



# Baby explorers

A Canterbury setting has devised a six-week course to give parents a real understanding of how their babies' minds and bodies develop

By **Hazel Davis** Photography **Claire Davies**

**“It’s amazing to look at Alfie, and understand how he sees the world around him”**



**F**ive-week-old Alfie rolls over and gurgles at his mother Louise as she massages his legs, applying olive oil in a downward motion. Both are clearly enjoying the soothing effect of this contact between mum and baby.

Similar scenes are being played out around the room as seven mothers learn the art of ‘baby massage’. But this is not just another baby massage class, it’s a session on the Baby Explorers course in Chartham, Canterbury, designed to give first-time parents an understanding of how infant minds and bodies develop.

The six-week course looks at different ways parents can help babies form skills for life, with topics ranging from ‘How your baby’s brain develops’ to ‘Why love matters’, and including today’s baby massage.

The course was set up by the Canterbury and District Early Years Project to provide an intervention and support programme, with the focus on laying good foundations for a child’s health and wellbeing – at the point at which it can make the most difference. One of the key aims is to offer families the chance to explore different ways to play, interact and communicate.

Nicolette Cole, manager of the Canterbury and District Early Years Project, explains the thinking behind the initiative. “Research shows that how the parent or carer relates to and interacts with their baby will have an impact on how the baby’s brain develops.

“There was a lot of support locally for pre-school children, but although we have excellent health visiting support, there wasn’t a programme for parents of babies emphasising the importance of attachment, positive environment and good interaction.” These are all important elements in the Early Years Foundation Stage, and help children to make friends and become confident learners.

So, with funding from Sure Start and the Chances4Change programme, Baby Explorers was developed. It’s free for parents and takes place at the local village hall. The session we visit is led by Sam Godden, a dads’ support worker and trained baby massage therapist. He spends the first 20 minutes explaining the background theory before running through some techniques. “Always ask

the baby if he or she is ready for a massage,” he says, as the babies gaze up at their mums. Which means, he explains, that parents should just ensure the child is in a receptive, playful mood.

Baby massage, says Sam, can help foster a more confident mother- or father-baby relationship. “It’s an excellent way to connect with the baby, and helps with things like colic, cradle cap and trapped wind.” Massage also teaches positive touch, develops body awareness and co-ordination and provides sensory stimulation.

The atmosphere is relaxed and informal. As Marie, mum to five-month-old Isaac, says: “I love the social aspect. It’s great to meet other like-minded mums.”

Alfie’s mum Louise adds: “I love that we find out so much about babies’ development. We discovered that they see in black and white, and after that it was amazing to look at Alfie and understand how he sees the world around him. Once you understand the theory, it all seems so obvious!”

Project worker Ann Lamkin says the programme is all about enhancing a baby’s environment. “We’ve done a lot on holistic play, using things other than toys to explore the world. It’s a constantly evolving course that we review according to need.”

Marie adds: “We’ve looked at all kinds of things babies can play with, such as rubber gloves or lavender bags, and I learned really practical tips. And the baby massage is a useful skill, something I’ll definitely do at home with Isaac.” To ensure the work extends beyond the village hall, parents are given ‘homework’ – such as mirroring the baby’s facial expressions and noting their response – and a fridge magnet with a weekly goal.

The benefits of the course extend to early years practitioners too, with an increased knowledge of the parents’ relationships with their children and a chance to interact with specialists and learn extra skills such as baby massage. This helps them put EYFS principles into practice – by understanding more about the importance of attachment, the crucial role of positive interactions for physical and emotional development, and the huge importance of the key person role.



## The syllabus: key topics in Baby Explorers

**1** How your baby’s brain develops  
Functions of different parts of the brain; how your baby’s brain makes connections; observing your baby’s behaviour

**2** How your baby sees the world  
Interaction and communication between you and your baby; your baby and the environment

**3** Why love matters  
Developing a brain-building environment; brain-building play

**4** Different ways to play with your baby  
How holistic play supports children’s development; how to build up items for holistic play with your baby

**5** Baby massage  
What baby massage is; how it is beneficial for babies and parents; practical session

**6** Recap and review  
Including possible follow-up sessions

### Resources

A practitioner’s guide to Social and Emotional Aspects of Development (SEAD) is available to order from DCSF Publications (call: 0845 60 222 60 – ref: 00707-2008BKT-EN) or download from: [www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/earlyyears](http://www.nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/earlyyears)