

# Thinking about babies

A Froebelian approach

Guidance for Leaders and  
Managers of Early Years Settings  
by Dr Caroline Guard



# Why should Early Years settings prioritise thinking about babies, now?

An increasing number of babies **split their time between home and Early Years settings.**<sup>1</sup> Increased government funding promoting access to settings for very young children aims to further expand that number. **England is the latest country to pledge funding for babies from nine months in 2024.**<sup>2</sup> This focus adds urgency to the need for Leaders and Managers to prioritise thinking around baby room practices, and the support for those working closely with babies.

Froebel invites us to see babies as **'independent human minds'**<sup>3</sup> who are intensely active in seeking connections with others as they enter Early Years settings. Babies are internally driven from birth to connect and maintain closeness with familiar people, and this shapes how they engage with their **social environment.**<sup>4</sup> Without time to nurture early relationships babies can struggle to settle.

The ways a baby communicates are not always obvious and can be challenging for educators to identify and **respond to in busy environments.**<sup>5</sup> Froebel illustrates how a baby moves through a gradual **'unfolding'**<sup>6</sup> into a new environment, establishing their identity and sense of belonging in response to the reactions they receive from others.





# What are the current challenges associated with baby room practices?

## Complexity

Baby rooms are often the most complex rooms in a setting to organise. **The care babies require looks very different to that offered to toddlers and pre-schoolers.**<sup>7</sup> Transitioning into an Early Years setting from home is not easy and can create **developmental tensions for babies.**<sup>8</sup>

**‘We can never remind ourselves too often that a child, particularly a very young and almost totally dependent one, is the only person in the nursery who cannot understand why he is there’.**

(Goldschmeid and Jackson, 2004, p.42)<sup>9</sup>





## Demands of the job

Tuning into and connecting emotionally with babies is **demanding professional work that should not be underestimated or undervalued.**<sup>10</sup> The demands of such work are not widely recognised and often **overlooked by policy makers.**<sup>11</sup> Educators need to know that Managers and Leaders are tuned into these challenges, and sensitive to the demands placed on staff.

## Training and development

All educators working in baby rooms should be appropriately qualified and specifically trained to work with babies, and **offered regular professional development that includes reflecting on their time with babies.**<sup>12</sup> This can add to the challenges of maintaining consistent and stable staff teams in settings.

## Routine

High levels of routinisation can be a barrier to enacting a responsive pedagogy for babies. Babies thrive in environments where their **needs are central to pedagogy**<sup>13</sup>, and they can wallow as they **discover and explore new spaces**<sup>14</sup>, alongside interested adults. Adult-centred routines can overshadow babies' needs and create pressures for educators.

## Competing pressures

Conflict between responding to babies' care needs and organisational demands such as tidying and paperwork can leave **educators feeling overstretched and lacking autonomy in their work.**<sup>15</sup> They can feel **pressured to 'look busy'**<sup>16</sup>, and, when completing organisational tasks, have reported experiencing a sense of **'letting the children down'**<sup>17</sup> if they are unable to respond to babies' needs.



# What do Early Years Leaders and Managers need to consider in creating an appropriate setting culture for babies?



The culture of an Early Years setting is influenced by national policy but also anchored in its own unique ethos shaped by values advocated by management and upheld by a staff team. This culture shapes the practices children experience, and educators' working environment. **Babies' relational seeking behaviours can often be overlooked by adults**<sup>18</sup>, so it is important that a baby's own contributions are valued and viewed as a central component of practice.

The richest culture for babies is one where they have access to consistent, **emotionally, and physically available**<sup>19</sup> educators and a pedagogy that foregrounds their needs. Supporting a working culture that promotes staff wellbeing and recognises the emotional demands of balancing organisational tasks with the needs of babies is paramount.

Leaders and Managers need to be sensitive to the need for educators to cultivate relationships with babies by adopting slower paced practice, where time for regular playful, **intimate, and affectionate dialogue**<sup>20</sup> with babies is valued.

Time with babies can be slow, still and quiet. Babies do not need busy, adult directed activities but they do always need educators who enjoy interacting with them and who can facilitate a responsive and inclusive curriculum that **promotes connection with others and the environment**.<sup>21</sup> Embedding approaches such as the **Key Person Approach**<sup>22</sup> and 'Adagio Interactions'<sup>\*</sup> to facilitate a **Slower Pedagogy**<sup>23</sup> promotes a Froebelian philosophy where babies' contributions are visible, and relationships are at the heart of pedagogy.

**'...the behaviour of even the youngest child is of great significance and the expression of his thoughts may so easily be forgotten or confused...'**

**(Froebel in Lilley, 1967, p.79)<sup>24</sup>**

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**\* Adagio Interactions (Guard, 2023) promote moments of being 'at ease' with babies and young children during moments of sustained interaction.**

# What can Leaders and Managers think about?

- Facilitating low stress environments that offer babies opportunities to connect affectionately with highly trained, responsive educators.
- Maintaining regulated adult: child ratios is essential but thought needs to be given to staff configurations that promote a respectful and responsive culture.
- Making sure that the people who work with babies are appropriately qualified and specifically trained for this age group.
- Maintaining a stable and consistent core staff team: disruptions in people, and care routines, can have a negative impact on babies.
- Supporting educators in forming meaningful relationships with babies and their families, and promoting ways of being with babies for sustained, uninterrupted time.
- Considering how the setting recognises and values the active contributions of individual babies, and what strategies are in place to validate these in everyday practice.
- Training and support should ensure educators know how to play with, and respond to babies needs beyond routine care giving practices. Developing sustained relationships takes time and commitment in all aspects of everyday practice.
- Showing staff that they value the responsive, slow caregiving they facilitate for babies by not placing unnecessary organisational demands on them.
- Supporting staff teams in working cohesively to support one another. This is particularly important in helping them recognise when not to interrupt established communications between babies and colleagues.
- Supporting educators to establish a responsive, relational curriculum and create well-resourced environments where they can comfortably communicate with babies for **prolonged, uninterrupted periods of time and promote freedom to explore.** <sup>25</sup>
- Building in time for reflection, both as a staff team and individually. Reflecting is not an **effortless unfolding** <sup>26</sup>, it takes time and effort and should be an open dialogue between individuals.



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