

Better Start

Think Baby

Practitioner Voices

INTRODUCTION

Why 'Think Baby'?

Babies have much to tell us, if we hold space to listen. To celebrate Infant Mental Health Awareness Week in 2025, we held a webinar called 'Think Baby: capturing the voice of babies in our practice.' We explored the importance of why a better understanding of the world from baby's perspective matters so much. We did this through focusing on three distinct areas of early years practice, our discussions looked at ways we can all strengthen our confidence to keep baby in mind and capture the voices of our youngest children.

We held conversations with national and local experts – including practitioners and parents – who shared their experiences, insights and tips around:

- **Capturing the voices of babies in the everyday** including Family Hubs ~ Creative approaches ~ Parent-infant relationships
- **Capturing the voices of babies in targeted services and early help** including Health Visiting ~ Early Parenthood Service ~ Community
- **Capturing the voices of babies in challenging times and specialist services** including Neonatal ~ Born into Care ~ Family Justice System

During Infant Mental Health Awareness Week 2025 as part of our Think Baby approach we launched a survey so more practitioners from Blackpool and beyond could share their insights and 'top tips.' Through the filmed conversations, practitioner survey, and thematic analysis, we have identified key principles and practical strategies that help embed infant voice into everyday interactions.

A key element of our Better Start approach is working together and we would like to thank everyone who has contributed and shared their best practice tips.

The Practitioner Voices are broken in to 3 principles:

Principle 1 - I value babies

Principle 2 - I slow down, and I am in the moment

Principle 3 - I support parents to think baby



PRINCIPLE 1

**I value
babies**



The voice of the baby means ensuring that infants and children are heard and seen by people who hold the agency for those children, advocate for and ensure that their rights are prioritised. This is important because we can sometimes prioritise adults' needs above children's, especially when infants and young people are unable to articulate their needs.

Kathryn Morris, Early Years Senior Manager



PRINCIPLE 1

I value babies

This theme reflects a foundational belief that babies are active participants in relationships and services. Valuing babies means recognising their rights, experiences, and needs – even when they cannot articulate them. Practitioners shared how they centre babies in decision-making, interactions, and service design. This aligns with UNICEF UK (1989) Convention on the rights of the child and The Lundy Model (2007).

Since 2007, the Lundy model of child participation, based on four key concepts (Space, Voice, Audience and Influence), has been used and adopted by national and international organisations, agencies and governments to inform their understanding of children's participation. We have been working to embed it in our Better Start approach in Blackpool.

Put baby at the centre

Putting the baby at the centre means holding the baby in mind in every interaction, decision, and request for support – even when the immediate focus may be on the parent or wider family. Practitioners described this as a mindset shift: recognising the baby as a person in their own right, a service user whose needs, experiences and rights must be actively

Always put the baby/child at the centre of everything I do, wherever I am signposting to - whether it be for the baby or the parent - the end goal is a positive outcome for the child.

Emma Hobbs, Community Connector

This principle also involves tuning into the baby's presence, even when they cannot speak for themselves. It's about noticing how parents interact with their baby, how professionals engage with the baby directly, and how systems can be shaped to reflect the baby's voice.

We tend to consider the 'service user' as being the mum. In fact, the baby is also a service user and it's essential we hear their voice too.

Siobhean McCarthy-Perham, Maternity and Neonatal Voices Partnership Lead

I think about baby all the time. A lot of it is just that interaction – the way the mummy looks at the baby, the way she talks to the baby.

Shirley Dawson, Health Visitor and Clinical Lead

In practice, this might mean centring meetings around the baby's experience, reflecting aloud on what might be pulling attention away from the baby, and ensuring that the baby's needs are being prioritised.

We try to orientate to the baby's experiences and position at all times... reflecting aloud on things that pull attention away from baby, or can get in the way of baby's needs being recognised or acted upon.

Bea Anderson, Consultant Clinical Psychologist



Create space, in all its forms

Creating space means more than just making time — it's about cultivating environments, relationships, and moments where babies and parents feel safe, seen, and heard. In practice, practitioners described this as both a physical and emotional practice: slowing down, being present, and allowing room for babies to communicate in their own unique ways. It's also about supporting parents to feel valued and comfortable enough to share their thoughts, while holding the baby in mind throughout.

Recognising that people have their own unique ways of sharing their story and having respect for this, ensuring that we hold babies in mind and make space for their communications as we would with any other person, offering sensitive and nurturing responses.

Bea Anderson, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Creating a space where you can 'hear' and 'see' what a baby might be trying to communicate to you.

Amy Peatman, Early Years Practitioner

Allowing them to feel comfortable enough to share their thoughts and feeling and valued within the setting.

Pamela Musgrave-Haddow, Speech, Language and Communication Home Visitor

This kind of space-making also involves narrating the baby's experience, being curious about their emotional world, and helping others — including parents and professionals — to tune into the baby's voice.

The most important thing to be mindful of is just to make that physical and emotional space and time to let the baby have their say, by doing that. And by narrating, through what you, what your baby might be thinking or feeling, you are setting them up as an equal person in a relationship.

Dr Josephine Ross, Professor of Developmental Psychology and co-founder of Art at the Start

I help the staff to be curious about the baby's voice so they can be curious with parents, about that, the baby's voice.

Dr Crystal Webster, Clinical Psychologist, Blackpool Parent-Infant Relationship Service and Neonatal Unit



Keeping the baby in the mind

Keeping the baby in mind means actively imagining the baby's perspective – what they might be feeling, experiencing, or needing – even when they cannot express it in words. In practice, practitioners described this as a form of professional curiosity and empathy, where the baby's emotional world is held at the centre of observation, documentation, and decision-making. It's about tuning into the baby's experience within their family and wider environment, and making space for their voice in practice, even during pregnancy.

Imagine if baby could speak what would they be saying to you?

**Jolene Crosdale, Professional Development
Coordinator for HCP 0-19**

It is important to consider and capture what life is like for the baby within their family unit... using observations of the infant/parent relationship to document their interactions and the care the baby receives.

Practitioner

Put yourselves into the mind of that baby and verbalise what they might be saying or thinking.

Kathryn Morris, Early Years Senior Manager

Think baby - imagine that you were them, how would you feel?

**Jolene Crosdale, Professional Development
Coordinator for HCP 0-19**

Be professionally curious and always consider what life is like for the baby and what they are experiencing or being exposed to even during pregnancy.

Practitioner

Some practitioners even described writing case notes directly to the baby, as a way of keeping their voice present and central in the work.

We write our case notes to the baby and not the mother and inform them of what we discussed with their mum during our sessions.

Practitioner

'As well as writing case notes, some parent-infant relationship teams use goal based outcomes from the perspective of the baby, e.g., what parents and practitioners think together about what the baby might be needing'

Dr Ben Yeo, Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and Clinical Advisor, The Parent-Infant Foundation



PRINCIPLE 2

**I slow down,
and am in the
moment**



My top piece of advice is: slow down, observe, and be responsive. Babies voices are often subtle and easily missed in a busy or task-focused environment.

Jessica Gray, Speech, Language and Communication Home Visitor



PRINCIPLE 2

I slow down, and I am in the moment

Babies communicate through subtle cues — body language, facial expressions, and sounds — that can easily be missed in fast-paced environments. This theme highlights the importance of slowing down, observing carefully, and being present. Practitioners described how creating space for silence, curiosity, and reflection allows them to better understand and respond to what babies may be expressing.

Here are some resources to support with this approach:

[Starcatchers Reflective Practice Template](https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Engagment-Signals-Resource.pdf)

<https://starcatchers.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Engagment-Signals-Resource.pdf>

[The Hanen Centre - The Power of Waiting: The Key to Supporting Your Child's Communication](https://www.hanen.org/information-tips/waiting-the-key-to-supporting-your-childs-communication)

<https://www.hanen.org/information-tips/waiting-the-key-to-supporting-your-childs-communication>



Observing is key

In practice, slowing down creates space to truly observe - to notice the subtle, non-verbal ways babies communicate and connect. In practice, observation not just as a technique, but as a mindset: being present, curious, and attuned to the baby's cues. It's about resisting the urge to rush or fill silence, instead allowing time for babies to express themselves through movement, gaze, and emotion.



Just because a baby is unable to use words doesn't mean they are unable to tell you things, we just need to listen and observe.

Practitioner



Observation is key. A baby can tell you so much through their body language, so it is important to give them space to do that.

Amy Peatman, Early Years Practitioner

This approach also involves modelling observation for parents – helping them slow down, notice, and wonder about what their baby might be communicating. It's a relational practice that strengthens the parent-infant bond and supports emotional attunement.



Modelling watching, waiting and wondering with parents about what the baby was communicating, 'being with' and alongside parents to observe their baby, modelling a slower pace and identifying nuances of these cues/ responses and helping parents to identify them and wonder what they may mean.

Zoe Tate, Parent Infant Therapist



Listening to both verbal and non-verbal cues

In practice, listening deeply means tuning in to more than just spoken words - it's about noticing silence, body language, facial expressions, and emotional tone. Practitioners emphasised the importance of slowing down enough to truly hear what babies are communicating, even when their voices are not verbal. This kind of listening requires patience, presence, and a willingness to sit with quiet moments rather than rush to fill them.



My top piece of advice is - don't be afraid of silence. A big part of ensuring the baby's voice is heard is observing the baby. You need to look for both verbal and non-verbal cues and analyse them, listen to them and understand them before you can react to them. Take their voice into your next step/reaction/planning.

Eve Ellison, Early Years Practitioner



Practitioners also reflected on the challenge of balancing interaction with sensitivity – recognising that sometimes, well-intentioned talking can overshadow the baby’s own communication. Creating space for babies to express themselves means resisting the urge to “interfere” and instead being attuned to what they are showing us.

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A challenge is interacting verses interfering, filling every silence with spoken words, missing opportunities. It is important to reflect and change your own practice to ensure you meet their needs.

Pamela Musgrave-Haddow, Speech, Language and Communication Home Visitor

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Ensure the baby’s voice is always heard by actively listening, responding to any forms of communication, encourage communication through serve and return, creating positive environments where the baby will feel comfortable and safe, be patient and remember, babies communicate through more than just their voice.

Becki Mckay, Early Years Practitioner

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Responding with curiosity and wonder

In practice, slowing down allows us to respond to babies not with assumptions, but with curiosity – to wonder aloud about what they might be feeling, needing, or trying to express. Practitioners described this approach as a gentle, respectful way of engaging with babies and supporting parents to do the same. It’s about creating a shared space of discovery, where the baby’s voice is explored rather than interpreted too quickly.

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They can ensure the baby’s voice is always heard by actively listening, responding to any forms of communication, encourage communication through serve and return, creating positive environments where the baby will feel comfortable and safe, be patient and remember, babies communicate through more than just their voice.

Becki Mckay, Early Years Practitioner

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We find it’s often more successful to ‘wonder together’ than to tell parents what we think.

Bea Anderson, Consultant Clinical Psychologist

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Learn to listen with your eyes. Be curious out loud about what baby might be feeling.”

Dr Crystal Webster, Clinical Psychologist, NHS Blackpool Parent-Infant Relationship Service/ Neonatal Unit

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This kind of responsive curiosity helps build emotional safety and strengthens the parent-infant relationship. It also models a way of being with babies that is attuned, respectful, and open – inviting both practitioners and parents to slow down and truly connect.



PRINCIPLE 3

I support
parents to
'think baby'



Sometimes it can be hard to capture the voice of the baby where there are other important things going on for a family. In my experience, it's important to keep a clear focus on the baby, but a wide lens on the relationships and systems around the baby.

Bea Anderson, Consultant Clinical Psychologist



PRINCIPLE 3

I support parents to think baby

Parents play a central role in interpreting and responding to their baby's voice. This theme explores how practitioners can support parents to tune into their baby's cues, strengthen bonding, and build confidence in their caregiving. It also acknowledges the challenges families may face – such as stress, housing, or mental health – and the importance of compassionate, non-judgemental support to help parents hold their baby in mind. When there are particularly difficult and complex needs in the parent-infant relationship, it can be hard for practitioners/parents to think baby.

In Blackpool, our Better Start team, Family Hubs and Blackpool Parent-Infant Relationship Service are working together to embed this guidance from the Department of Health and Social Care on how practitioners can start a conversation with parents about their relationship with their baby. Contact your local specialised parent-infant relationship team for support across the UK (parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/). Not only can parent-infant teams support practitioners to think baby, they can also offer specialist therapeutic support to support parents and babies directly.

[Reflecting on parent-infant relationships: a practitioner's guide to starting conversations: GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-infant-relationships-starting-conversations-practitioner-guide/reflecting-on-parent-infant-relationships-a-practitioners-guide-to-starting-conversations)
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-infant-relationships-starting-conversations-practitioner-guide/reflecting-on-parent-infant-relationships-a-practitioners-guide-to-starting-conversations>

Sharing the learning with parents

Supporting parents to “think baby” begins with helping them see and understand their baby’s experience. Practitioners described the importance of gently sharing insights, observations, and reflections that bring the baby’s voice to life. This might involve narrating what the baby could be feeling, pointing out subtle cues, or inviting parents to wonder alongside you. It’s about empowering parents to tune into their baby’s emotional world and recognise their baby as a social, communicative being – even before birth.

The explainer series resources from The Centre for Early Childhood can help practitioners explain the brain development in early childhood, and how interactions between babies, young children and caring adults can make a positive difference to their social and emotional development.

[The Explainer Series](https://centreforearlychildhood.org/help-resources/the-explainer-series/)

<https://centreforearlychildhood.org/help-resources/the-explainer-series/>

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One of the things that we do too is really sometimes narrate the voice of baby to really help them think about what baby might be thinking in that moment or what baby might want to say to their parent, a caregiver.

Dr Lisa Wardle, Consultant Clinical Psychologist and Clinical Lead of Blackpool NHS Parent-Infant Relationship Service

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To enable the pregnant person and partner (and wider family if present) to understand the view of the baby. To keep baby in mind in thoughts and to share with them their unborn babies capabilities of being social beings and how subtle their cues are. By capturing the voice of baby, the two way nature of relationships feels empowering for parents to do what is right for their baby and family.

Practitioner

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We really invite people to slow down and notice the cues and tune into baby’s voice and really be curious and wonder about their internal world of what they might be thinking or feeling.

Dr Lisa Wardle, Consultant Clinical Psychologist / Clinical Lead, NHS Blackpool Parent-Infant Relationship Service (PaIRS)

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This approach helps parents build confidence in their ability to connect with and respond to their baby. It also fosters a deeper emotional bond, rooted in mutual understanding and attunement.



Supporting parents to bond with baby

Helping parents to bond with their baby is central to nurturing early relationships. Practitioners described this as a process of gently guiding parents to notice, respond to, and connect with their baby's cues — building confidence and emotional closeness. It's about creating opportunities for parents to see their baby as a communicator, a person with feelings and needs, and to feel empowered in their role.

Tools like the Newborn Behavioural Observation (NBO) and parent-infant focused conversations were highlighted as ways to support this process. These approaches help parents reflect on their relationship with their baby, their own identity as a caregiver, and the baby's emotional world — all within a safe, non-judgemental space.

Tune in to their communication attempts and respond appropriately. Being face-to-face with the baby/child during home visits and highlighting any sounds, gestures, movements that may be communication attempts to parents.

Lauren McGuire, Speech, Language and Communication Home Visitor

We talk a lot of bonding and attachment and skin to skin contact with our parents and how effective these techniques are. We also provide guidance on how parents can read and respond to their baby's signals.

Angela Burns, Health and Development Practitioner

Using the 'Newborn Behavioural Observation along with parent/infant focused conversations highlight the relationship, the parent's view of themselves and their view of their baby. When explored in a non-judgemental way it gives space to bring their baby to their mind.

Pam Whelan-Reid, Specialist Health Visitor



Recognising parents' capacity to 'think baby'

Supporting parents to 'think baby' means acknowledging both their potential and the challenges they may face in holding their baby in mind - especially when life circumstances are overwhelming. Practitioners reflected on how stressors like housing insecurity, debt, or mental health struggles can make it difficult for parents to tune into their baby's emotional world. Creating space for compassionate conversations helps parents reconnect with their baby's experience, even during pregnancy.

Practitioners emphasised the importance of being alongside parents in this process - gently encouraging curiosity, validating the difficulty, and helping them imagine their baby's perspective.

When there are other issues happening for a family, such as debt, poor housing or mental health, it can be difficult for a parent to find the headspace to be able to keep baby in mind. Attending antenatal services can give parents the time out to facilitate this.

Kerrie Roberts, Family Engagement Worker

The voice of the baby can at times be difficult especially when they are still in the womb. My team talk about how they are growing and moving around as well as how their mum goes to appointments to make sure they are healthy and strong.

Practitioner

Think it's really challenging, isn't it, to think about baby's voices in these situations, but it's important that we don't let our discomfort stop us from doing so.

Kaisu Fagan, Lived Experience Lead, North West Coast Clinical Network

Engage in compassionate discussions with parents around how this can be difficult to capture babies voice given the world we live in/ current dynamics/ family situation. Acknowledge and name how this can be tricky. Be with parents, encourage curiosity and wondering about their baby. i.e. 'If your baby had a speech bubble above his/her head what would they be thinking or saying right now?' encouraging time to pause/reflect.

Zoe Tate, Parent-infant Therapist



References

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