Baby massage and baby play
Promoting touch and stimulation in early childhood

Early bonding and learning opportunities for babies are the goals of a Sure Start programme that emphasises play and massage, as Karen Moyse explains

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The UK has some of the highest child poverty rates in Europe (NCH Action for Children 1996). Rural Derbyshire has high rates of poverty (Table 1) and high mortality rates across all age groups, including young children (North Eastern Derbyshire PCT 2003).

The government has pledged to put child poverty high on its agenda and one of its strategies is Sure Start. Since this initiative was first announced (Home Office 1998) Sure Start schemes have been set up all over the country. Sure Start is an exciting opportunity for children's nurses as it recognises the importance of innovative practice as a means of developing much needed health and educational services for young children and their families living in deprived communities.

Sure Start supports early bonding between parents and their babies, helping them to build a warm, affectionate relationship. Early bonding is an essential first step towards ensuring babies are able to form strong emotional attachments with others in later life. The psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1969, 1973) strongly advocated early attachment between mothers and their children as vital for the latter's emotional wellbeing and psychological development into adulthood. Contemporary approaches to bonding include work by Field and colleagues at the Touch Research Institute in Miami (www.miami.edu/touch-research). Cullen et al (2000), for example, demonstrated links between baby massage and bonding of fathers with their babies.

In the 1960s, Piaget identified play as essential for children's development, allowing them to develop language skills through interaction with others (Smith et al 2003). Sure Start encourages the development of stimulating and enjoyable play experiences for babies, which may help to develop their language skills.

Building on these ideas, the Sure Start area of Creswell, Langwith/Whaley Thorns and Shirebrook in north-east Derbyshire is using different strategies to encourage early bonding between parents and their babies, as well as developing a variety of learning opportunities for babies. These strategies include baby

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<th>Indices of deprivation 2000, index of multiple deprivation score</th>
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<td>Deprivation scores (range)</td>
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<td>46.9-69.77</td>
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massage, to encourage early bonding, and baby play, to provide different learning opportunities. Nursery nurses, health visitors and a community children's nurse, are all involved in baby massage and baby play.

Baby massage and positive touch

Baby massage has helped the development of early bonding in our Sure Start community by encouraging parents to positively touch their babies. Touch Learn (2002) describes 'positive touch' as parents touching their babies gently and lovingly.

In their early work, Klaus et al (1972) found that a mother touching her baby positively was an essential part of bonding. The experience of Sure Start practitioners is that baby massage appears to have an important influence on the development of positive approaches to parenting in the local community (Lorenz et al 2005).

One aim of Sure Start is to steer parents away from some of the negative approaches to parenting, such as smacking and aggressive verbal behaviour. Positive parenting is advocated by many specialists in children's behaviour (Sutton 2000) and is about encouraging positive interactions with children so that they grow up to be more confident in their abilities (Moyse 1999).

On our Sure Start programme parents are encouraged to be verbally positive with their babies and to touch them in a gentle, positive way. Heller (1997) believes loving touches are vital for children: baby massage provides a valuable opportunity for loving touches to occur and can contribute towards parents thinking about parenting in a positive way.

Baby massage in practice

When their baby is two months old, parents on our Sure Start programme have the opportunity to participate in weekly baby massage sessions over a three- to four-week period. It is mainly mothers who attend, although some fathers also participate. Baby massage is undertaken either on an individual family basis or in groups. Some group sessions also take place in clients' homes, creating a very warm, relaxed atmosphere.

A doll is used to demonstrate massage techniques, which parents are encouraged to copy on their baby – as long as the baby is settled and happy to be massaged. During the sessions parents can also discuss different child health issues with practitioners and other parents. Practitioners who undertake baby massage with parents have all completed recognised training either through Touch Learn or the local college.

In a recent evaluation Hart et al (2003) found that baby massage strengthened the bond between parents and their babies. Although our work has not been formally evaluated, practitioners feel baby massage has helped to support that bonding. We are teaching parents different ways to touch their babies sensitively and to be aware of a baby's need to be touched.

The value of play

Parents generally realise the importance of toddlers and children learning through play, but they do not often consider the value of play for babies. However, as psychologists emphasise, play is essential for the development of babies (Cole and Cole 1989). Ball's (1994) report on early learning highlighted the need for good quality learning opportunities for very young children in disadvantaged communities. More recently, the government's Birth to Three Matters initiative (DfES and DWP 2003) has provided scope for the development of play initiatives for the under-threes as part of the normal provision for these children.

The Birth to Three Matters framework recognises the need for babies to develop through interaction with others and emphasises the importance of babies exploring the world around them. The framework's basic principle – 'Parents and families are central to the wellbeing of their children' – is reflected in our programme.
of the child (DFES and DWP 2003) – also underpins the Sure Start approach.

Baby Play in action

Baby play is the name of a local initiative in north-east Derbyshire that promotes learning through play for babies. It was introduced before Sure Start in this area but is now part of the Sure Start programme. Coombs and Kirk (1999) report that concern was expressed during the 1990s by local health and education practitioners about the high number of children under five who were entering nursery school with poor language skills and limited ideas about play. They devised baby play, which was set up to provide good quality learning opportunities from the earliest months of a baby’s life.

Baby play involves a health or education practitioner working with a mother and her baby, or a group of mothers and their babies, demonstrating a variety of different play activities. The mothers then engage their babies in these play activities. The activities need to be age-appropriate for each baby to enhance interest and enjoyment (Coombs and Kirk 1999). Baby play is undertaken in a relaxed environment, which is fun and friendly for everyone (Coombs and Kirk 1999).

Parents are provided with baby play activity packs (Blenkinsopp and Winson 2003), which can be used during the session and at home. They contain a variety of rhymes for babies of different ages and explain how different rhymes can be used with the babies, highlighting the verbal and physical pleasure that babies can gain from rhyme.

Play is the focus of each baby play session, with other issues dealt with outside the baby play arena. Baby play sessions normally last an hour and are held weekly. Sometimes baby massage forms part of a session, usually towards the end of the session when the baby can be eased into sleep after an exciting play experience. The practitioner keeps brief notes with the involvement of the parents, so that they are able to pick up on points from the previous week. A record is also kept for parents in their personal child health record.

Baby Play sessions allow babies to enjoy play experiences with their parents and teach parents a number of different activities to do with their babies at home. They also promote families’ interest in their baby’s development: these babies will be in a better developmental position to learn when entering school at the age of three or four.

Baby Play has been developed in the local community since 1999. Toddler Play has now been devised, providing the same opportunities for toddlers and parents to learn. A Sure Start evaluation is under way to measure the impact of Baby Play and Toddler Play on children’s learning. Our Baby Play work goes some way to meeting the Sure Start target of providing young children with opportunities to learn.

Conclusion

Something that was overlooked by some sections of the media during the recent election campaign, and still is, is the valuable work based on government policy that health and education practitioners are doing to improve the lives of young children in deprived communities. Sure Start focuses on the future of the UK and the welfare of our children, and surely merits recognition.

Baby massage seems to help babies and parents share important moments together, which can only be beneficial for the bond between them. Baby play also seems to be having a positive impact on the learning of some young children. Although baby massage and baby play have been considered separately in this article, they interact in their support of young children’s development.

Parenting is one of the most challenging and rewarding roles an individual or couple can undertake (Barnes 2002). Yet we can all do with a little help now and again. For many parents, Sure Start is that helping hand.

REFERENCES


