



SESSION

5

# Babies Matter: Baby's amazing brain

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## Babies Matter: Baby's amazing brain



**BABIES  
MATTER**

A KIDS MATTER PROGRAMME

### Pre-Session planning list

To do	To buy	To prepare	Babies Matter resources
Reminder text to parents	Refreshments	Doll / teddy bear	Facilitator's Booklet
Double check room is booked	Flowers	Kettle, mugs, water, spoons, plastic cups, plates	Guest Booklets
Collate toys / blankets for babies		Tablecloth, napkins & tissues	Group register
Sticky labels for names		Pen & paper	Postcards
Pray! Prompt others to pray for you		Ideas of free activities new parents can attend in local area	Pens
		Visit <a href="https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/activities/zjh8hbk">https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/activities/zjh8hbk</a> for at home ideas	
		Ideas for where to find local community support including toddler groups, baby massage groups, stay and play, breast-feeding groups, sling libraries as well as online groups	

### On the day:

- Set up chairs in a 'horseshoe' with blankets / cushions on the floor with baby toys in reach
- Check that baby changing facilities are stocked up and clean
- Prepare tea/coffee/food on a separate table
- Introduce yourself, and each other, give out name labels
- Offer a tea/coffee/water; make sure hot drinks are covered if using disposable cups

**Remember:** Smile, be positive, be ready to share your good and bad experiences of parenting babies of this age!

### My goals in facilitating this session:

To remember the three 'ingredients' that can strengthen relationships from Session 4  
 Parent/carer recognises that how they respond to their baby will influence how their baby's brain develops including playing 'serve and return'  
 Parent/carer has tools to try when their baby is unsettled and understands that their response to crying can impact how their baby develops  
 Parent/carer recognises how practicing gratitude can help increase their wellbeing  
 Parent/carer sees the importance of being able to ask for help well as a way of strengthening their PT relationship

## Review of Session 4

Welcome back! Last week, we talked about the importance of building strong relationships, to benefit us, our Parenting Team and also our baby.

Q: Who can remember any of the 'ingredients'? *Communication and listening, arguing well, saying 'sorry' and forgiveness.*

Q: Was there anything helpful that stood out to you from this session?

Q: Who had the chance to practice saying 'sorry' this week?!

Today we are going to think more about how we can help our babies be the best they can be as they continue to grow. We will be discussing more about child development and playing with our baby.



### Over the next 6 weeks we will be covering:

- Session 1 – Changes for me and us
- Session 2 – Bonding and attachment
- Session 3 – Helping baby to develop
- Session 4 – Building strong relationships
- Session 5 – **Baby's amazing brain**
- Session 6 – Thinking back, looking forwards



## Baby's amazing brain

As parents, we are all doing things every day which help our babies' brains grow! Babies are born with 100 billion brain cells, but the connections between the brain cells have not been formed yet, so the brain cells are not yet working. Our job as parents is to help get the brain cells 'wired up', so that the brain can grow in a healthy way.

Q: What do you think reading that?!

Everything we do with our baby sparks connections in their brain – and the more we do certain things, the stronger the pathways and connections in the brain become.

To help us picture this, imagine a field with long grass and no pathways through it. If we walk across the field, it will start to form a path. If we walk the same path again and again, it will become a clear pathway. The more we walk across this path, the more established it becomes. The same is true with our babies' developing brains as every positive interaction is strengthening the connections which help them to learn and develop.

As we have discussed before, if we aim to be a 'good enough' parent, it takes the pressure off us to be 'perfect' and helps us connect better with our baby.





## Relating to our baby

Remember how a few weeks ago we talked about how to build a relationship with our baby and how important it is to build that strong bond? The ideas we've been putting into practice at Babies Matter already have been helping them to develop these strong connections. Throughout today's session we will look at how what we have already learnt relates to our baby's brains developing.

Our relationship with our baby has a very important influence on how our baby's brain grows and develops.

**Activity:** for those of you with babies in the room, let's once again see the power of us engaging with our baby in a positive way. Try the simple action of smiling at your baby and see what they do. How does their face change? What does it do to your mood when you smile at your baby?

*For those who are still pregnant, draw them into the conversation by asking what they notice.*

The power of a smile is huge – smiling and positive looks at our baby actually help our baby's brains to grow!

If we are loving and consistent in the way we respond to our babies, their brains will begin to form pathways that tell them they are safe, loved and well looked after. By feeling secure and contented, they are then able to start forming trusting relationships. As they get older, this will help them in how they make friends, learn at school, and manage their emotions.

*Try to pause and reflect - we as parents can actually help our babies' brains develop. Isn't that incredible?!*

Q: Does this feel like a new way of looking at being a parent to anyone?

Do you remember in Session 2 when we all closed our eyes and tried to imagine what it is like when we need something and not having any language or much movement to communicate with?

Q: How do you think our baby feels when we respond to their needs and are able to reassure them? By responding consistently to our baby, this will help them feel safe, secure, cared for, and loved.

If we are often impatient, frustrated, or unpredictable in our responses to our baby, those strong, positive pathways will be much harder to form, and they may be anxious. This could make them hard to settle and unsure about whether the world is a safe place.

Q: What long-term impact do you think this will have?

As they get older, they may find it difficult to make trusting friendships, learn at school or cope with their emotions.

In order to help us respond in a loving, consistent way to our baby, it can help to remember what we looked at in Session 3: that one of our jobs as a parent is to be curious about what our baby is telling us. We are going to try an activity that helps us to do this.

**Activity:** for those of you whose babies are awake, try imagining what they are communicating to you right now; does their cry sound frustrated or tired? What does a gurgle and blowing bubbles mean?

Until our children can communicate with words, we have to keep thinking 'What is my baby trying to tell me?'. If it becomes overwhelming or confusing when our baby can't explain what they need from us, being in the habit of wondering what they are communicating can help us connect with what's going on for our baby and build the foundations for their own communication.





## Helping our baby's brain to develop

*This is a long section where the content all relates to the role parents have in helping their baby to develop.*

One of the ways in which we can help our baby's brain grow is by helping them to build the tools they need to relate to other people as they grow up.

Q: Can anyone remember the 3 aspects of attachment that we talked about a couple of weeks ago?

*Respond, reassure, play.*

Q: How do you think these might help our babies' brains develop?

Relating to our baby helps to build a strong bond between us and them, as we discussed in Session 2, and helps their brain to develop. It helps give them the skills they will one day need to relate to others.

When we play with our baby, we can think about this as practicing back and forth communication between parent and baby. It works a bit like a game of tennis. First the baby "serves" by communicating with us, e.g., smiling, kicking legs, babbling, touching, and we, as parents and carers, "return the serve" by interacting back to them, e.g., chatting back, playing. By responding in positive and caring ways, we keep the back-and-forth communication, "the game", between us going which helps baby to learn, develop and build language.

Let's think about how we actually do this:

### Playing Serve and Return with baby

- **Notice and share baby's focus:** notice what baby is looking at or what sound baby is making, moving arms or legs. That's their "serve".
- **Support and encourage:** acknowledge baby with a facial expression (excited, surprised, a nod) or by moving closer to them, mimicking their actions or picking up an object they're looking at.
- **Name it!** Notice what baby is seeing, doing, or touching and talk about it to them, as it helps them learn to understand the world around them and what to expect from it.
- **Take turns back and forth** and remember to pause and wait for baby to respond before you "return" again.

**Activity:** Let's give it a go now, or you could try this at home. Start by copying your baby's movements and sounds. If they make more movements and sounds, pause, watch, and smile. Name what you see them doing and see how your baby responds. *For those who are still pregnant, draw them into the conversation by asking if they have noticed other parents playing 'serve and return' with their baby.*

Q: How is this different to when we did it in Session 2? Taking the time to pause and watch is just as important as mimicking or joining in as it means we can be responsive to them, and it teaches our baby that this is part of relating to others.

For more ideas on play and relating to your baby, you could go back to our session on bonding and attachment or use <https://www.bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people> for ideas.



As we play this 'serve and return' game with our baby, you'll notice how they will want to do the same thing over and over again.

**Repetition is the key**

Q: Have you noticed your child loves to repeat things over and over again? Can anyone share some examples e.g., songs, games, words, climbing, peekaboo.

Actions, words, and games that our babies like repeating are helping them form pathways in their brain, learning new skills and building new links. Everything from daily routines to singing songs over and over, being read to, playing games together and exploring the outside world all help develop these connections.

**But when is enough, enough?!** When playing with our babies, it is important to think about what is too little or too much for them.

Q: How can we tell when our baby has had enough stimulation and needs a break?



Babies give us cues when they need a change, a break or a rest. Here are some of the ways they might communicate this:

- Initially they might look away from you (to decrease stimulation, not because they are rejecting you)
- May suck their hand to self soothe
- Shield their face
- Pull/push away
- Wrinkle their forehead
- Arch their back
- Start fussing
- Spluttering and coughing
- Crying and whining



Babies cannot soothe themselves and need our help so they can calm down.

Q: What are some things you've tried to sooth your baby?

Part of helping our baby's brain to develop is also soothing them when they are upset. Being overstimulated is one reason babies cry, but there can be many reasons why they are upset.



## Soothing your unsettled baby

How we **respond to** and **reassure** our baby when they are unsettled not only builds a strong attachment with them but strengthens the connections in their brain which help them to learn and develop. *We are going to think about some practical tips for how to do this.* There is no 'one size fits all' method but it can help to have some ideas to try:

### Responding to your baby

*Q: What do you notice happens in yourself if your baby is crying? How easy do you find it to concentrate on something or listen to someone?*

*Our baby's crying is designed to get our attention, but it can be hard to think clearly about how to respond to them.* When baby's screaming is making us feel stressed, it can sometimes help to run through a checklist, that might include the reflections we made earlier (see above). Once you have addressed some of the things you have reflected on, you might also want to try working your way through responses, for example:

- Quiet background noise may help distract baby; either soft soothing background music or using a YouTube clip of 'white noise'
- Hold baby close or rock baby gently backwards and forwards  
*Using a baby carrier or sling may be useful.*
- Try stroking baby's back or their hair
- Skin-to-skin contact can be very comforting
- Try a warm bath; this calms some babies instantly, but makes others cry even more
- Sing or hum to baby whilst in our arms



*In the moment, it can be quite hard to think about how we try these soothing responses. We're going to give this a go now so that next time our baby is unsettled, we've already had a go.*

**Activity:** *does anyone have an easy song or rhyme that they use with their baby that they want to teach us? Share an example of something very simple and easy to remember to get started.*

*Q: What do you notice about how your baby (or even your bump?!) responds when you sing or hum to them? It might not come naturally to us all, but your baby isn't judging you on how well you can hold a tune! Trust that they love the sound of your voice and the attention you're giving them.*

If trying to help your baby to sleep, you might consider:

*If the topic of co-sleeping comes up, refer to official guidelines at the end of the Session 1.*

Temperature	Are they too hot or too cold?
Brightness	Does your baby get plenty of light during the day, especially in the morning, to help them sleep better at night? Darkening the bedroom at night may also help.
Comfort	Have they fed enough? Do they need winding? Or a nappy change?
Routine	What is the bedtime routine like for your baby? Is there anything you could do consistently to help baby to transition to sleep time such as bathing, changing, singing, reading, final feed etc.



### Ways to reassure your baby

It may take a combination or more than one attempt to soothe your baby. Try to remember that we are not the cause of their crying.

**Q: How can it feel when our responses don't seem to help soothe our baby?**

Many parents feel desperate, rejected, fed up, angry, helpless, anxious or at a loss when their baby doesn't sleep. During these phases, we can easily feel that everyone, including our own baby, is criticising us. This is normal. It is important to reassure yourself that this is a common experience that you are managing.



**Q: What helps you calm down if your baby's crying makes you feel stressed or overwhelmed?**

*Encourage guests to complete the box below.*

**This week when my baby is crying, I will try .....**  
**..... to help me cope.**

**Remember that the amount our baby cries doesn't directly reflect our skills as a parent.**

### What not to do...

**Don't be embarrassed by your baby's crying and become isolated.**

*Reference that it might not just be us but also our parenting teammate who may find it difficult when our baby cries.*

**Q: Why do we think we hear in the news that babies have been shaken and harmed?**

It can be very unsettling when we can't seem to comfort our baby and stop them crying. This can sometimes lead to us feeling very angry, frustrated, and even feeling like we might lose control and harm our baby. If this is the case, this is the time to reach out and get extra help. **Please talk to me after the session.**

- **Never shake a baby.** It can cause bleeding inside the brain and likely permanent brain damage:
- Blindness
- Learning disabilities
- Seizures
- Physical disabilities
- Death

If we ever feel like we are losing control of our feelings and reactions and could potentially do something to harm our baby out of frustration, it is really important to immediately put our baby somewhere safe and take five minutes to calm down.

Looking after ourselves is not a luxury, it is essential and will help us to look after our baby. **If anyone is feeling like this and wants to speak to me outside of the session, please let me know.** If you think there is something wrong with your baby or the crying won't stop, speak to your GP, Midwife or Health Visitor. If you are worried that your baby is unwell, call NHS 111.





## Looking after ourselves and practicing gratitude

As we have said, looking after ourselves when our baby needs so much from us is especially important.

As we discussed in previous sessions, this may look like:

- Knowing what we can do to 'release stress'
- Making time to look after our physical health
- Balancing our time with Everyday activities, Must-do activities, and Fun activities
- Investing in positive relationships

Let's talk now about gratitude and the role it plays in our wellbeing.

When life is busy, exhausting, and challenging, it can be easy to forget the good things that happen each day in our parenting. It's all too easy to focus in on the things that haven't gone well and miss the joy in the positive moments. Being grateful for small things in the day is another tool we can use to increase our wellbeing.

Q: What is something today that you feel grateful for?

*It can be anything to do with our baby or something as simple as having clean water in our homes.*

*Give your own example.*

Q: What are you enjoying about being pregnant at the moment? *If relevant.*

Q: What are you enjoying about your baby at the moment?

Q: Is there anything about this group that you have been grateful for over the past few weeks?

It can take a bit of effort to begin with, but if we can get ourselves into the habit of noticing positive things in our lives each day, it can have a huge beneficial effect on how we are feeling and also on how we parent our baby.

**3 things I am grateful for today:**

1. ....

2. ....

3. ....





## Asking for help from our parenting teammate

As well as looking after ourselves, investing time and effort for important relationships is good for us as adults and for our baby. One way we can do this is by thinking about how we ask for help.

One area we need to be honest about with each other is asking for help - our parenting teammate may not realise that we need extra support, so it's up to us to let them know. Not only will it help us to have extra support, but it could also help our parenting teammate to know how they are needed and what they can do.

*Q: How easy do we find it to ask for help? If there are relationships in the group that are complicated or have high needs, give space and time for the guest to express their concerns whilst being mindful of the rest of the group and what they are taking from the session.*

*Q: If you were going to ask someone for help, who would you ask?*

Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness or failure; it's a way of expressing our own needs so we can be our best. However, this can sometimes come across as a demand or a criticism when we're overwhelmed, even if we don't mean it to.

E.g. "You don't support me when the baby's crying and I find it really annoying, why can't you take the baby to give me a break."

"You don't understand how hard I work for us, when I come home, I just need some space."

Whereas expressing our need in a positive way, so it comes across more like a wish, shows more how our partner can help and can stop it sounding like criticism e.g. "I need your support and help when the baby's crying as I find it so hard, and it would be great if you could take the baby to give me a break." "When I get in from work, it would really help me if I could have 10 minutes quiet before I take over with the baby, then I can focus on what's going on at home".

### Remember our parenting teammate can't read our mind.

If one parent is feeling overwhelmed, resentments can easily build between us. Expressing our feelings is important to prevent this.

**One thing I can try to do to connect to my parenting teammate is**

.....



## Summing up....

This week we have spent time thinking about how amazing our baby's brain is and how we can help it grow and develop so our babies can be their best. We've looked at how powerful 'serve and return' is and ways to soothe our baby, as well as the importance of practicing gratitude and how to ask for help.

Thanks so much for coming today and we look forward to seeing you next week for our final session.

**At the end of the session:**

- Look at the Top Tips
- Encourage them all to come back and thank them for their contribution today
- Say something about what you enjoyed or learned today
- Offer food to them all to take away
- Don't rush off! Be available for anyone who wants to chat

**After the session:**

- Jot down any great quotes you heard today
- Send messages to anyone who didn't make the session

Notes

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If we are loving and consistent in the way we respond to our babies, their brains will begin to form pathways that tell them they are safe, loved and well looked after. **We as parents can help our babies' brains develop.**

**Repetition is the key!**

Playing 'Serve and Return' helps baby to learn, develop and build language

