

High-quality baby rooms: What they look like and how we get there

By: Dr. Mona Sakr, Dr. Sara Bonetti, and Kayla Halls

The first years of a babies' life are a critical time for development, learning and wellbeing. They lay the foundations for an individual's future, including how they fare in school, relationships and work. With that in mind, getting it right in the baby room is essential. We have to offer the highest possible quality of provision to babies and families and ensure strong foundations for the future. The expansion of the entitlement, and the rapid growth of baby rooms as a consequence, makes this even more urgent.

In our research, supported by the Nuffield Foundation, we ask two questions: 1) what does high quality provision in the baby room look like, and 2) how do we get there? In this article, we share our findings to date, based on the largest ever study of baby rooms in the UK. More than 300 baby room educators and nursery managers contributed to our research, through six professional learning conferences around England. Through surveys and focus groups, we've probed what quality in the baby room looks and feels like, and what is needed to sustain and improve quality.

PHOTO 1

Picturing quality in the baby room: What does 'good' look like?

With babies

Educators explained that a foundational element of quality is having a calm environment. Smaller group sizes facilitate this, limiting noise. Within this, babies need stimulating resources and access to the outdoors, ensuring they have plenty to explore as they build an understanding of the world around them.

Consistent and secure relationships with key adult(s) are another key feature of quality. This supports attachment which is key to learning and development with children under the age of two years old. As one educator put it:

'For me, it's the attachment to the children, the connectedness to them, knowing your child well, well enough to be able to differentiate the cries and having that relationship with the parents too.'

Attuned and responsive interactions ensure rich moments of learning and connection. Educators and babies need time and space to slow down and be together, engaging in one-to-one interactions that support brain development and their growing understanding of the world and their place in it.

ADD PHOTO 2

With families

Our participants were certain that clear, frequent and warm communication with families is an essential part of delivering high-quality provision. When families and educators can have open and honest conversations about the baby, what happens at home, and what happens in nursery, it paves the way for consistent and joined up care and builds trust between families and baby room educators.

Baby room educators felt they had a part to play in fostering a sense of community between parents. As nurseries welcome a wide range of families in the local area, baby rooms have the potential to serve as a hub of connection, supporting families to build relationships with fellow parents.

Finally, supporting parents with questions about caring for their baby is important. The first two years of a child's life is filled with rapid changes. When paired with the anxiety some new parents experience, it can be an overwhelming time. Baby room educators are experts on many topics that may be new to parents, so the connection between educators and parents extends well beyond the nursery day.

With staff

We heard repeatedly in our research that strong team dynamics are crucial for the smooth running of a baby room. Balancing the routines of several different children while holding space for attuned interactions requires agile and sensitive teamwork. Participants described how the best provision happens when your team knows the routines and their roles within it, and feels that they have capacity to be empathetic to one another:

'The dynamics of the team is an element of quality, isn't it? How you understand one another. How you pick up where someone else leaves off... fitting everything in together as a puzzle piece, but it's not always easy when the foundation isn't there.'

Another element staff need to deliver high quality provision is regular access to baby-specific CPD. According to our research, only 29% of baby room educators had access to baby-specific CPD in the last year. With the influx of babies entering baby rooms, baby room educators need consistent access to high quality CPD, allowing them to stay up to date on best practice and to continually reflect on and renew their pedagogy.

While baby room educators believed in the importance of their work, and many demonstrated a clear love for the baby room, the way others saw them wore down their sense of professionalism over time. Toddler and preschool educators did not always understand the complexities of the baby room, deeming it an 'easy' or 'boring' place to work.

Quality in the baby room depends on the professionalism and self-worth of baby room educators. This means that it is essential that other educators, along with parents/carers and wider society, are educated about what goes on in the baby room and have a clear sense of its importance.

ADD PHOTO 3

Delivering quality in the baby room: What steps can we take?

So, how can nurseries deliver high-quality baby room provision? There are several steps to take:

- **Keep baby rooms small.** Having babies in groups of 12 or fewer supports a calm environment, where attuned one-to-one interactions occur as a norm. If your nursery currently has over 12 babies in a group, how can you structure your baby room to have fewer babies? Can you keep them in smaller groups that rotate through indoor

and outdoor spaces throughout the day, or could you open another baby room in the nursery?

- **Secure access to regular baby-specific CPD.** Baby room educators need regular CPD that is relevant to the nuances of their work. While this can include online courses, they should also be supported to join baby room networks and have access to coaching and mentoring as these support reflection on day-to-day practice. It's not easy in the current climate to make the time and space for high-quality CPD to happen, but – in the context of qualifications that don't always prepare staff for the baby room - it is at the heart of flourishing baby room practice.
- **Invest in your baby room teams and leaders.** Give your baby room team time to connect and reflect without the babies in the room, allowing them to think critically about not only their work with the babies but how they currently work together and how they want to work together. The baby room leader can be a 'port in the storm'; when they are passionate, committed and supportive of the staff in the room, it can create a team culture that enables excellent practice.
- **Celebrate the baby room.** Ensure other educators across the nursery understand the rapid and complex development of babies and the highly skilled nature of working with them. This may involve inviting them onto baby-specific CPD courses or sharing celebrations about the baby room during team meetings. When we celebrate the baby room and the people who work there, we celebrate the very beginnings of early childhood, making nurseries a brighter place overall.

To learn more about the findings from 'Achieving high-quality provision in the baby room of English nurseries' and to access resources for nurseries, visit:

<https://thebabyroom.blog/report-2/>.