

A Quick Guide to Baby and Toddler Groups

Introduction

Baby and toddler groups, also known as parent and toddler groups or stay and play sessions, create the opportunity for children to interact and form relationships with other children and adults. They can experience a range of materials and play activities to support their learning and development. The group provides parents/carers with the opportunity to socialise and support one another, gain play activity ideas to use with their child at home and if they are involved in the running of the group, gain decision making and organisational skills.

When thinking about starting a baby and toddler group you will need to carry out research to identify and confirm the needs in the area. This can be done by asking parents, perhaps through a short face-to-face or postal questionnaire or by advertising a public meeting to gain an idea of attendance levels and the local needs. Parents can be contacted in a variety of ways, through their pre-school or school, by notices in shops or community buildings or through community associations. To find out about other groups that are already in existence, you can contact your local Children's Information Service. You may also contact local Pre-school Learning Alliance Development Workers.

Organisation and Management

Management

The parents and carers who attend baby and toddler groups are responsible for the care of their children at all times. As such, baby and toddler groups are not required to register with Ofsted or follow the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS); which is a mandatory framework setting the standards for the welfare, learning and development of children attending Ofsted registered childcare settings. However, baby and toddler groups may still find the guidance in the *Early Years Foundation Stage* useful and can view the materials online at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/eyfs or order a hard copy by calling DCSF publications 0845 60 222 60.

There are many ways in which a baby and toddler group can be managed. As a charity a group of volunteers, usually parents attending the group, take on the responsibility of its running and management. Charitable groups with an annual turnover of over £5,000 should register with the Charity Commission. Alliance charitable member groups are eligible to adopt the *Pre-school Learning Alliance Model Constitution*, which outlines rules and procedures for the group. Alternatively, groups can be run as a private business.

During the initial set-up process of the group, it is helpful for the parents and those running the group to agree some basic aims and policies of the group. For example, an admissions policy, a health and safety policy, a behaviour policy and a registration form for parents to sign when they first attend the group. Further information on creating policies can be found in the Pre-school Learning Alliance publication *Policies and Procedures for the Early Years Foundation Stage and Early Adventures: Building and supporting baby and toddler groups*.

Groups should promote their service as widely as possible to ensure that they are known to all local parents, including those who have just arrived. If groups have regular meetings they should advertise the meeting days and times with contact details for the group. When advertising and

promoting the group, it should be made clear that all parents and children are welcomed from all sections of the community, irrespective of their gender, age, race, cultural or ethnic background.

Any group considering employing staff will be required to adhere to specific employment legislation. For further information please refer to the Pre-school Learning Alliance publication *Employment in Early Years Settings*.

Premises

Once the management of the group has been decided, those responsible will look for a venue. Many groups use premises where they can hire or book a time slot for each session they require. These types of premises tend to be local church halls, scout huts or community centres. When viewing possible accommodation it is extremely important to take all health and safety matters into consideration as the premises must be suitable for young children to move around safely. For further information, please see the health and safety section.

Opening times

Groups should consult regularly with parents about the suitability of their opening times and if necessary, adjust the times accordingly. If there are other groups in the area, the group could consider running on different days to extend the range of choice available to parents. The group should also consider school holidays and, if they stay open, decide whether they are able to welcome children of school age and make this arrangement clear to parents.

Fees and fundraising

A fee is usually charged for parents to attend each session with their child. The amount required to charge can be calculated by reviewing all the group's outgoing costs, such as rent, insurance, food/drink, equipment/expendable materials and out of pocket expenses for volunteers and staff members. If the initial set-up costs are fairly high, due to equipment requirements and insurance fees, the group can consider fundraising within the group or local community. There could be funds available from the Local Education Authority; the group should contact their local Children's Information Service for further details.

Running the sessions

The venue must be booked in advance for the days the group is due to meet, the regularity of this booking must be made clear to the landlord to ensure that the group is not charged for the days they do not use. A volunteer or person responsible for the group should be present throughout the session to complete various tasks before, during and after the session:

- Collect the keys and open up the venue before each session.
- Set up the room, including the play activities and refreshments area.
- Collect the fees and take details of any new members attending.
- A register of all parents and children attending the session is vital for fire safety. The Pre-school Learning Alliance publishes a *Register and Outings Record* that groups can use.
- Clear away the venue at the end of the session.
- Ensure the venue is secure and keys are returned as appropriate.

It is useful for those running the group to establish a set of administrative and regular tasks that need to be fulfilled at each session or each week and to allocate these tasks to individuals as necessary. All documents and information concerning the group should be kept in a safe place. Those responsible for the group should know what information is kept and where. The following documents and information should be kept:

- Contact details of those responsible for the group.
- Contact details for those that attend the group.
- Set of rules for the group or a signed constitution.

- Welcome letter or leaflet for the group, outlining the aims of the group, opening times, etc.
- Policies, procedures or statements.
- Insurance policy or cover note (see the insurance section).
- Minutes of meetings.
- Equipment inventory, including details of items on loan.
- Licence/tenancy agreement.
- Certificate of charitable status and charity number (if registered).
- Pre-school Learning Alliance membership number and membership card (if applicable).

Finance tasks

- All fees should be collected at the beginning of each session.
- Money must be kept in a safe place, for example, a lockable cash box during the session and in a post office or bank account in between sessions.
- Rent or hire of the venue must be paid at the regular intervals required.
- Refreshments must be kept well stocked and receipts kept/logged.
- Pre-school Learning Alliance membership (if applicable) and insurance costs paid on time.
- Maintain an accounts record book showing income, expenditure and petty cash. The Pre-school Learning Alliance *Accounts Record Book* can be used for recording the finances of the group.
- Bank/building society account details to be kept up-to-date, including an up-to-date list of signatories authorised to access the account.

Health and Safety

Baby and toddler groups are usually established as informal unregistered organisations. However, it is important to ensure the facilities on offer are safe for the adults and children who use them. Please find below a summary of all the health and safety aspects that must be considered when running a group.

Procedures for promoting a safe environment

- Conduct a 'risk assessment' of the premises at least annually. Your insurance provider should be able to provide you with a template risk assessment document and the Pre-school Learning Alliance has produced a useful publication *Risk Management in Early Years Settings*.
- Carry out a quick safety check prior to each session, for example, check large equipment such as climbing frames to ensure they are safely erected and positioned (should be part of risk assessment).
- Fire drills to be held often enough to ensure each family experiences one per term.
- A no smoking policy should be established within the group.
- A first aid box is present at all sessions and kept well-stocked.
- Each session has a trained first aider or an 'appointed person' to take charge in the event of an accident.
- In the event of an accident concerning a child in which basic first aid treatment is required, a trained first aider may administer the treatment as long as the parents'/carers' permission is sought before treatment takes place.
- All accidents and treatment given should be recorded and reviewed to ensure that no patterns are emerging which may give cause for concern. The Pre-school Learning Alliance *Accident Record Book* contains forms to record accidents.
- All adults that attend the session are made aware of health and safety procedures.

Premises

- If renting or hiring premises, the group must ensure that the owner or landlord is notified of any safety issues as they arise to ensure appropriate action is taken.
- Groups in shared premises should ensure that the other users do not put young children at risk, therefore, the activities taking place in the premises should be known so that those responsible can take appropriate action.
- Doors should be fitted with slow closing mechanisms to prevent children's fingers from being trapped; sponge wedges can be fitted to doors to provide additional protection.
- Ideally toilet doors should not be lockable by children.
- Stair gates should be fitted to stairways if appropriate and internal safety gates fitted to prevent access to the kitchen or other high risk areas.
- Floors should have non-slip surfaces, baby areas should have easily washable floor coverings and all floors should be kept clean.
- Heating appliances should be stored in a safe place, regularly serviced and suitably guarded.
- Electrical plugs and power points should be protected from children. Electric leads should not be loose or trailing.
- Fire precautions should be taken, with fire drills regularly practised and fire equipment serviced where appropriate. Written fire instructions should be displayed in each room.
- Curtains and furnishings should be non-flammable and conform to the appropriate standards.
- Any outdoor play space should be securely fenced and gated with impact absorbing surfaces in the areas around play structures.
- As part of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, those responsible for the group are required to adhere to two core duties concerning persons with a disability; the first is 'not to treat a child or an adult with a disability less favourably' and the second is to 'make reasonable adjustments for children and adults with a disability'. Groups that use rented premises may still have responsibilities to ensure that physical alterations are made to the building for disabled service users. Changes are required to be 'reasonable' so groups with a limited budget will not be expected to make expensive changes and factors such as the use of the building at other times, costs, resources, health and safety and the interest of other children will also be taken into consideration. For further reading please refer to the booklet *Early Years and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995*, which is available from the National Children's Bureau on 020 7843 6000.

Kitchen and food preparation

- Any group that is providing snacks or meals to the general public is required to register with their local Environmental Health Department. Further information can be provided by the Food Standards Agency or the Environmental Health Department at your Local Authority.
- If the group provides snacks, these should be treated like mini-meals and children should be expected to sit and eat, rather than continuing their activities with a snack in their hand. Organisers should be aware of any allergies or intolerances children have and avoid these foods. Snacks containing fat, sugar or salt such as crisps, chocolate, sweets and biscuits can be part of the diet but should only be given occasionally as treats rather than daily items. Milk and water are the best drinks to serve between meals.
- The kitchen should be kept clean, hygienic and well ventilated.
- Groups should ensure that general rules of hygiene are followed when food and drink are being stored, prepared and served. No food or drink should be reheated.
- All areas and surfaces where food is prepared should be kept clean and in good repair.
- Tea towels should be kept clean and washed after each session.
- Mugs or other containers should be stable to prevent spillage; any spills that do occur should be cleaned immediately.
- If feeder beakers are used they should be cleaned and sterilised after every session, the group could consider asking parents/carers to provide their own.

- Hot drinks must be kept out of reach of children and never left unattended. Adults should be made aware that they can still scald even half-an-hour after being made.

Equipment

- Litter bins should not be accessible to children and emptied regularly.
- All toys should be washed or sterilised regularly, broken or damaged toys should be removed immediately.
- Groups that borrow their equipment from a pre-school should ensure that the equipment is suitable for the ages of the children attending the group.
- All equipment must hold a CE mark which shows it has been made in conformity with essential safety requirements.
- In addition, for toys, the Lion Mark is a recognisable consumer symbol denoting safety and quality.
- Ensure that any products with age warnings (e.g. not suitable for children under three) are not accessible to these age groups.

Ensuring the safety of children during the session

- Adults are present throughout the session and remain responsible for the children they bring. This must be explained clearly to the parents/carers when they first attend the group; ensuring that their children are supervised particularly whilst sleeping, in outdoor spaces, taking part in hazardous activities like water play, and when adults are talking or taking part in activities.
- Baby and toddler groups must have a policy on safeguarding children and child protection, and be able to follow the government guidance *What to do if you're worried a child is being abused* (2006), which is available to download online at www.everychildmatters.gov.uk or can be ordered by calling DCSF publications 0845 60 222 60.
- Baby and toddler group organisers are not required to have Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks, as the parents and carers remain with, and are responsible for, their children at all times. However, it can assist in safeguarding children and reassuring parents and carers.
- Childminders can attend the group with their own children and those children they are legally registered to care for.
- Groups should ensure that babies and crawlers are neither harmed nor over-restricted by play activities and equipment which are provided for older children.
- Groups which provide additional adult activities should have sufficient volunteers and/or staff to ensure the safety of the children.

Ensuring adults safety during the session

- Any additional volunteers and staff involved in the group can play an active role in maintaining the level of supervision but should not assume total responsibility.
- Groups should pay particular attention to the safety of adults arriving early or leaving late.
- Although parents/carers remain responsible for their child, every adult within the group should be safety conscious, everyone should be encouraged to prevent accidents and remove any hazards.
- No-one should be asked to do jobs which are hazardous to themselves or to the children in their care.

Insurance

It is vital for groups to have a valid insurance policy that provides adequate cover. The Pre-school Learning Alliance provides competitive insurance cover alongside our membership scheme. If the group is told by the owners or landlord of the premises they use that they are covered by their insurance, the group should always ask for a copy of the policy in order to check their position and seek advice from the Pre-school Learning Alliance insurance team if they are unsure. Any insurance scheme chosen by the group should at least contain the following types of cover:

- Public liability insurance.
- Personal accident insurance.
- Equipment and contents insurance.
- Group's money cover.
- Personal effects of members of the group.
- Employers' liability insurance (only applicable if the group employs staff).

Play Facilities and Activities

Children are learning all the time, the activities and equipment provided within a baby and toddler group can make a vital contribution to their learning and development, and help to support children's transition to the *Early Years Foundation Stage*. Those responsible for organising the group can meet to plan what play facilities are provided before the sessions take place so that:

- the learning experiences for the children are of the best possible quality
- the experiences that are offered are stimulating for both children and parents
- the activities and materials offered by the toddler group can provide parents with ideas to use at home with their children

Some ideas for play activities are given at the end of this guide. The Pre-school Learning Alliance *Baby and Toddler Cards for the Early Years Foundation Stage* highlight how good practice in baby and toddler groups contributes to children's development. The cards can be used alongside the Pre-school Learning Alliance *Baby and Toddler Posters*, which are another useful resource for providing parents with an understanding of what they can expect to see and experience.

Room layout

Groups should always ensure that adults are able to sit comfortably near the play activities so that the children in their care can be both supervised and enjoy the enticing activities available. The room should be welcoming and attractive, and the safety of children should be given high priority. Some aspects to consider could be:

- Babies and crawlers to be separated from other children.
- 'New' walkers are given a safe space to practise their skills.
- Any bikes or sit/ride toys to have their own dedicated area.
- Providing a quiet area for books and stories.
- Adult chairs to be used to screen off each area and placed close enough to allow adults to get involved.
- Messy activities to be situated near a water supply.

You may find it is useful to try several ways of laying out the room during the early months to find an arrangement that suits the group of families attending.

Range of toys and types of play for different ages

The ages of the children attending the group should be carefully considered to ensure that the types of activities and materials available are suitable for their development.

New babies

A basic range of toys and play materials can be provided for babies that they can explore with fingers or mouths. Equipment can be provided to help babies become aware of their surroundings and therefore enjoy a stimulating environment, like equipment to:

- *look at* - bright posters, mobiles, toys with a range of shapes, colours and patterns, mirrors, shiny and dull objects, things that move

- *listen to* – someone singing, rhymes and music tapes, toys with rattles, bells and musical mobiles
- *touch and handle* – soft toys in different fabrics or safe objects with different textures, shapes and weights

Babies from three months

Babies from about three months of age will become more active and they need the opportunity to strengthen their muscles and increase control over their head, eyes, hands and feet. Groups can provide materials that:

- *babies can kick or reach for* – soft balls or toys
- *stimulates reach or grasp* – toys which rock, roll or squeak when touched; rattles, teethers, household objects such as wooden spoons or plastic bowls
- *requires the use of both hands* – rattles/teethers which the baby has to hold in one hand and manipulate with the fingers of the other

Crawling children

Crawling babies will need space to explore and try out their new mobility skills; they continue to learn through their senses so colour, shape, sound and texture are still important. Groups can provide equipment for babies at this stage which they can:

- *manipulate* – activity centres and mats; buckets, boxes and baskets to fill; household and natural object to grasp and handle; bricks to build and knock down; simple posting boxes; pop-up toys; cars to push about
- *use to make sounds* – shakers, lids and spoons to bang, humming tops, bells and squeakers
- *move towards* – balls, plastic bottles, cars and other toys which roll slightly when pushed
- *look at* – simple books and catalogues showing everyday objects, and an adult to share them with

Toddlers

Children that are just beginning to walk will need space to move around without getting knocked over and large equipment that will enable them to gain their balance. Anything that the children may pull themselves up on must be stable. At this stage, children will enjoy equipment that they can *push and pull*, for example:

- baby walkers to push (heavy with a low centre of gravity to avoid tipping; not the 'sit in' variety as they are considered dangerous)
- push-along toys such as prams, animals and 'pretend' machines such as grass cutters or vacuum cleaners
- cardboard boxes to push or pull (with a cord attached)

Pre-school children

From 18 months or so, children can enjoy a very wide range of play experiences that can extend their development in many ways. Some of these play activities will require forward planning and more adult supervision, particularly for 'messy play', however, it is these activities that can be particularly enjoyable and valuable to the children. The following types of play can be provided at a baby and toddler group session:

- *Creative play* – children will take pleasure in creative play by doing rather than focusing on the end result, this can be encouraged by providing materials such as crayons, chalk or soft pencils; painting using thick brushes and non-toxic paint with non-spill pots and large pieces of paper on a table or low easel; collage and junk modelling using non-toxic glues with spatulas or brushes and a wide variety of materials, natural and discarded; a variety of musical instruments - bought or home made - to shake, bang, scrape or pluck.
- *Imaginative play* – dressing up clothes such as hats, bags, shawls; simple kitchen and household utensils from a variety of cultures; dolls, male and female, representing a range of

ethnic groups; garage/road mats for cars; toy animals; telephone; a home play area with cooker, sink etc; dough with rollers and cutters; simple train sets.

- *Books and stories* – a book corner with bright, attractive picture books; stories about familiar events and situations; the experience of listening to and re-telling stories contributes to children's language development.
- *Exploratory play* – using home made playdough with different colours and varying recipes to provide new experiences, sand in a baby bath, sand tray or washing-up bowl; water in washing-up bowl, assortment of plastic containers; clay, or wood as long as carefully sanded, for children to handle, smell and build with.
- *Energetic play* – toddler size slide and/or small climbing frame both with safety surfacing under and around; large cardboard boxes; rocking horse or rocking chair; sit and ride toys; play barrel/tunnel; small set of steps.
- *Manipulative and skill building play* – interlocking bricks, blocks and shapes; lacing and threading; large peg board with pegs; shape sorters; toys to screw and turn.
- *Mathematical play* – opportunities to sort, match and count objects; to make patterns, orders and sequences; to experience and talk about volume, shape, weight and size of objects.
- *Technological play* – small scale vehicles; cranes, pulleys and old radios and clocks.

Parental Involvement

Support for parents

When planning the sessions, those responsible should consider the needs of both parents and children. There are many reasons why parents might come to the group; to get a break from the house, to meet people and make friends or to share some of the stresses, worries and joys of parenthood. Those responsible for the group should help parents develop self-esteem by:

- welcoming new parents warmly
- getting to know each parent as an individual
- calling parents by their name (not just Daniel's dad or Nikki's childminder)
- consulting with the parents about aspects of running the group
- using the parents' skills and expertise and valuing any contribution they make to the group
- being non-judgmental about the parent's methods of child-rearing, while still encouraging good practice

Inclusive practice

Those responsible for the group should ensure that all sections of the community are welcomed into the group. The group should ensure that:

- an equality of opportunity policy is implemented and regularly reviewed
- every family is made aware that their contribution to the group is wanted and valued
- the way in which the group is organised is inclusive and does not discriminate on the basis of gender, race, ethnic, cultural or linguistic background, ability or age
- the activities provided in the group reflect the diversity and ethnicity of the families in the community which the group serves

Groups may find the Pre-school Learning Alliance publication *Embracing Equality* useful when thinking about inclusion.

Learning opportunities

Those responsible should recognise the importance of the informal learning about parenting and the support for parents which takes place during each session. Parents should be encouraged to share experiences, joys and concerns in a non-judgemental, relaxed atmosphere. Parents should

not be made to feel inadequate because of any lack of educational achievement; the group can provide an access point and/or venue for basic skills training for adults who need and want this.

Groups should provide opportunities for shared play, suitable for the ages and stages of development of the children. By watching their own and other children at play, parents will increase their understanding of child development and will gain ideas for suitable activities for their child. The Pre-school Learning Alliance publication *Looking at Learning Together* contains materials for a family learning course to help parents get involved in and support their children's learning.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance can provide parental support through our free *Growing Families* parent's club, in association with Bounty. For further information, or to register, visit www.bounty.com/growingfamilies.

Useful Contacts

Charity Commission T. 0845 3000 218 W. www.charity-commission.gov.uk

Children's Information Service T. 0800 234 6346 W. www.childcarelink.gov.uk.

Food Standards Agency T. 020 7276 8829 E. helpline@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk W. www.food.gov.uk

Parentline Plus, a charity that offers support to anyone parenting a child, T. 0808 800 2222 W. www.parentlineplus.org.uk

The Alliance publications, referenced throughout this guide, can be ordered online at www.pre-school.org.uk/shop, or by calling 0870 603 0062. The free Alliance resources, referenced throughout this guide, can be downloaded at www.pre-school.org.uk/resources.

The Pre-school Learning Alliance is a leading educational charity specialising in the early years. We provide practical support to over 15,000 early years settings and make a positive contribution to the care and education of over 800,000 young children and their families each year. We actively involve parents and families in all aspects of our work.

Our products and services include specialist publications, childcare services, quality assurance, campaigning, research, training and family programmes. We also offer a range of independent professional information, advice, support and guidance tailored especially to meet the needs of young children and their families, students, early years practitioners and professionals.

If you would like to find out more about our work or you wish to make any comments about our products or services, please do get in touch.

Information Services

Pre-school Learning Alliance

The Fitzpatrick Building

188 York Way

London N7 9AD

T. 020 7697 2500 F. 020 7697 8607 E. info@pre-school.org.uk W. www.pre-school.org.uk

Activity Ideas for Baby and Toddler Groups

Painting

Planning:

If parents are forewarned children can be dressed in old clothes. Have everything ready before you start: a place to dry paintings, a pen to name work, extra towels & tissues. Ensure there are ample pots /trays of paint for each place set.

Equipment needed:

- Ideally child size table and chairs or easel.
- Aprons (or old shirts worn backwards).
- Newspaper to cover table or easel & floor.
- Bowl and towel to wash hands.
- Paper & paint.
- Large Brushes or just fingers!
- Variations: potato, hand or sponge printing.
- Trays for printing (washed ready meal trays are ideal).

Painting gives children the opportunity to:

- learn colours
- see what happens when colours are mixed
- control a brush and marks made on the paper
- express feelings and expand vocabulary e.g. "it's slimy"
- explore the feeling and texture of the paint

Story/Rhyme/Singing Time

Planning:

Choose simple stories that children can follow. Books with good pictures and a few words on each page are ideal. Keep the stories short, remember to keep eye contact, and use expressive face and voice tones. Using a prop perhaps a teddy or doll which tells the children that it is time to sit down because teddy/doll wants to listen to the story.

Equipment needed:

- Suitable stories/books/rhymes/songs.
- List of favourite songs.
- Tape machine, basket of instruments.

Story time gives children the opportunity to:

- enjoy stories and to sit for short periods
- develop their listening skills
- develop social skills

Physical Play

Planning:

Encourage appropriate clothing; ensure parents observe and accompany children; ensure adequate surrounding space is available for equipment; ensure all equipment is away from fire escape door and any hazards.

Equipment needed:

- Safety mats (for indoor or outdoor play).
- Variety of age and stage large equipment that encourages physical play.

Physical play gives children the opportunity to:

- develop their co-ordination, gain spatial awareness
- develop confidence, develop social skills i.e. learn to share and take turns
- express feelings i.e. overcome fears