

MY BABY'S BRAIN - HERTFORDSHIRE – LOCAL PRACTICE EXAMPLE

Summary

My Baby's Brain is a multi-agency initiative that was established by the Childhood Support Services team within Hertfordshire County Council. Its aim is to convey to parents the fundamental importance of everyday interaction between them and their baby, and the positive impact that this has on its brain development. The programme uses simple, accessible language to explain what are often complex scientific processes.

Background

The programme was set up as a response to a growing body of research that identifies the period between conception and age three as the foundation for a child's social and emotional wellbeing, learning, and positive outcomes in adulthood. This evidence from neuroscience is complemented by attachment theory which identifies strong, healthy relationships between caregiver and child as being the most efficacious way in which this development can be fostered. From a policy perspective, the programme was influenced by Graham Allen MP's report *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* which promoted the benefits of early intervention to address risk factors in vulnerable families, thereby preventing them from developing into negative outcomes further down the line. It also took inspiration from CentreForum's report *Parenting Matters*, in particular its demotic five-a-day healthy eating campaign.

Model

The programme is underpinned by Five to Thrive, a universal campaign that promotes five key messages about baby brain development to parents. Its five key messages are: *respond, cuddle, relax, play, and talk*. These are neurological sequences that are intended to inculcate a healthy relationship between parents and babies which will become instinctual as the programme develops. This information is disseminated across websites and social media in order to reach the largest possible audience. A printed set of resources is also available for parents, including booklets, leaflets, and posters. Each new birth within the county of Hertfordshire is provided with a leaflet about the programme via their personal child health record ('red book'). Promotion is also specifically targeted to reach families in which there a risk has been identified of either insecure attachment or child neglect.

Spreading the message

The basic model is also used to inform best practice among the county's practitioners, more than 1,200 of whom have been trained to incorporate its ethos within their daily work. This includes Children's Centre workers, family support workers, health visitors, Homestart volunteers, library staff, and social workers. A one-day bespoke training course is held for those who have direct

contact with the parents of children aged between 0 and 3. It is estimated that the programme has now reached more than 6,000 parents.

Practitioners have used the model in a number of diverse ways. For instance:

- Children's Centres have incorporated the model into its embedded practices such as baby massage and stay and play;
- Health visitors have used the model in postnatal sessions;
- The library has run pedagogical sessions for new parents and parents-to-be through its Bookstart service;
- A nursery nurse working on a specialist postnatal depression ward has used the model to help mothers understand how to bond with their babies once their health improves;
- Social care practitioners have used the core principles of Five to Thrive in order to address child protection concerns.

Evaluation

An independent evaluation has been undertaken into the programme. The initial report was published by the Family Matters Institute in June 2012, followed by a second, final one which was jointly published by the Colebrooke Centre and the University of Warwick in February 2014. The latter report praised the "great flexibility" of the programme's approach which allowed practitioners to utilise its core elements in order to inform their own work. It was also complimentary regarding the programme's success in disseminating some of the basic information regarding early years' development to parents and practitioners alike.