



THINK BABY

Developing a practical framework for practitioners to really Think Baby

The Think Baby project set out to understand how practitioners can better recognise, interpret, and respond to the experiences of babies within their everyday practice. Drawing on staff reflections, survey insights, and sector expertise, a practical toolkit has been designed to embed infant voice within practice.

Think Baby began in 2022 as Better Start sought to understand how well practitioners and services in Blackpool recognised, responded to and captured babies’ perspectives. While teams were committed to improving outcomes for families, there was no shared or effective mechanism for ensuring that practitioners were specifically listening to or capturing babies’ experiences and voice. What started as a set of exploratory questions and conversations evolved into the co-development of a universal, practice-based toolkit.

Designed with practitioners through iterative test-and-learn cycles, the toolkit builds reflective practice, strengthens professional confidence, and promotes simple, consistent principles to keep babies at the centre of everyday interactions. The result is a practical resource grounded in real-world experience.



Understanding the Challenge

Early efforts to incorporate the “voice of the baby” into case studies from the Better Start Community Connectors revealed a clear gap: accounts were largely parent-focused and struggled to evidence meaningful impact on the baby. Practitioners found it difficult to articulate how actions and support aimed at parents shaped babies lived experiences.

Wider review across Blackpool’s early years system, including Family Hubs, showed this was a consistent issue, and there was a lack of shared methods and principles for capturing babies’ perspectives. While models such as Lundy Model of Child

Participation (2007) offered useful concepts, they proved complex for universal practitioner use. Pilot testing with babies and their parents at Better Start Christmas Grottos confirmed that while early years practitioners with relevant background knowledge could engage with the Lundy model, it was not accessible for the broader workforce.

The insight was clear: a common language, framework, and practical, reflective tool to support this type of thinking was needed. One that could guide practitioners to slow down, observe, and recognise babies’ communications in a structured and meaningful way.

What we did

The project began with a small working group, who collectively explored how the Better Start Community Connectors might better understand and represent babies’ perspectives. Early efforts involved reviewing case studies and introducing adaptations, such as introducing reflective questions on how activities might influence the baby. However, feedback highlighted that this was still not supporting practitioners to fully Think Baby and recognise the baby’s experiences.

Using existing theory, The Lundy Model of Child Participation (2007) offered four useful domains - Space, Voice, Audience, and Influence - which helped frame thinking about how babies’ experiences might be acknowledged. The model however was felt to be too conceptually dense for routine use, particularly by practitioners without specialist training. Early testing showed that practitioners found the approach challenging, despite extensive work to simplify and adapt the model.

“I share the toolkit with other practitioners because I’ve found it helps structure conversations with families, builds parents’ confidence to respond to their baby’s cues, and keeps the focus on relationships. It also provides in the moment support which I feel is the best way to approach any supportive situation. It’s also easy to adapt for families and their levels of need, therefore making it easy to access for any practitioners. If we were all to use this, it will strengthen consistency and outcomes helping all families right from the start receive the same message.”

Practitioner

Recognising the need for broader national insight, the team aligned the next phase of work with Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2025 and launched a largescale webinar titled Think Baby: Capturing the Voice of the Baby in Our Practice - which received nearly 300 signups. A corresponding online survey gathered 39 detailed responses from practitioners across the UK, including but not exclusive to – health visitors, early years practitioners, consultant clinical psychologists, parent-infant therapists. This captured real world examples of how they interpret and respond to babies’ cues in their practice. These responses were thematically analysed and generated three clear themes; the baby at the centre; listening and responding; and supporting parents to think baby.

Three principles were developed from the thematic insights from practitioners and sector experts. They emphasise presence, attunement and intentional practice and they form the backbone of the toolkit:

1. I value babies
2. I slow down and am in the moment, and
3. I support parents to think baby

Alongside these principles, the team produced a practical checklist that practitioners could use in everyday practice, within families homes or during interactions. Intended as a quick, accessible prompt to support reflective observation.

The toolkit combines the developed principles, reflective statements, practical strategies, and resources for practitioners across the early years workforce.

The Think Baby Toolkit has been publicly launched and offers a practical, reflective resource intended to help practitioners pause, notice, and hold space for babies’ voices, acknowledging that babies have so much to tell us - if we slow down, notice, and hold space to listen.



Evolving the Think Baby Toolkit

The first iteration of the Think Baby Toolkit has undergone a further test and learn cycle. Through an online survey, two workshops and conversations a further eighty practitioners from across the UK have shared their practice experiences of using the toolkit.

The updated Think Baby Toolkit builds on the original version, retaining its core principles while strengthening clarity and usability based on practitioner feedback.

The original Top Tips have been retained, as they reflect authentic practice wisdom and continue to resonate strongly with practitioners. These have been complemented with clearer practice statements for each principle.

The updated toolkit combines:

- Core practice statements – offering clear, consistent guidance
- Practitioner Top Tips – grounding the principles in real world experience
- Guidance on how to record babies’ experiences.

This ensures that Think Baby remains an accessible and easy to use tool which is authentic and rooted in practice. The toolkit is applicable universally and therefore flexible across professional roles and systems. The further developments strengthens the toolkit’s ability to support everyday practice, professional development and system level application.

In Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2026, the updated version of the Think Baby Toolkit was launched as a nationally available free resource to support everyone to ‘Think Baby!’

See: betterstart.org.uk/voice-of-the-baby/

“I think it is helpful for people who are new to this area of practice / way of thinking. It lays the foundations for putting the baby at the heart of everything.”
Practitioner

Outcomes

Accessible Resource

A co-developed accessible digital toolkit that provides principles and strategies for capturing the voice of the baby, grounded in practitioner insights and tested across multiple service areas.

Easy Reference

Practical, reflective one-pagers that can be printed enabling practitioners to integrate ‘Think Baby’ perspectives into home visits, groups and everyday interactions.

Increased Awareness

Increased organisational and systems awareness of infant voice, supported by thematic research, staff engagement, and sectorwide learning drawn from nearly a wide range of practicing participants.