

Baby massage and baby play: promoting touch and stimulation in early childhood: early bonding and learning opportunities for babies are the goals of a Sure Start

for babies are the goals of a Sure Start programme that emphasises play and massage

Citation metadata

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Date: June 2005
From: Paediatric Nursing(Vol. 17, Issue 5)
Publisher: Royal College of Nursing Publishing Company (RCN)
Document Type: Article
Length: 1,952 words

Main content

Article Preview :

The UK has some of the highest child poverty rates in Europe (NCH Action for Children 1996). Rural Derbyshire has high rates of poverty (Table 1) and high mortality rates across all age groups, including young children (North Eastern Derbyshire PCT 2003).

The government has pledged to put child poverty high on its agenda and one of its strategies is Sure Start. Since this initiative was first announced (Home Office 1998) Sure Start schemes have been set up all over the country. Sure Start is an exciting opportunity for children's nurses as it recognises the importance of innovative practice as a means of developing much needed health and educational services for young children and their families living in deprived communities.

Sure Start aims to promote the emotional wellbeing of young children (0-4 years) and improve their opportunities to learn (Sure Start 2003). This article describes how a Sure Start scheme in rural Derbyshire is addressing these objectives.

Early bonding and learning

Children's nurses are very familiar with the concept of bonding. Its most important characteristic is the development of a strong attachment between baby and carer, which ensures support and protection are provided for the baby, without which the baby might not survive (Moyse 1998).

Sure Start supports early bonding between parents and their babies, helping them to build a warm, affectionate relationship. Early bonding is an essential first step towards ensuring babies are able to form strong emotional attachments with others in later life. The psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1969, 1973) strongly advocated early attachment between mothers and their children as vital for the latter's emotional wellbeing and psychological development into adulthood. Contemporary approaches to bonding include work by Field and colleagues at the Touch Research Institute in Miami (www.miami.edu/touch-research). Cullen et al (2000), for example, demonstrated links between baby massage and bonding of fathers with their babies.

In the 1960s, Piaget identified play as essential for children's development, allowing them to develop language skills through interaction with others (Smith et al 2003). Sure Start encourages the development of stimulating and enjoyable play experiences for babies, which may help to develop their language skills.

Building on these ideas, the Sure Start area of Creswell, Langwith/Whaley Thorns and Shirebrook in north-east Derbyshire is using different strategies to encourage early bonding between parents and their babies, as well as developing a variety of learning opportunities for babies. These strategies include baby massage, to encourage early bonding, and baby play, to provide different learning opportunities. Nursery nurses, health visitors and a community children's nurse, are all involved in baby massage and baby play.

Baby massage and positive touch

Baby massage has helped the development of early bonding in our Sure Start community by encouraging parents to positively touch their babies. Touch Learn (2002) describes 'positive touch' as parents touching their babies gently and lovingly.

In their early work, Klaus et al (1972) found that a mother touching her baby positively was...

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Moyses, Karen. "Baby massage and baby play: promoting touch and stimulation in early childhood: early bonding and learning opportunities for babies are the goals of a Sure Start programme that emphasises play and massage." *Paediatric Nursing*, vol. 17, no. 5, June 2005, p. 30+. Accessed 6 Nov. 2020.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A133493779

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