

The baby room

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR EARLY YEARS EDUCATORS



by Dr Mona Sakr



community playthings

Introduction

This is a guide for everyone who works in the baby room of a nursery. We've designed this booklet to offer ideas that are specific to what happens in the baby room. We'll weave together an understanding on development, pedagogy and day-to-day routines, but we'll do it in a way that feels accessible. This is the kind of booklet you can pick up and find inspiration from in the middle of a busy day.

The guide is structured as a tour through the baby room. In each section, we'll look at a part of the provision for babies, whether it's eating together, nap times, getting outdoors or heuristic play. The aim is to give you some practical ideas for your professional toolbox: suggestions for improvements you can make almost immediately.

It is up to you how you engage with this guide. If you're new to the baby room, it might be helpful to read it cover to cover and return to the reflection prompts as a way to structure your first steps in the baby room. If you're more experienced with babies, you might find it helpful to dip into the sections that relate to areas of practice you want to develop. For example, you might feel confident and happy with care routines, but may want to get some new ideas when it comes to supporting babies' physical development and movement.

We hope that this guide will be useful to you.



About the author

Dr Mona Sakr is an Associate Professor of Early Childhood at Middlesex University in London. She is passionate about practice in the baby room and founded *babyrooms-inspiringleaders.co.uk* to offer more professional learning specifically tailored to the baby room. Mona is currently leading a large national project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, on achieving high-quality provision in the baby room. Check it out at www.thebabyroom.blog.

Where we clean ourselves 11

Where we rest 12

Where we say hello and goodbye 2

Where we connect with nature 14

Where we feel safe 16

Where we eat 8

Where we discover 18

Where we move 6

Where we explore 5

This is where we say hello and goodbye

Transitions and settling in are a vital part of what happens in the baby room. During the settling-in period babies are taking huge “steps”. They are learning that it’s possible to be safe and secure with adults who are not their main caregiver. They are learning to form new attachments and depend on these new people, not only for their physical needs, but also their emotional needs. Separation anxiety is common when a baby first starts nursery, and it is our role to ensure the transition is as gentle and secure as possible. While some babies may experience distress, effective attachment-based practice will significantly reduce crying over time. A well-structured settling-in process, with a consistent key person and responsive co-regulation, will help babies feel safe and build trust in their new environment. At some point, with consistent care and attention, the crying associated with separation will calm down. After settling in, a baby may still feel upset about saying goodbye to their parent or main carer day-to-day, but if they are feeling well in themselves, they will quickly shift attention to what is happening in the room and engage with the adults they trust.

In your professional toolbox

As a baby room educator, it’s important for you to know that a baby’s capacity to self-regulate will only develop through co-regulation. This means that before they can soothe themselves, they need to be consistently soothed by trusted adults. You need to have a set of co-regulation strategies that you can use when babies are crying and are distressed by the

separation from their main caregiver.

This will involve soothing touch, rocking movements, singing and a calm tone of voice. You will only be able to respond to their needs if you are in a calm state yourself. Self-regulation starts with self-awareness. For example, recognise when you are starting to get frustrated, and then take steps to counter this emotion. This might involve deep breathing, stepping out of the room for a few minutes (if that’s possible in terms of staffing) or singing a song that you find calming.

Reflection prompts

- Do you have any babies settling in at the moment? How are they finding it? Where are they in their ‘settling-in journey’?
- How confident are you in using co-regulation strategies to soothe babies who are upset?
- How is your own self-regulation a part of your practice? What do you do when you are feeling frustrated or stressed out when you are in the baby room?







This is where we explore

Heuristic play is exploratory play. The word 'heuristic' means a process of discovery that happens through experimentation and trying new things. When babies are supported to explore the physical world around them, they make discoveries about how the world works. Babies instinctively engage in this kind of play, which is why even newborns are born reaching out and trying to grasp things around them. Babies under the age of 10 months are asking the question "What is this object like?" whereas older babies tend to ask "What can I do with this object?" Heuristic play really takes off from about six months (when a baby can sit independently) to about two years old. At around six months, babies start using their hands purposefully, exploring objects by grasping, shaking, mouthing, and thumping them. Our role in the baby room is to support babies' heuristic play by thinking carefully about the objects and materials in the room that babies engage with. Babies are naturally curious, wanting to explore objects that feel new and stimulating, and returning to objects that are more familiar.

In your professional toolbox

The treasure basket method was introduced by Elinor Goldschmeid as a way to support heuristic play. It involves a sturdy circular woven basket that a sitting baby can sit next to. With the support of an adult who is also beside the basket, they can explore the objects that are contained in the basket. The basket contains items of interest for babies, often gathered

from the natural world (such as smooth seashells or large pebbles). Items should be age-appropriate, dynamically risk assessed, and time-limited. For crawling babies, heuristic play baskets offer a broader exploratory experience. Introducing metal containers and poster tubes can develop the play as the babies get older. There is no set recipe for what should go in a treasure basket and there are many exciting possibilities. Changing what is in the treasure basket supports the baby to make new discoveries so that they are not always exploring the same objects.

Reflection prompts

- Look around your baby room. What materials and objects support heuristic play?
- How often do you find new resources for the room to prompt new exploration and to respond to babies' natural curiosity?
- Do you use treasure baskets with the babies? How do you support the babies to explore the items in the treasure basket through your interactions and conversation?

This is where we move

Dr Emmi Pikler was a Hungarian paediatrician who introduced a new approach to working with babies in the mid 20th century. One of the key principles of the Pikler approach is supporting babies' freedom of movement and allowing them to naturally learn about how their bodies move, rather than rushing them to hit particular developmental milestones. The Pikler approach emphasises allowing babies to move at their own pace without being pushed into positions they cannot sustain independently. However, this does not mean avoiding all movement support - providing tummy time opportunities and enriching environments for crawling and standing can still align with respectful movement support.

Pikler's focus on respecting natural movement is most valuable when combined with a deep understanding of physical development steps. Taking time to be with babies as they move in their own way helps educators tune in to what they are learning and how we can support. When we do this, we tune into the little, subtle movements that are occupying the babies. To give an example, with a baby that is learning to roll, instead of placing them on their tummy for tummy time, we can observe how they are using their legs and arms to create the momentum to roll over from their back. It takes time and patience to learn these movements, but in the Pikler approach, this is the work of the baby and as much as possible, we should follow their lead.

In your professional toolbox

All baby rooms need to have indoor equipment that supports independent physical exploration. For a baby room of 0-2 year olds, this is going to be a broad spectrum of objects and furniture. For a baby lying on their back, a play mat with stimulation above is vital to support practising with rolling. For the crawling baby, equipment that enables them to experiment with crawling up and down surfaces is helpful. As they get older, babies will want to pull themselves up to standing and there needs to be the right apparatus to support this, as well as objects that stimulate the interest for this (e.g. mirrors on the walls at standing height for the babies). For the older babies, indoor climbers and slides help them to experiment with their movement in more ambitious ways.





Reflection prompts

- How much do you physically support babies' movement (e.g. pulling them to standing, or providing tummy time) and how much do you intently observe their own self-determined movements?
- What equipment do you have in the room that invites and celebrates babies' independent movement?
- Do you have any equipment in the room that babies are using for physical exploration even though it is not intended for this? What approach do you take towards this issue at the moment?

This is where we eat

Mealtimes are about so much more than just food. While of course it is essential that babies are nourished, we can often get overly anxious about what babies are consuming rather than seeing mealtimes as a prime time for meaningful connection and baby-led learning. Mealtimes are an opportunity for babies to demonstrate their self-determination, by choosing what to eat and how they eat it. Mealtimes offer opportunities for babies to explore food through sensory experiences. Research suggests that babies who are allowed to engage with food using their hands may develop a greater acceptance of new textures and flavours. While we tend to see the baby as “eating” or “not eating”, there are many steps on the way to eating. We call this “The Hierarchy of Eating”. It can include touching, smearing, smelling, and licking, before the actual eating.

In your professional toolbox

Look for opportunities to enhance babies’ self-determination during mealtimes. This might be about offering more choice in the food that babies eat. Rather than giving them plates that are pre-loaded with food, try offering food on a platter and seeing what they choose to take. Avoid pressuring babies to eat, and instead show interest in what they are choosing to eat and how they are exploring the food with their fingers or mouths.

Celebrate babies’ independence when they try to feed themselves and make time and space for lots of trial and error around this. Look for opportunities to encourage further independence. For example, you might know a baby who enjoys eating with his fingers and you could offer him a chance to eat with a spoon, and then, later, a fork. This approach applies to clearing-up at the end of a mealtime as well. Rather than wiping babies’ faces for them, offer them a wet flannel that they can use to clean themselves, and quite possibly, the table.



Reflection prompts

- What are mealtimes about in your baby room? What are the main emotions that accompany mealtimes? Joy? Stress? Frustration? Curiosity?
- What suggestions from the list above could you use to bring more self-determination to mealtimes in your baby room?



This is where we clean ourselves

Nappy changing and changing a baby's clothes are an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the value we place on respectful care and babies' self-determination. Through care routines like nappy-changing, babies learn about how the world works and how people treat one another. A respectful approach involves giving a running commentary ('I'm going to change your nappy now') and recognising non-verbal cues - for example, a baby lifting their arms or making eye contact signals assent. If a baby resists (e.g., arching away), pause to acknowledge their discomfort, consider delaying and offer reassurance rather than forcing the change abruptly. Seeing nappy-changing in this way can be a big shift for baby rooms where it is typically seen as something that needs to be ticked off and kept on schedule. Magda Gerber, the most influential follower of Dr Emmi Pikler, popularised the idea of 'care as curriculum'. This means that physical care routines can be rich moments of learning for babies and we should take the time to explore and learn together.

In your professional toolbox

You can embrace an ethos of self-care and self-determination in the baby room through the way that you carry out care routines, but also through providing equipment and objects that encourage babies to look after their own physical needs. Some baby rooms have a self-care station. This is a Montessori-inspired approach, where babies begin exploring self-care routines through imitation. A self-care station might include a mirror, tissues, and a small

hand-washing setup. While babies won't master self-care at this stage, they observe adults and older peers and start engaging in small self-care actions, such as attempting to wipe their nose or wash their hands. The key is adult modelling and gentle encouragement, rather than expecting full independence. Older babies will take the opportunity to look after themselves in the way that they see adults around them doing. For younger babies, there will be some investigative play in this corner as they most likely explore pulling tissues out of the box.

Reflection prompts

- How are nappy changes integrated into the learning in the baby room? Are they done as part of the routine or are they 'care as curriculum'?
- What happens during a particular nappy change? How is the baby involved in their physical care (e.g. holding items or finding what's needed for the change)? Do you use distraction or involve them in the process?
- Do you have a self-care station? What would a self-care station look like in your room?

This is where we rest

Babies arrive at nursery with familiar sleep routines and preferences developed at home. Wherever possible, these should be respected and incorporated into nursery sleep practices to support a smooth transition and reduce stress for the baby. Some adjustments may be needed due to the nursery environment, but these should be made gradually and with close communication with parents.

Settling a baby to sleep in a new setting requires patience, consistency, and a calm environment. A predictable, soothing sleep routine helps babies feel secure, while responsive caregiving supports their emotional regulation. Staff should work as a team to ensure all babies receive individualised comfort, using gentle techniques.

Nap times should be calm, predictable moments in the day, but managing multiple sleep needs can sometimes be challenging. Educators should support each other to maintain this calm environment. A well-organised team approach, with clear roles during sleep routines, helps to create a peaceful and effective sleep environment.

In your professional toolbox

Nurseries must follow safer sleep guidelines to protect all babies. Part of this safer sleep is providing appropriate sleep spaces for your babies.

All educators should be fully aware of safer sleep guidelines and ideally have attended safer sleep training. This not only ensures that babies are safe but also provides an opportunity to support parents in understanding evidence-based sleep practices.

Singing a favourite lullaby while changing nappies and removing footwear helps them transition to nap time. Dimming the lights, closing the blinds, and playing soft music are all preparing children for sleep. Some babies like to settle their cuddly toy, and will drop off to sleep in the process.

Reflection prompts

- What feelings do you associate with nap time as a part of the day?
- Is it a time for calm and connection, or does it feel stressful?
- What could be changed to reduce stress for staff during this time of the day?
- How do you work with parents and carers to promote safer sleep routines?



This is where we connect with nature

The natural environment offers rich sensory experiences for babies, from the feel of the wind to the sound of birds singing. Some babies will be immediately engaged, while others may need gradual exposure and reassurance to feel comfortable in outdoor spaces. By offering both stimulating and calming areas outside, we can support each baby's unique response to outdoor play. Consider the limitless play opportunities in all kinds of weather. If it's raining, get the welly boots on and splash in the puddles. When it's sunny, have the babies lie down under a canopy. In the garden, the children will come across different plants, insects and animals. The natural world offers so much rich learning for babies, but at the same time it is important to avoid overstimulation and ensure that babies feel secure and safe in the outdoor environment.

In your professional toolbox

We need places and routines in the baby garden that feel safe and contained, where babies can be sure to find a trusted adult and return to them when needed. You can start by thinking about the physical parameters of this secure base. It might just be a waterproof picnic blanket on the ground, or it might be a canopy or veranda. Next, think about how this space is made to feel cosy, warm and inviting for the babies. Finally, and most importantly, think about how you ensure that there is at least one adult in this space providing care and comfort to the babies who are not yet mobile, and to the babies who are mobile and return to this space when they need reassurance.



Reflection prompts

- How often do you get outdoors with the babies?
- What is your approach to supporting the babies to get outside in all weathers and experience what nature has to offer?
- How do you create a secure base amidst the stimulation of the outdoor environment? What does your secure base look like? How does it feel? How do you manage the space, in terms of ensuring that an adult is there to offer safety and security when it is needed?

This is where we feel safe

Cosy spaces are important in a learning environment for babies. They support co-regulation and connection. They remind us that the most important and wonderful thing we can do with babies is to slow down, be physically close, and pay attention to the small things. Cosy spaces prompt us to slow our interactions down. This might be a chance to explore the treasure basket together, or it might be a chance to share books, sing songs or tell stories. We know that loving touch is a vital part of babies' physical and emotional development.

A great cosy space is a calm, sensory-friendly environment where babies feel secure. It should include soft furnishings, low lighting, and a sense of enclosure. Books, comfort objects, and a soothing adult presence help reinforce a sense of security.

In your professional toolbox

As well as creating cosy spaces in the baby room that invite slowing down, we need to create a culture in the baby room that appreciates our efforts to slow down. Too often, we create the opposite culture where everyone needs to be seen 'doing something', whether it's tidying up or preparing an activity or giving a baby toys to play with. One of the ways

we can build a culture that values slowing down is by observing and documenting the quiet moments of connection that happen during the day. Take it in turns to photograph interactions that happen in the cosy corner. As well as sharing these observations with parents and carers, put these photographs up around the room as a visual reminder of the most important thing we can offer to babies: our attention and care.

Reflection prompts

- How does the cosy space environment remind you to slow down and connect?
- What visual reminders are there around the room reminding you that this is vitally important for babies?
- Is there a culture in your baby room of slowing down and taking moments for affection? Or is there sometimes a judgement that the adults need to always be on the go and moving around, doing the next thing?





This is where we discover our interests

Through play and interactions, babies discover what they – as individuals – love and are excited by. Each baby has a unique temperament, but they also have different interests. One of our greatest privileges in the baby room is observing as these interests emerge, and being in a position to stimulate them through the play and support we provide. Some babies will adore music and will dance well before they can walk, lighting up when you sing to them or when they hear music around them. Others will be movers and find joy in their mobility, getting frustrated when they need to be still, and attempting to climb everything they can. Celebrate babies' unique interests. A simple way to do this is to have 'on-the-go' mind maps on the walls where everyone can jot down things they notice about a particular child.

In your professional toolbox

In-the-moment planning responds to babies' unique interests as they emerge. The first step of in-the-moment planning is to look for things that spark the baby's interest. For example, when outside, you might notice that one of the babies has fixed their gaze on the sky and that they have noticed the moon in the sky during the day. This is a moment to

extend the learning. You can do this by looking together with the child and verbalising the fascination: 'Wow, the moon is in the sky today'. Perhaps there is a song about the moon you know that you can sing together now or later, or maybe there is a book about the moon which you can read together.

If there is a chance to document the baby's spark of interest and how you responded to it, that's great. It shows how much you value the baby's individual interests and it helps you and others to pay attention to these interests.

Reflection prompts

- Think about the babies in your room at the moment. Do you know what they're each fascinated by? What are the sparks of interest in the room?
- How do you value individual children's interests through the resources that you put out, through the interactions you have, or with your attention at the moment of noticing the interest?
- How do you document children's interests and your responses to them so that they can become a part of the room's daily practice?





Final words

We hope that some of the content and prompts in this guide contribute to ideas for things you want to try in the baby room. At the same time, it can easily become overwhelming when we feel that there is too much we need to change in one go. Our advice is therefore to take just one idea at a time and turn this into a commitment. This change, however small, becomes a launchpad for continuous reflection and improvement. We call this the action research cycle.

In action research, a small change is followed by observation and documentation (e.g. taking a photograph of the change in action and its consequences), which in turn is followed by collaborative reflection with your team. Through this process, the team decides on the next change to make.

Baby room educators do an amazing job. By supporting babies to thrive now, you are giving them the very best start in life and teaching them lessons to take on into the future. Every time you soothe an upset baby, respond to a baby's individual interest, or take the time to engage in respectful care routines, you are contributing to a positive future for these children.



Further reading

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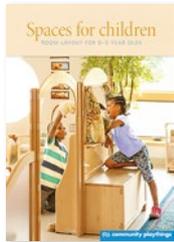


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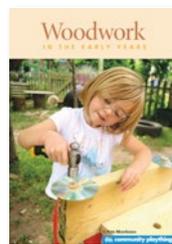
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