



MEASURING WHAT MATTERS MOST

Learning from Parent-Infant Relationship Services

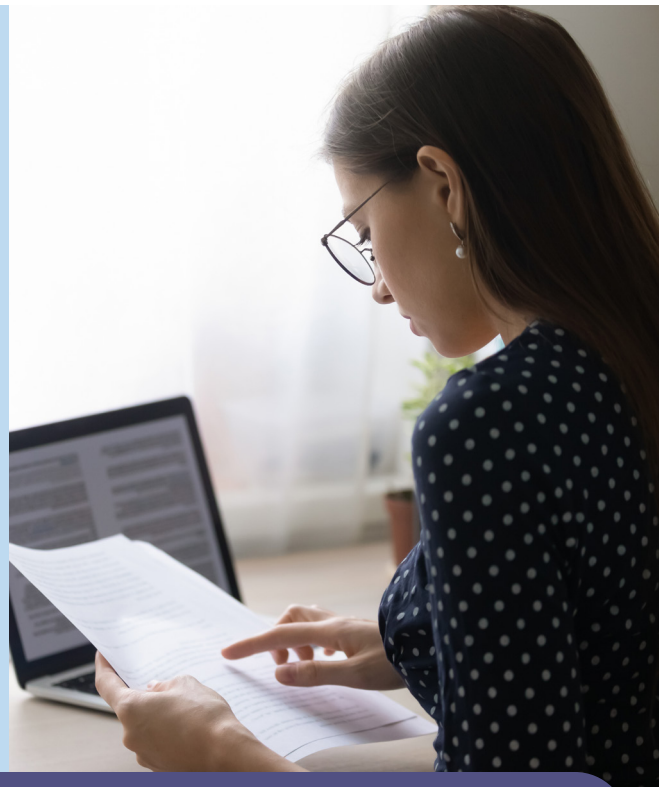
The Measuring What Matters research was led by Better Start in Blackpool, with support from Karen Bateson and colleagues at the Parent Infant Foundation (PIF).

It aimed to explore how outcome measures are currently used in specialist parent-infant relationship and infant mental health services across the UK. The study was designed to address a critical gap: how to meaningfully evaluate the impact of services that support the parent-infant relationship, especially in the first 1001 days.

Understanding the Challenge

Despite growing recognition of the importance of early relationships on health, the research found several key challenges:

- **No single standardised measure exists to assess the quality of parent-infant relationships.**
- **Practitioners often rely on proxy measures rather than direct measures of parent-infant relationship or attachment.**
- **Observational tools are underused due to time, staffing, and training constraints.**
- **There is a disconnect between academic 'gold-standard' tools and what is practical in frontline services.**
- **Practitioners feel pressure to produce quantitative data for commissioners, which may not reflect the nuanced nature of their work.**



“We are measuring what we can, not necessarily what matters most.”

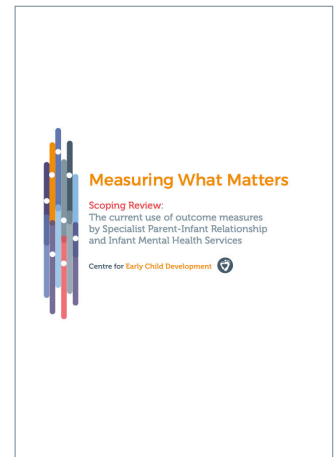
What we did

To explore how outcome measures are used in specialist parent-infant relationship services, our research adopted a mixed-methods approach. This included a comprehensive literature review of UK policy, academic research, and published evaluations to understand the current landscape.

A national survey was distributed to practitioners working in parent-infant relationship and infant mental health services, gathering quantitative data on the tools and approaches currently in use. To complement the survey findings, qualitative interviews were conducted with a diverse group of practitioners. These interviews provided rich, contextual insights into the challenges and opportunities faced in measuring outcomes.

The rationale behind this approach was to ensure that both statistical trends and lived experiences were captured, offering a holistic view of the issue. This triangulation of data sources enabled the research team to identify key themes and recommendations that are both evidence-based and grounded in real-world practice. The findings have informed ongoing discussions about how to improve outcome measurement in ways that are meaningful, practical, and supportive of frontline service delivery.

We wanted to understand what's really happening on the ground and how we can better support services to measure what matters.



Outcomes

The research generated five key recommendations:

1. Be Realistic

No single measure can capture the full complexity of parent-infant relationships..

2. Seek Clarity

Define what outcomes matter most and avoid over-reliance on proxy measures.

3. Capture Observation

Invest in tools that reflect practitioners' expertise in 'seeing' relationships.

4. Think Long-Term

Allow time for interventions to show impact and use measures consistently..

5. Work Together

Involve practitioners, parents, commissioners, and researchers in co-designing evaluation approaches..

We need to move towards a shared understanding of what good looks like and how we know we're making a difference.

Further information:

[Blackpool Parent-Infant Relationship Service Evaluation Report 2024](#)

Measuring What Matters Scoping Review: <https://blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MWM-Report.pdf>