

# AN INTRODUCTION TO B.A.S.E.<sup>®</sup> BABYWATCHING AS A WHOLE-CLASS NURTURE INTERVENTION IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS, CONTRIBUTING TO A THERAPEUTIC SCHOOL CULTURE

**Michele Crooks, Griselda Kellie-Smith and Andrea Perry**

B.A.S.E.<sup>®</sup> Babywatching UK, 50 Peterborough Road, London, SW6 3EB

**Corresponding author:** Michele Crooks, [babywatching.michele@outlook.com](mailto:babywatching.michele@outlook.com)

**Keywords:** empathy, attachment, primary education, language

## ABSTRACT

With the aim of promoting empathy in children, Brisch (2012), drawing on his extensive work on attachment and the skills of Parens' (2008) work on aggression theory, developed the programme: Babywatching. This programme is designed as a whole class nurture intervention to reduce Anxiety and Aggression and promote Sensitivity and Empathy (B.A.S.E.). This short exemplar paper explains how the idea is being translated into working practice in the UK; reports on primary teachers' experiences, and gives examples that suggest the potential impact on children's self-awareness, emotional expression and social skills, as attachment is embedded through sensitive, attuned relationships that may be seen as part of becoming a therapeutic and nurturing school.

## INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s psychoanalyst and aggression researcher Henri Parens was working in Philadelphia, USA, studying how to prevent aggressive behaviour disorders in very young children. Karl Heinz Brisch was working as an attachment researcher in Munich, Germany. They met and discussed their related research. From their discussions, Brisch devised the B.A.S.E.<sup>®</sup> Babywatching programme and started groups in the 1990s, with the objectives of fostering sensitivity and empathy and reducing aggression and fear in children, building on Parens' previous preventative programmes. The B.A.S.E.<sup>®</sup> Babywatching programme has been operating in UK primary schools since 2012, and some anecdotal evidence has been collected on the impact of the programme.

Numerous studies have concluded that a positive relationship exists between the development of secure attachment in the early years of life (Bowlby 1969, 1979) and later social competence (eg Coleman, 2003; Lieberman, et. al. 1999). Preschool children who are secure demonstrate better social skills and school adjustment than do their insecure peers (Sroufe et. al. 1993). Elementary school children who are secure are significantly more accepted by their peers, have more friendships and are less lonely than less secure

children (Kerns, et. al. 1996). The attachment security a child feels throughout his or her early years has been associated with their later ability to pay attention, focus, and possess increased confidence as learners. Children with secure attachment histories earn higher grades and are more goal oriented and cooperative than are students with insecure attachment histories (Crittenden, 1992; Jacobsen and Hofmann, 1997).

This body of evidence supports the link between attachment and learning and attachment and improved pro-social skills. Babywatching is an experiential programme facilitating felt understanding of the value of secure attachment relationships.

## HOW THE PROGRAMME WORKS

Once a week a parent brings their very young baby to a school classroom, for 20-30 minutes. Parent and baby do whatever comes naturally: playing, sleeping, feeding, changing, crying, soothing, enjoying being together, on a mat within the circle of seated children. The children watch. A trained group leader (often the class teacher) asks the children guided questions that encourage careful attention and noticing of how parent and baby signal to each other and attune to each other's needs, motivation and feelings. They discover together how a secure attachment relationship develops.

Accepted on 13 March 2019; published on 29 July 2019

**Citation:** Crooks, M., Kellie-Smith, G., Perry, A. (2019) An introduction to B.A.S.E.<sup>®</sup> Babywatching as a whole-class nurture intervention in primary schools, contributing to a therapeutic school culture. *International Journal of Nurture in Education*, 5(1) 66–69.

Post-session there are opportunities for class discussions or for drawing and writing. During the week, the teacher is often presented with opportunities to help the children reflect on what they noticed during Babywatching, and to integrate the empathic responses they felt when watching parent and baby in their classroom, particularly in naming, identifying and managing feelings.

The class visits continue until the baby is too adventurous to be contained in the circle and becomes more interested in the children, therefore removing the focus from the parent/baby relationship. Children's responses often show a depth of insight and connection, demonstrating empathic responses that provide positive modelling and powerful reflections to others, with both genders engaging equally. The parent and baby become an important part of the school community.

The group leader uses a series of questions to help children explore the parent/baby relationship. All the children's contributions are valued. The group leader demonstrates unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1951) and reflects back to each child how they have answered a question to encourage deeper thinking.

The guided questioning is in five layers and explores the behaviours, motivations and feelings of the baby and the parent:

1. 'What do you see/hear?' Simply observational, about behaviour.
2. 'Why did parent...?' or 'Why did baby...?' exploring and encouraging children to describe the effect of the person's behaviour on the other.
3. 'How does it feel for...?', exploring emotions. At first, children can only relate to how they think they would feel themselves. However, as empathy develops, they are more able to recognise how the 'other' reacted and reflect this feeling back more accurately. This approach is a blame-free one, there are no right or wrong answers, we imagine and we explore. This is a motivational question and requires an analytic depth of thinking (Bloom, 1956).
4. Identification level on 'activity' – 'What would I do if I were...?' This is a synthesis and evaluation style of question in Bloom's taxonomy.
5. Identification level on 'emotions' – 'What would it feel like if I were...?'

Layers 4 and 5 are questions that begin to deeply explore our own emotional world in connection to those around us, thus developing our empathic responses.

The layered use of questions helps children to recognise and respond to the emotions of others, explore motivation and consider their behaviour in reaction to others. In this approach, children are enabled to *feel alongside* the couple in an embodied fashion: observers often note that the children unconsciously mimic what the baby is doing, for example moving their mouths in synchrony with the baby feeding, or rocking, when the mother is cradling the baby. They are also developing *mind-mindedness* (projecting themselves into the minds of the parent and baby), by the exploration of possible motivation, rather than jumping to conclusions. Both of these skills are implicit in empathy.

Often sessions provide a rich opportunity to explore emotions. For example, one group leader working with reception children said that the baby (about eight weeks old) was frowning. The group leader encouraged children to mimic the baby's face to give them a similar, embodied experience. She asked the children to see what that felt like and to wonder at what a frown might mean. 'Frown' was also a new word for the reception children. This exploration is a helpful way to develop self-awareness, a healthy precursor to 'other' awareness, that will help children self-regulate.

#### **EXAMPLE: A VOLUNTEER MUM'S EXPERIENCE**

*My eldest son absolutely loved Babywatching classes when he was in year 1. He wondered about this little girl and her mother, reported all the stages of development that he witnessed, and took in all the minutiae of babyhood, wide-eyed with wonder. So, when I was pregnant with our third baby, I called the school to volunteer.*

*I started the classes when he was six weeks old with reception children. The class sat round on the carpet and watched as I held H, fed him, played and sang with him. A couple of times he slept through the whole session, sometimes he screamed his head off (because babies do!) and once – possibly the highlight for the class – he did a poo, and I had to change his nappy.*

*The group leader included all the children in the class, gently drawing out their understanding of these very normal day-to-day emotions. Labelling them, working through from 'holding a hand and smiling' to concepts of 'happiness and security'.*

*I found the sessions incredibly valuable to me as a mother. This regular time gave me the chance to stop and reflect on my baby, his development and our relationship. The analysis of a reception class constantly surprised and delighted me, and I noticed how quickly they developed from the basic observation 'He has opened his eye' comments to the 'He is looking at all the children because we are really interesting'.*

*We finished the sessions when H was around seven months old because he was way too active a subject! Babywatching has already carved out a role for him in our community and school. We have all benefited from it: our baby, his parents and the whole class of children'.*

## IMPACT

### Impact on behaviour and relationships

Many teachers have observed better self-regulation, an awareness of other people's needs and feelings, resulting in kinder behaviour.

- *'I didn't expect the impact. For example, one boy who started this year constantly calling out, interrupting the whole class and unable to cooperate with his peers has changed significantly. The baby's development fascinated him, and he was able to watch in an unexpectedly calm way. He was also able to share with us changes in his baby brother at home and amazingly he is a changed boy. His friendships are more secure and he is calmer throughout the day.'*
- *'It creates such a warm, supportive and permission giving atmosphere.'*
- *'Boys who originally pushed and shoved one another are helping each other out.'*
- *A school's family support worker reported that a child with difficulties in relating positively to others started to change his behavior. He began to notice if children were alone in the playground, ask how other children felt, checking if they were OK and whether they wanted to play, accepting a variety of responses, even if they weren't what he had hoped for. As a result of his changes, children are now involving him, whereas before they would avoid him.*

The ability to accept an alternative view than his own represented a huge risk for this particular boy, and thus his new approaches to other children are likely to have come from a greater point of security and resilience (Winnicott, 1964).

### Impact on language and writing

Teachers have reported children's increased confidence in sharing ideas and improved emotional vocabulary. Another teacher commented on how the sessions have 'fed into' their guided writing – 'What voice would that character use, what would they be like?'. Some instances have been noted where children who had problems speaking in school have begun contributing, and this effect has transferred to the classroom.

## Children's comments following

### Babywatch sessions

A sample of children's comments in Year 3/4

- **Boy:** We see how D develops in her heart.
- **Girl:** I enjoy Babywatching because I observed how babies and mothers communicate and react to other people.
- **Boy:** I have learnt to write about L. My writing has improved.
- **Boy:** In Babywatching L makes me feel happy. He makes me know how to be a big brother; it makes me know if I smile my brother smiles.

Sometimes the range of children's comments provides an opportunity to share more complex and difficult feelings. The challenge for the group leader is to hold and work with these feelings, for example: jealousy; anger; resentment; disappointment and anxiety. Where difficulties arise, the group leader is supported by a mentor.

## CONCLUSION

Nurture practitioners are fully aware of the link between the importance of empathy and secure attachment and healthy, curious children who are now ready to learn. Babywatching appears to offer a practical way of teaching these fundamental social learning blocks in a gentle, transformative way and fits within a values-based education, whole school, therapeutic and nurturing school culture. The evaluation of practical activities such as Babywatching presents rich opportunities for further research, ranging from randomised controlled trials to classroom-based practitioner research.

## REFERENCES

- Bloom, P.S. (Ed).** (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, New York, David MacKay Company.
- Bowlby, J.** (1969). *Attachment and loss. Vol 1*, New York, Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J.** (1979). *The making and breaking of affectional bonds*. Hove, Brunner-Routledge.
- Brisch, K.H.** (2012) *Treating attachment disorders, from theory to therapy*, 2nd Edition, New York, Guildford Press.
- Coleman, P. K.** (2003) Perceptions of parent-child attachment, social self-efficacy and peer relationships in middle childhood. *Infant Child Development*, 12(4), pp. 351-368.
- Crittenden, P. M.** (1992). Quality of attachment in the pre-school years. *Development and Psychopathology*, 4, pp. 209-241.
- Jacobsen, T. and Hofmann, V.** (1997). Children's attachment representations. Longitudinal relations to school behaviour and academic competence in middle childhood and adolescence. *Developmental Psychology*, 33(4), pp. 703-710.
- Kerns, K. A. Klepac, L. and Cole, A.** (1996). Peer relationships and pre-adolescents' perceptions of security in the mother-child relationship. *Developmental Psychology*, 32(3) pp. 457-466.

**Lieberman, M. Doyle, A-B, & Markiewicz, D.** (1999, January). Development patterns in security of attachment to mother and father in late childhood and early adolescence: associations with peer relations. *Child Development*, 70(1) pp. 202-13.

**Parens, H.** (2008) *The development of aggression in early childhood*. Revised Edition, New York, Jason Aaronson.

**Rogers, C.** (1951) *On becoming a person*. London Constable

**Sroufe, L. A., Carlson, E., and Shulman, S.** (1993). Individuals in relationships: Development from infancy through adolescence. In D. C. Funder, R. D. Parke, C. Tomlinson-Keasey, and K. Widaman (Eds.), *APA science Vols. Studying lives through time: Personality and development* (pp. 315-342). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association.

**Winnicott, D. W.** (1964). *The child the family and the outside world*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.