

# Talking to babies: Improving literacy and reducing inequalities

## The role of the maternity support worker



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## The role of the maternity support worker

**Maternity support workers (MSWs) have a valuable role working with midwives caring for women and their families. Support workers are working more in the community, in women's homes and in clinics. Effective care contributes to improving public health and reducing inequalities, for example literacy, where studies have shown a connection between poor literacy and poverty.**

Literacy is essential because it is the ability to understand, speak, read and write the spoken and written word and it helps people to make sense of the world. Children born into households with income poverty (i.e. eligible for free school meals) can be 19 months behind their peers and twice as likely to score below average for language development when they start school.

**Poor language development and language skills in children mean they are twice as likely to have:**

- low levels of educational achievement throughout school.
- poor social and financial outcomes.
- poor physical and mental wellbeing.
- reduced life expectancy.

While it is not possible to eliminate poverty overnight, it is possible to help the women and families we care for acquire skills that will support their baby's overall development and help improve literacy. For example, when women have meaningful emotional relationships with their baby, they are more likely to interact positively through talk and play.

There is substantial evidence that inequality can be reduced when parents talk to their babies from an early age.

There are several reasons why parents might not talk to or relate to their babies. These include confidence, embarrassment, their own experiences, a lack of role models, being time poor or they haven't yet felt an emotional tie to the baby; or there may be mental health issues such as depression.

In developing this publication, we have looked at areas where MSWs can identify when good parent infant interaction is being established and where there are some suggestions of how to help in addition to ensuring you share your concerns with the midwife.

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## Antenatally

**Pregnancy is a major life-changing event for a woman and her family. A time to re-examine their relationships, circumstances and futures. There can be uncertainty, anxiety and confusion as women change physically, emotionally and socially, especially in the first three months of their pregnancy.**

Women can respond to their growing unborn baby and establish a relationship as the pregnancy progresses. This helps support good postnatal attachment interaction between parent and infant. As a woman develops this emotional tie with her unborn baby, the baby also forms an attachment with her as they are particularly in tune with their mother's physical and emotional states. Studies show that newborn babies recognise the voices and sounds that they have heard during the pregnancy, especially the voice of their mother. Partners can also become involved by talking to the baby throughout the pregnancy.

**Here are some top tips to be aware of when you are listening and talking to parents and indicators that help may be needed.**

## Top tips

- If the woman feels confused and anxious at the start of her pregnancy reassure her that this is perfectly normal in a time of change. Ensure the midwife is aware in case there are any underlying health problems and encourage the woman to talk to her midwife about these feelings.
- Listen to how she talks about her pregnancy, any words she uses to describe her "bump" should be positive (many women name their bump). It's normal for women to stroke or touch their bump.
- It is very natural and normal for women to read to, talk to, sing or play music to their bump but some may not feel confident in doing this. Reassure her that it is how the baby learns to recognise her voice and they can be calmed by the sound of it.
- Listen to the partner and how they speak about the pregnancy and baby. Many partners want to be involved in the pregnancy but may need some encouragement to talk to the bump.
- Expressing positive thoughts about the pregnancy shows acceptance of the unborn baby and the start of that important relationship developing in the family.

If you have concerns about any of the above it is important to talk to the midwife.



## In labour

**Parents need to have a sense of control, being involved in decision making, continuous and one to one care in the birth room will help create a calm and positive environment in the transition from pregnancy to positive parenthood.**

If there is an intervention in labour or birth, staying with and continuing to care for the family, keeping them informed and involved in the decision making mean they can still have a positive birth experience.

Following birth most women have an enormous surge of the hormone oxytocin (known as the love hormone), not only does this help move labour into the third stage it is also thought to help cement the emotional tie between mother and baby.

Encouragement given to the woman's partner during the labour also helps postnatally, increasing their sense of involvement and the new family's feeling of security.

**The following are some good signs that a positive mother infant relationship is being started.**



## Good signs

**Within an hour of delivery of the placenta (often referred to as the fourth stage of labour) the mother:**

- welcomes skin to skin (kangaroo care).
- is keen to examine her baby's body for example counting fingers and toes.
- naturally cradles her baby on her chest.
- talks gently and softly (but usually with a slightly higher pitch) while stroking caressing and exploring her baby.
- is automatically drawn to focus on the baby's face while talking to her baby.

**The partner should be included by offering them:**

- the opportunity to be in the room.
- the opportunity to be involved in offering support such as massage (if appropriate).
- explanations about what is happening.
- the opportunity to cut the cord (if appropriate).
- the opportunity for skin to skin (if appropriate).
- encouragement to continue supporting the mother if procedures such as suturing are necessary.
- ways in which they can help with breastfeeding.
- ways in which they can help with bathing and general care.

However, in some cultures it not unusual for some partners, even if present in the room, to not want to be actively involved in the labour. Some parents may only want to undertake some traditional rites of welcome, which should be appreciated.

## Postnatally

**Frequent skin to skin contact between mother and baby have been shown to help the woman's feelings of affection towards her baby. It can increase breastfeeding rates and the duration of feeding. This contact may also help shorten episodes of crying when the baby is with their mother.**

In this era of technology, building a relationship with the baby while feeding and playing is more important than relationships on social media. The unintended impact of not having the baby as the focus of the parents' attention is that it can affect their baby's ongoing development especially in areas such as concentration, language and building their own relationships.

When parents are focused on electronic devices, they miss opportunities to interact with their babies and children. Being the focus of attention helps to develop a baby's feelings and sense of reassurance, security, consistency and responsiveness to their physical and emotional needs; it is soothing.

If, for some reason, the mother and baby are apart, for example if the baby needs to go to the neonatal intensive care unit, we can still help their relationship. Taking photographs of the baby for the parents and putting one by the mother's bed, helping her to make frequent visits to the baby, encouraging skin to skin contact with both parents and encouraging them to be involved in caring for their baby. They may need reassurance to do this, which is only natural, especially if the baby is in an incubator.

Talking to their baby and placing a hand in the incubator to touch the baby will help the parents feel more reassured and benefit their interaction and attachment. Studies show that introducing small items such as soft toys or baby blankets that carry the smell of their mother and visa-versa can help that sense of belonging to each other and improve colostrum production.

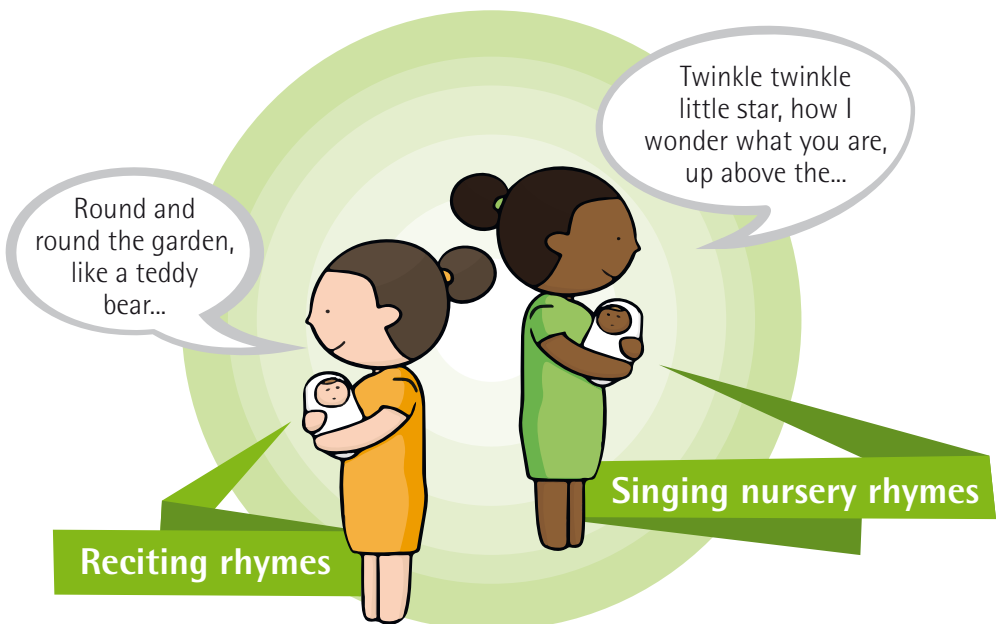
Learning to talk is one of the most important and complex skills a baby will learn and it is an important part of increasing literacy. We may think it happens naturally but families have an important part to play. The more parents talk to and play with their baby the more likely it is that the baby will develop the language skills to become confident, happy children. We might not necessarily see what eventually happens in the family relationships but we can provide encouragement and support for parents to help develop those skills early on and gain confidence talking to and playing with their baby from birth.

**The following are some signs to look out for when you observe, listen and talk to parents. If you are at all concerned you must talk to the midwife.**



## Good signs

- Talking to the baby with reassuring and encouraging tones about what they are doing as they change a nappy, bathe and dress the baby.
- Gazing into their baby's eyes lovingly, gently and with a smile.
- Demonstrating growing confidence as she handles her baby with smooth easy movements.
- Using a soft but higher tone when talking to the baby, cradling them in the left arm.
- Looking at the baby as they talk to them and giving them time to respond.
- Singing age appropriate songs such as nursery rhymes.
- Responding to baby noises and babbles.
- Demonstrating tenderness by caressing the baby as they feed: stroking their cheek, putting the baby's fingers between their lips, gentle kisses with the feed and the baby central to her attention.
- Talking about their baby using loving and positive language (most parents can't help but smile as they do this).
- Having one to one time without electronic devices.



## Useful resources for you and parents

**The midwife** is your main resource as they can make sure there aren't underlying problems impacting on the relationship and the baby's development. The woman could be taking a bit longer developing emotional attachment to her new baby which might be for a number of reasons. The midwife really needs to be alerted if you have any concerns so that an assessment and if necessary, referral to the appropriate healthcare professional can be made.



### RCM i-learn

These i-learn modules may give you a better understanding:

- **Nurturing infant mental health** (30 minutes)
- **Perinatal mental health** (30 minutes)



**BBC Tiny Happy People** is an initiative aimed at helping parents and carers develop their babies and children's speech, language and communication. With lots of fun activity ideas

all the content is quality assured by speech and language therapists and health professionals including midwives. Go to [www.bbc.co.uk/tinyhappyypeople](http://www.bbc.co.uk/tinyhappyypeople)

## Other useful resources

**Association for infant mental health UK** a charity that promotes research and practice in the field of infant mental health. They advocate on the importance of the early nurturing environment on the short and long term development of babies especially the future social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. Go to [AIMH UK: Getting to know your baby](http://AIMHUK.org.uk)

**Big Little Moments** a campaign embraced by many sure starts. Encourages parents and carers to build young brains with big little moments. For example go to [blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk](http://blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk)

**Brazelton Centre UK** understanding baby behaviour. Giving newborn babies a voice by supporting parents in understanding their unique communication. Go to [www.brazelton.co.uk](http://www.brazelton.co.uk)

**e-LfH Cultural Competence** an e learning package to support health professionals to develop cultural competence using three 20-30 minute learning sessions that help develop knowledge and understanding of culture and health; and how this can influence health care outcomes. Go to [www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/cultural-competence](http://www.e-lfh.org.uk/programmes/cultural-competence)

**National childbirth trust** nct 1st 1,000 days – New parent support. How and when do babies develop social skills. Go to [www.nct.org.uk/baby-toddler/emotional-and-social-development/how-and-when-do-babies-develop-social-skills](http://www.nct.org.uk/baby-toddler/emotional-and-social-development/how-and-when-do-babies-develop-social-skills)

**Words for Life** (National Literacy Trust) a website giving parents and families ideas for fun activities that develop children's literacy skills including 0-3 year olds <http://www.wordsforlife.org.uk/baby>

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