



Understanding babies beyond milestones

A reflective practice tool for baby room practitioners

A practical tool to help practitioners slow down, notice more and reflect on what babies may be communicating through behaviour, movement, attention and emotional responses.

Why this matters

Babies begin learning long before they begin speaking.

Every interaction, expression, movement and response tells us something about how they are experiencing the world around them. Through relationships, routines, emotional security and responsive interactions, babies begin building the foundations for communication, attachment, confidence and future learning.

In busy baby rooms, it can be easy to focus heavily on routines, care tasks and day-to-day organisation. But high-quality baby room practice is built through something deeper than this.

It is built through noticing.

Noticing cues

How babies communicate comfort, discomfort, interest, tiredness, frustration, enjoyment and connection.

Noticing patterns

What babies return to, repeat, avoid, seek out or use to reassure themselves across the day.

Noticing responses

How babies experience routines, transitions, relationships, environments and familiar adults.

Noticing communication

What babies may be telling us before they have words, and how adults respond in return.

This tool is not designed to assess babies or create unnecessary checklists.

It is designed to support reflective practice and help practitioners think more deeply about babies' experiences, emotional wellbeing and development within the setting.

Observation reflection tool

Use the prompts below to reflect on what you are noticing within your baby room practice.

What am I noticing?	What might this mean?	How are adults responding?	Notes
Does the baby seek eye contact or familiar adults?	Developing attachment and emotional security.	Are interactions warm, calm and responsive?	
Does the baby explore confidently?	Feeling emotionally safe within the environment.	Are practitioners encouraging safe exploration?	
How does the baby respond during transitions or routines?	Communication of emotional regulation needs.	Are routines predictable and emotionally supportive?	
How does the baby communicate discomfort, interest or enjoyment?	Early communication development.	Are cues recognised and responded to consistently?	
Does the baby return to familiar adults during play or uncertainty?	Attachment and reassurance seeking.	Are key person relationships secure and consistent?	
Does the baby show curiosity through movement, sensory exploration or repetition?	Developing schemas and early learning patterns.	Are opportunities for exploration available daily?	

Reflection prompt: Are practitioners using what they notice to adapt interactions, routines and environments, or are observations mainly being used for records?

Reflective practice prompts

Consider the statements below and reflect honestly on current practice.

Reflection area	Secure	Developing	Inconsistent
Babies experience warm, emotionally available interactions throughout the day.			
Practitioners respond consistently to non-verbal communication and cues.			
Care routines feel relational rather than task-focused.			
Babies have uninterrupted opportunities for movement and exploration.			
Emotional wellbeing is prioritised alongside routines and safety.			
Practitioners understand the importance of attachment and responsive caregiving.			
Parents are included in discussions around routines, comfort and communication.			
The environment supports calm, connection and communication.			

Current theory made practical

Attachment and responsive caregiving

Babies build emotional security through consistent, responsive relationships with familiar adults. When babies feel emotionally safe, they are more likely to explore, communicate and engage confidently with the world around them.

What could this look like in practice?

- Familiar practitioners responding consistently to cues.
- Calm reassurance during transitions.
- Warm facial expressions, eye contact and comforting interactions.
- Predictable routines and emotionally available adults.

Serve and return interactions

When babies vocalise, gesture, point, look or react, they are initiating communication. Responsive back-and-forth interactions help strengthen communication pathways, emotional security and early brain development.

What could this look like in practice?

- Responding to babbling and facial expressions.
- Copying sounds, gestures and expressions back to babies.
- Narrating shared experiences during play and routines.
- Allowing time for babies to respond within interactions.

Current theory made practical

Co-regulation

Babies are not born able to regulate emotions independently. They learn emotional regulation through repeated experiences of calm, responsive support from trusted adults.

What could this look like in practice?

- Calm voices and predictable responses.
- Supporting babies through distress rather than rushing routines.
- Helping babies feel safe during moments of frustration or uncertainty.
- Recognising emotional needs behind behaviours.

Sensory exploration and movement

Babies learn through movement, repetition, sensory exploration and physical interaction with the world around them. Exploration supports cognitive, physical and communication development.

What could this look like in practice?

- Open-ended sensory opportunities.
- Space for crawling, reaching, climbing and movement.
- Repetition within play experiences.
- Time to explore without unnecessary interruption.

Final reflection

High-quality baby room practice is not about creating perfect routines or heavily structured environments.

It is about relationships.

It is about emotionally responsive care. It is about noticing babies' communication. It is about understanding that development begins through connection, safety and interaction.

Sometimes, the smallest moments become the most significant parts of a baby's day.

What this might help you notice

Where practice feels calm, responsive and secure.

Where babies' cues may be missed during busy routines.

Where staff confidence could be strengthened through CPD or reflective discussion.

Where the environment supports movement, communication and emotional security.

Where parent knowledge could be used more fully to understand each baby's routines, cues and comfort needs.

Next steps

Reflective tools like this can help identify strengths, inconsistencies and opportunities for development within baby room practice.

If you are beginning to explore baby room quality improvement, responsive caregiving approaches, communication-rich environments, staff CPD, attachment-informed practice or emotionally secure environments, further support can help strengthen consistency across teams and practice.

How Stephanie Lawrence Consultancy can support:

- Baby room quality reviews.
- Reflective practice sessions.
- CPD planning and staff development.
- Responsive caregiving and communication-focused training.
- Quality improvement support for early years settings.

Sources and guidance used

This tool has been informed by the EYFS statutory framework, Birth to 5 Matters guidance on child development, attachment and the key person, and evidence-informed guidance on responsive serve and return interactions.

Further reading: GOV.UK EYFS statutory framework; Birth to 5 Matters; Harvard Center on the Developing Child, serve and return.

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