed? When do they seek connection, and when do they need space?

By slowing down, we begin to recognise each baby's unique "voice", expressed through repeated movements, sustained gazes, subtle facial expressions or moments of contentment. As we work through the early stages of observing and analysing these communications, we are refining our skills in noticing, interpreting, and responding to babies' subtle cues. This reflects the ECPLC assessment guidance, which emphasises a **"Notice, Analyse and Respond"** approach as a way of integrating assessment into everyday practice, and supports our thoughtful decision-making around routines, environments, and planned experiences.

Our listening practice reflects Froebel's view of babies as capable communicators and aligns with his principle that strong relationships matter. Froebel suggested that communication is the outward expression of inner life, describing language as **"the self-active statement of the peculiar interior become exterior"** (Froebel, 1885, p.140). This understanding supports our view that babies are not passive recipients of care, but active participants in relationships who communicate their thoughts and feelings through movement, gaze, and expression. Listening attentively allows us to recognise their agency and respond with sensitivity.



### Developing Our Research: The Voice of the Baby



Building on this practice, our current Froebel Trust-funded research project is deepening and formalising our understanding of the baby's voice. Working collaboratively across the team, we are analysing observations more closely and strengthening the link between what we notice and how we adapt environments, routines and interactions in response. Rooted in Froebel's emphasis on careful observation, this research challenges us to remain curious and reflective, ensuring that babies' expressed experiences genuinely shape provision.

Through this ongoing inquiry, our baby room continues to evolve as a place of relationship, reflection and respect — where the voice of the baby not only matters, but actively shapes the life of the setting.



# The Importance of the Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Framework

The Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) framework is central to delivering high-quality childcare for children aged 0–5. It recognises that every child is unique and develops at their own pace, shaped by their experiences, relationships, and environment.

## What is the ECPLC?

The ECPLC provides a vision for care, play, and learning, ensuring that all babies and young children have the right to grow up happy, healthy, and safe. It promotes access to high-quality childcare and learning opportunities delivered by a skilled, diverse, and thriving workforce. The framework aims to ensure equity across all early years settings, including maintained and non-maintained provision, Welsh Medium settings, Additional Learning Needs (ALN) support, and outdoor environments.

The framework is supported by a suite of resources on the Welsh Government website (<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-in-wales>) developed by experts alongside practitioners. These resources help early years professionals to:

- Embed children’s rights into everyday practice
- Support holistic development and learning
- Engage in reflective practice to continually improve quality

## Delivering High-Quality Childcare

Children flourish when they feel safe, loved, and secure. Positive attachments, consistent care, and nurturing environments allow children to explore confidently. Early relationships form the foundation for emotional security and resilience, enabling curiosity and joy in everyday experiences such as singing, storytelling, movement, and play.

High-quality interactions in the early years support social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Combined with rest, nutritious meals, and thoughtful care, these experiences help children build independence, confidence, and a strong sense of belonging.

The early years are profoundly influential. They shape children’s future learning, wellbeing, resilience, and ability to form positive relationships. The experiences provided during this time lay the groundwork for lifelong success.

If you would like to find out how you can successfully implement the ECPLC into your childcare provision email: [training@earlyyears.wales](mailto:training@earlyyears.wales)



## The Role of Early Years Professionals

Early years professionals play a vital role in nurturing, protecting, and inspiring young children. By understanding child development and children’s rights, practitioners ensure every child receives the best start in life. Prioritising development, creating high-quality experiences, and fostering curiosity through play are essential to supporting happy, healthy, and resilient children.

The ECPLC is more than a framework; it is a vision for equality of opportunity and positive development for every child. By embracing each child’s uniqueness, embedding children’s rights, and promoting holistic development, practitioners help children flourish.

Meeting the needs of young children requires thoughtful, responsive practice:

- **One size does not fit all** — every team, setting, and group of children is unique.
- **The environment matters** — enabling spaces and supportive adults are at the heart of quality care.
- **Support every child** — experiences should grow from observations, team discussions, and children’s interests.
- **Make it engaging** — meaningful experiences enhance the environment and are shaped by children’s curiosity.

Through reflective, high-quality practice, we hold both the privilege and responsibility of helping every child thrive.

