

Bringing Five to Thrive Alive

Two approaches to implementing Five to Thrive within Barnardo's





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Executive Summary

Five to Thrive, developed by Kate Cairns Associates, is a flexible approach that offers learning for practitioners and parents. It is designed to enhance awareness of the central ingredients for healthy brain development in babies, with five key activities – Respond, Cuddle, Relax, Play, Talk – described as the ‘building blocks for a healthy brain’.

Five to Thrive training has been rolled out throughout Barnardo’s, with more than 1,500 staff across the UK receiving training between April 2014 and April 2015. This paper focuses on two Barnardo’s services in the North West of England that were early adopters of *Five to Thrive* and use promising interpretations of the approach. Kendal West Children’s Centre provided a structured *Five to Thrive* course for parents, while Benchill Children’s Centre had embedded the approach more broadly into its everyday work.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted in early 2015 and includes feedback from parents and staff about their perspectives on *Five to Thrive*. The staff consulted had all attended *Five to Thrive* training and some were directly engaged with running *Five to Thrive* activities.

Overview of *Five to Thrive* at Kendal West Children’s Centre

At Kendal West Children’s Centre in Cumbria, staff ran a seven-week course for parents of babies aged six to 18 months, covering all aspects of *Five to Thrive*.

Key features included:

- Seven to ten parents with babies aged six months to 18 months.
- Seven weekly 1.5 hour sessions: an introduction, a session on each of the five building blocks, and an evaluation.
- Two to three play workers, including a lead worker who devised the programme.
- Room set up for a range of play activities, such as messy play and reading.
- Four parents at a time joined a 15 minute discussion on *Five to Thrive* in a separate room.

- Babies either stayed with their parents or with play workers and other parents in the play room during the discussions.
- Parents returned to their babies immediately after the discussion to implement the learning.
- Photos were given to parents to construct their own ‘learning journey’ book.

The parents on the Kendal course described learning and applying the different aspects of *Five to Thrive*, especially ‘respond’ and ‘play’. They appreciated learning about their baby’s brain. The staff observed changes in the parents’ relationship with their babies during the seven weeks, including increased interaction, playing and responding, and improved bonding. Staff said that their practice had changed, in terms of giving positive feedback to parents, and that felt more confident talking to parents.

The advantages of the *Five to Thrive* approach in this context included the simple nature of its approach and messages. It delivered evidence to back up good practice, and provided the opportunity to praise and reinforce good practice by parents and help them to feel empowered. Other successful features of course were the skilled and imaginative way it was developed, the welcoming atmosphere, the peer support element and the ability of staff to reinforce the messages through modelling and encouragement.

Overview of *Five to Thrive* at Benchill Children’s Centre

Staff at Benchill Children’s Centre, in Wythenshawe, Manchester, attempted to embed the principles of *Five to Thrive* systemically into the wider work of the service, rather than developing a specific intervention.

This included:

- displays about *Five to Thrive* in reception
- providing a bespoke simple leaflet at baby registration
- discussing *Five to Thrive* with parents in 1:1 sessions

- modelling behaviour and reflecting back to parents
- bringing *Five to Thrive* messages into Stay and Play
- integrating the messages into baby massage sessions
- incorporating *Five to Thrive* into supervision and group meetings
- establishing an evaluation notice board for practitioners to monitor *Five to Thrive* examples.

Feedback from parents showed that many of the *Five to Thrive* ideas were integrated in their care of their babies, and a few said that this was directly due to the leaflets they had received. The discussions with parents identified the importance of peer learning and interaction, and, in some cases, a general lack of confidence in an ‘expert view’.

The staff consulted at Benchill were enthusiastic about *Five to Thrive*, but nearly all fed back that it was difficult to implement the training directly in their work. Several felt it was hard to discuss the *Five to Thrive* messages with parents; on the one hand feeling that the messages were so simple they felt patronising, but on the other, that the brain development aspect was too complex to explain easily and confidently.

Key learning

The work in Kendal demonstrated that being part of a dedicated group enabled a more focused dissemination of *Five to Thrive* messages. Participants were also able to observe each other, reinforce messages, model behaviour and provide ongoing mutual support. However, exploration of the work in Benchill suggests that integrating *Five to Thrive* by modelling and highlighting good practice with parents can also be valuable and empowering.

‘One of the beautiful things about Five to Thrive is that it can be incorporated, you don’t have to think “right now I’m going to do 20 minutes of this.” It’s not an extra thing, just something that you bring into your life.’

Parent participant

Some challenges were identified by staff, including difficulties in communicating messages in a simple yet non-patronising way. Parents said they often received contradictory advice, leading to stress and a preference to follow their own instincts. Many parents felt that they learnt more from meeting with other parents to discuss the ‘realities’ of parenting. It is important, therefore, that *Five to Thrive* is communicated as an approach that enables staff to support parents, by encouraging them to reflect on information they are given, and through recognising and praising positive interactions.

1. Background

Barnardo's and *Five to Thrive*

Five to Thrive training was rolled out to over 1,500 members of Barnardo's staff across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales between April 2014 and April 2015.

Designed by Kate Cairn Associates, *Five to Thrive* is a flexible approach with learning for both parents and practitioners. It acts as a framework to enhance awareness of five key activities for healthy brain development in babies – *Respond, Cuddle, Relax, Play, Talk* – which are described as the 'building blocks for a healthy brain'. These activities are based on research into the key processes of attachment and attunement that forge bonds between young children and their carers. Practitioners are taught about the neuroscience underpinning the *Five to Thrive* approach and encouraged to embed the principles in their work with families.

Evaluations were conducted in Hertfordshire¹ of this approach, where it was embedded across the whole multi-agency team. Positive changes were found in practitioners' knowledge and confidence, in parents' self-efficacy and confidence within the *Five to Thrive* areas, and in the importance that parents attributed to the five areas. Based on this evidence, *Five to Thrive* received 'validated practice' status from the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO)².

Five to Thrive is non-prescriptive and adaptable for a range of purposes. It is described by Kate Cairns Associates as '...not a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach. Rather, an array of resources, tools and training content available to help tailor a strategy that best fits with local needs and aims.'³ This allows for a wide range of tailored uses by services and organisations, which enhance rather than replace existing approaches.

Bringing *Five to Thrive* alive

During the roll-out of the *Five to Thrive* training within Barnardo's, it became clear that practitioners were interpreting the approach in a variety of ways. A project group of representatives from across the UK recognised a role for exploring the development of new practices and structures based on *Five to Thrive* within Barnardo's services. This research is the first phase of that analysis and gathers evidence from two of these interpretations.

The aims of this paper are:

- to focus on two promising ways of implementing the approach – one structured (Kendal West Children's Centre seven-week course) and one embedded (Benchill Children's Centre's integrated method)
- to gather feedback from parents on the *Five to Thrive* messages and their impact, and to present individual case studies
- to discover the views of staff about the implementation and effectiveness of the *Five to Thrive* approach so far.

2. Methods

As staff and parents were interviewed as part of this analysis, the proposal was submitted to the Barnardo's Research Ethics Committee.

Researchers carried out the following field work during early 2015:

- one visit to Benchill Children's Centre and one visit to Kendal West Children's Centre
- observations of two groups in Kendal
- one focus group in Kendal and one focus group in Benchill with four and eight parents respectively
- one phone interview with a parent from Kendal
- eight face-to-face interviews with staff members from Benchill and Kendal, either one to one or in pairs
- one phone interview with a staff member from Benchill.

Parents at Kendal had direct experience of a course developed from the *Five to Thrive* training. The Benchill parents had experienced 'light touch' *Five to Thrive*, as Benchill Children's Centre had integrated *Five to Thrive* messages more indirectly across its work. The staff consulted had all attended *Five to Thrive* training; some were directly engaged with running *Five to Thrive* activities, others were less involved. A range of staff roles was represented at both centres, including play workers, trainers, outreach workers, volunteer co-ordinators, and team managers.

3. Seven-week course at Kendal West Children's Centre

Description of the course

The *Five to Thrive* course in Kendal, Cumbria, was run for parents of babies aged six to 18 months. The seven-week course was made up of 90-minute sessions. They took place in a play space, with a separate room for the 'training' element of the session. Participants attended with their babies.

The course had been run once before, and at the time of the visit was at week three of a second group. Ten parents started the first course, but only seven completed it, as the others had returned to work. Eight parents were taking part in the second course. The first course was run by two staff members – the trainer (a play worker) and a second experienced play worker – and the second by three staff members.

The play room was set up with a range of toys and play experiences including creative/mark-making, book areas, messy play, sensory play and physical play. Each week, different play resources were tailored for the different sessions. For example, a dark tent and a range of lights were used for the 'relax' session.

The lead trainer conducted 15 minute training sessions in a separate room, for four parents at a time (i.e. half the group). The parents could either leave their babies with the play workers and other parents in the play room or take them into the session. After the training session the parents returned to their babies to put their learning into practice.

The sessions covered:

- 1 Introduction to *Five to Thrive* approach, including the five building blocks and background on brain development
- 2 Respond
- 3 Cuddle
- 4 Relax
- 5 Play
- 6 Talk
- 7 Evaluation
- 8 Catch up/'party' session two months later

The workers went through the learning material together before the sessions. They took photos of the parents and babies throughout each session, capturing them implementing the theme of the week. Workers also positively reinforced the messages from the sessions by pointing out to parents when they were 'responding' to or 'cuddling' their babies.

At the end of each session, the parents were given an information handout and a laminated card with suggestions of how they could implement the theme, to take home.

The parents were also given a 'learning journey' – a scrapbook wrapped in patterned paper and containing key *Five to Thrive* messages. Each week, photos from the previous sessions were given to the parents to stick into the book and they were asked to write comments about them. Parents left the 'learning journeys' at the centre and the play workers added tailored comments for each parent, drawing from the *Five to Thrive* messages. The parents took their 'learning journey' away after the last session and were encouraged to continue adding to it and bring it to the two-month catch up.

The content of each session followed the buildings blocks of *Five to Thrive*. The trainer wrote weekly planning sheets for each session and created flipcharts, which she personalised for each group with photos from the sessions.

Summary of the key features of the approach

- Seven to ten parents with babies aged six to 18 months.
- Seven weekly 1.5 hour sessions: an introduction, five sessions based on each *Five to Thrive* building block, and an evaluation. These were followed by a follow-up session two months later.
- Two to three workers: lead worker who devised the programme and play workers.
- A room was set up for play with a range of different activities, such as messy play.

- Four parents at a time joined a 15 minute discussion on *Five to Thrive* in a separate room.
- Babies either stayed with their parents or with play workers and other parents in the play room during the discussions.
- Parents were photographed with their babies during the session to reinforce positive observations of the *Five to Thrive* building blocks.
- The photos were given to parents to construct their own 'learning journey' book and workers added their own comments based on *Five to Thrive*.
- Parents were given a laminated card with suggestions of things to try at home after each session (taken from the *Five to Thrive* resources).
- Parents were encouraged to continue with the 'learning journeys' after the course and bring them to the follow-up session after two months.

The course developed organically from the Barnardo's *Five to Thrive* training, and the intended outcomes were not specifically identified. However, some aims which emerged were to:

- encourage the parents to enjoy their time with their babies
- increase the participants' confidence in their parenting and support them to be less anxious
- observe improved levels of responsiveness, so parents recognise the needs of their babies and feel confident in meeting them
- empower parents by giving them knowledge and allowing them to mould it to fit their lives.

'We're not saying do this 24/7. I'm aware that a lot of them haven't got partners and have lots of other issues going on. Something has changed to make it better for them – for the child. That's

what you want to do – make a difference. I don't know how much has gone in, or [if they are just] doing it naturally now. That would be perfect.'

Staff member

The first group was an established group that had previously attended a baby massage group, plus one newly referred family. Nearly all participants were mothers, although one father attended occasionally with the mother. One grandmother also attended intermittently. The second group was more mixed, with approximately half referred by other professionals, such as health visitors, who had identified that additional support was required. This included a young mother, several lone parents, and two mothers who had experienced postnatal depression. It was also possible for other carers to attend. The young mother asked if her cousin could accompany her, but after the first session attended without her support. This was seen as an indicator of how comfortable she felt within the group.

Outcomes for parents

What parents learnt

We asked, both in a focus group and in a one-to-one interview, what the parents learnt from the course. They described learning about different types of play and the various things you can play with. There was a sense that there was always at least one thing to take away from each session.

'There was always a fact that was helpful. So you might think "well obviously I'm going to sing to them or talk to them", but being told you actually need to be doing that means it sticks in your head a bit.'

Parent participant

3. Seven-week course at Kendal West Children's Centre

One parent outlined learning about neurons and the importance of the session on 'respond' in particular.

'The stuff about neurons was good – that was more about 'respond'. That made you think anything is valid, doesn't matter what it is, it's all important. All the things they made – we've made all these things at home, [like] the bottles with different things inside them to rattle.'

Parent participant

The parents found learning about babies' brain speed and delay in reaction helpful, especially when trying to soothe them.

'I quite liked learning that they were 16 seconds behind where you are. That really helped actually. That was one thing I took from that, because when you can't calm them down you think "well I've got

to give them that extra time" and it made a bit more sense. Because when you first pick them up you think "why aren't they happy now? I should have 'magic-ed' this by now." But it's really good when you can think "oh that's alright, it takes a bit longer." That was the most useful thing.'

Parent participant

Learning about making eye contact and getting down to the baby's level was helpful to some parents.

'No one told us about the eye contact and getting down to their level and that was a really useful thing [to] see at their level what they are doing. And [it] made a real difference and no one was saying that.'

Parent participant



For one parent, the course helped to explain why their baby cried when she was put down, and another talked about learning how cuddles affect babies.

'I put her down and she starts to cry. She wants to be picked up all the time, and you pick her up and she stops crying. It's because of 'cuddle' isn't it?'

Parent participant

Although some of the messages seemed 'obvious', parents did not see this as a problem, as it reinforced their experience.

'A lot of it was new to me [as a] first time mum... Even if you thought it was sort of obvious, having someone say it – it's really nice when you're new to something.'

Parent participant

'[I learnt] how your baby is affected by cuddles [and] talking... it all felt new even though she's my third.'

Parent participant

What parents were doing differently following the course

On their feedback forms, parents were able to identify things that the course had inspired them to do differently:

To what extent has this course helped you to:		Examples of comments
<i>Respond</i>	A lot = 5 Quite a lot = 1	Helped me to realise when [child] needed eye contact, [that] was really good tip, getting close to his/her level. Learnt to wait for a response from [child] and understand his/her needs more. Has made me aware of facial expressions and how [child] needs to see me when we play.
<i>Cuddle</i>	A lot = 6	Just to reassure us we are doing the right thing when others say leave them to cry. Learnt different ways to show affection. Excellent and effective – lots of cuddles.
<i>Relax</i>	A lot = 6	Able to keep calm around child, excellent session.
<i>Play</i>	A lot = 6	Used different play ideas, loads of ideas to play.
<i>Talk</i>	A lot = 6	Talked more to [child] since the course. Made conscious effort to keep talking. Confidence to jabber away and be silly – bought lots of books as a result.

Source: Kendal monitoring data

3. Seven-week course at Kendal West Children's Centre

Parents identified that they were playing with their children more than they would have done without the course, were playing on the floor with them, and were making special time to play rather than doing household chores.

'And you do see the difference as you are watching them in different ways. I don't think I leave them to play as much as I would have done if I hadn't come here... you stay on the floor and you play with them and don't worry about doing the laundry or the washing up... which is good.'

Parent participant

'We had the little cards to put on the fridge and I would refer to those and think "oh yeah, I'll do that with her", and I got lots of leaflets about play we can do at home, and it just made me put aside everything else and just sit and know what to do with my baby... it was just very knowledgeable.'

Parent participant

They also described observing their children more, making eye contact and seeing their facial expression more, and being able to anticipate when their baby was getting tired or overwhelmed before they got upset.

'When he was learning to sit up and I was sitting behind him to give him support and they were saying "try to sit beside him so you can see what he's enjoying" and I'd never thought of it that way – things like that made a massive difference.'

Parent participant

Parents also described using the information from the course to challenge other perspectives, for example from their parents and partners.

'[It was] very up to date... my mum would say "I used to put you down and leave you to cry for half an hour." It gave me a bit of confidence to say to her, "No I'm doing it like this, this is quite nice." It's quite hard going from being someone's daughter to being a mum.'

Parent participant

Two parents identified that they started to read to their babies earlier than they would have done otherwise.

'And the books – that's something I hadn't twigged. Making sure you try to read five to ten minutes a day, and how many words they learn when you read to them. Because she's so little I wouldn't have done it but I did show her a book when I was here. I wouldn't have thought about doing that at an early age.'

Parent participant

One parent described speaking more slowly and clearly with repetition.

'Talk slower so they can pick it up. Read slowly and clearly and with repetition. You do notice them looking at your mouth. Mainly trying to expose them to as much language as you can.'

Parent participant

The parents highlighted the 'relax' session as being particularly enjoyable, and described ways of having a relaxing routine and relaxing themselves to spend more time with their baby.

‘Relax’ – it was reminding yourself to get into a routine. [It] was good to know that they need that system of relaxing. My partner would come back and do lots of exciting things and you’d say “you can’t do that, it’s relax time” – that reinforced it.’

Parent participant

‘You learnt how to relax with your baby... When you are at home you’re doing your jobs and you do sit down with them but you don’t necessarily sit down with them that often, there’s always something else to do. We learnt to take time and that the baby learnt from everything you do to them, just talking and even talking about things we do about the house.’

Parent participant

One parent said she felt the course had helped her to bond with her baby, something that hadn’t come easily.

‘I think the ‘cuddle’, and just talking... [baby] hasn’t liked cuddles for a long time but she actually comes up to me and says “ah” and it’s paid off I think, we’ve got a really nice bond with each other. So yeah it’s helped me that way.’

Parent participant

Changes observed by staff

The staff observed distinct changes in behaviour throughout the course and compared how parents behaved at the first meeting to their last meeting.

‘At the first session, parents sat with their babies on the mat in front of them or on their laps facing away, chatting to the other parents – all of them. They were putting toys in front of them but not stimulating them. By the third, fourth week, they were finding ways to prop them up, lying [them] in front of them or to the side. They were looking for different things to do.’

Staff member

‘We see it each week, as soon as they come out of the room they change what they do the second they come out. Like the positioning, being able to have that eye-to-eye connection, they’ll sit in a different place.’

Staff member

‘When they come out of the ‘respond’ one they immediately are sitting so they can see the baby’s face.’

Staff member

‘The last week we just stood back and watched and we were saying [to each other] “look at this, look at this.” We were in shock really. They were all interacting with their children and not each other. They were all totally absorbed in playing with them.’

Staff member

Staff reported seeing changes in individual parent-and-child interactions.

'The baby was very stiff and startled [at the start]. We were worried about her. When I held [her] I could feel the tension in her. The parent was over-doing things due their own tension and anxiousness. We calmed them down so by the end she was a different child. She wasn't reacting or playing [at the start]. By the end she was cuddling and playing, and mum was playing with her.'

Staff member

Staff also noticed that they were able to boost parents' confidence.

'What I find is really lovely with this is you can really boost up their confidence when you point out what they are doing really well. I had a dad in tears because he said "no one ever told me that I that I do anything well"... he was sitting where he could see her face and I said "what you're doing is absolutely perfect" and he just welled up and said "no one has ever said that.'"

Staff member

One example the staff gave was of a clingy child who eventually started to explore and play on her own.

'I had one mum whose child was clingy and cried quite a lot every time she tried to move. Just by sitting in front of her and making eye contact, that child stopped crying. And by the end she was

going off and exploring and the mum was amazed and I said "all you've done is changed your position and given that one-to-one full attention and it has made her feel safe and secure that you're there and you're not going to disappear.'"

Staff member

Staff gave another example of a parent who hadn't been cuddling or touching her child, putting her on her lap and reading her a story for the first time. The staff discussed how effective the approach could be for mothers with postnatal depression.

'[We] got some [participants] referred from the Wellbeing Team who had postnatal depression and it is surprisingly hard for some of them to hold and touch their baby. That's what we're really working on without being too pointed. You have to do it so carefully and get their trust. I say "I'm not here to teach you, just give some little hints and tips along the way." Not preaching at them.'

Staff member

Changes in staff practice

The staff reflected on how *Five to Thrive*, especially running the course, had changed their own practice. They reported drawing on the *Five to Thrive* messages when parents described what their babies were doing.

'They say "they want to do the same thing over and over again" and you can say "that's them building up their brain connections and

making that limbic system and the cortex bind together”.

Staff member

One staff member identified that it gave her confidence to talk to parents in a new way.

‘You’ve got the knowledge so you feel safer saying things to parents. Before you might think “well shall I say that, or is it just me.” The training backs up that it’s ok to say it.’

Staff member

They also said that *Five to Thrive* had led to further discussion with colleagues about the different programmes they deliver and challenged some aspects of them. For example, they had started to question whether it was appropriate to put a child on a ‘naughty step’ or use ‘time out’, as this may conflict with *Five to Thrive* messages about the ability of very young children to soothe themselves.

What worked

We asked staff and parents what they felt worked well on the course. The following features stood out:

Imaginative play space and comfortable environment

The workers were experienced play practitioners with access to a purpose-built play space. They planned which play resources to use carefully and thoughtfully, and created an imaginative, encouraging and safe play space. They used different play resources each week to reflect the discussion topics, and deliberately made the space interesting for parents as well as children. This effort was appreciated by the parents and was the first thing that was highlighted by one parent in the discussion.

‘All the stuff outside related to the five, so it was really good. I didn’t

expect it to be different like that. The amount of stuff they must have planned each week was amazing... Like the tent with the glow-in-the-dark things was really good.’

Parent participant

‘Their imagination and variety – you couldn’t believe the stuff. There was always something different. It was really impressive.’

Parent participant

‘Things they’d made – that was brilliant, the effort they had made.’

Parent participant

Parents particularly appreciated that the play resources were things that they could easily replicate at home, reinforcing the message that ‘anything you do counts’.

‘It was high-street stuff as well, so if your child enjoyed it, it didn’t cost a lot, you could go out and get it.’

Parent participant

Parents really appreciated the relaxed atmosphere. One mum who wouldn’t have attended the group if she hadn’t been persuaded by one of the workers said ‘you really got the feeling they wanted you there’ and cited the fact that name tags were provided. Parents described the group as ‘happy’, ‘fun’, ‘joyful’, ‘social’ and ‘informative’.

The staff members’ experience and respectful approach were also recognised by parents.

‘They’ve got their own kids, and are experienced doing it. You didn’t feel you were being told what to do, it wasn’t “do this, do that.”’

Parent participant

3. Seven-week course at Kendal West Children's Centre

'It was really knowledgeable and relaxed.'

Parent participant

The workers identified that being able to have the time to set up the play space was important, as well as being calm enough to deliver the training.

Small group size (eight parents)

Both staff and parents thought that the group was a good size (approximately eight participants), with enough people both for discussion and for bonding and friendship. Continuity – with the same people attending each week – was important and helped when building trust.

'This size, it works, they can bond as a group; there is space to spread out and enjoy everything. We know everyone's names, all the mums and babies, so they are happy for us to look after the babies.'

Staff member

The workers felt that training a group was better than a one-to-one approach, partly as the parents encouraged each other, which reinforced good practice.

Implementing ideas immediately

Having the play space and the parents and babies together meant that they could immediately implement ideas from the discussion.

'They had a little session with us in the back room, three or four at a time, and then we'd swap in and out and take photos and try and put into practice what they had just told us.'

Parent participant

The play workers were also able to reinforce the messages positively by using photos and modelling the practice.

'Then I could say to them "there, can you just see how he's watching you, he's copying you." And you can see the penny drop with them, especially with 'respond'. You can't get them to respond to you if you're sat there with the baby facing out.'

Staff member

Personalising the course

The personalisation of the course, with photos of the parents and babies integrated into flipcharts, was really appreciated by both parents and staff.

Mixed group

Having a mixed group of parents, some of whom had been referred to the group, worked well, with participants learning from each other and modelling good practice.

Learning journeys

The 'learning journeys' were popular with parents and were seen by staff as an incentive to participate. They were used to reinforce *Five to Thrive* messages and to spread them to other family members and friends.

'The 'learning journey' has been good fun. It's nice to look back at how much [your] baby has come on and good to show others, [like] her grandparents. It makes you think about the messages. [And I thought] "take a photo, evidence, quick to impress the [staff]."'

Parent participant

Building up a connection with parents

Building up a connection and trust with the parents was important. The introduction session helped, as play workers could get to know each parent and observe how they interact with their baby.

Peer support

The group setting helped reinforce the messages and activities, and also gave participants confidence. Several parents said it had encouraged them to go to other baby groups.

'[There's] not much around here, it's secluded. It was nice to meet new people. It gave me confidence to meet other people, because you do get scared to meet new people. It gets you confident to go to other groups – you hear that they are going, so you know there will be someone you know there.'

Parent participant

Summary of what worked at Kendal

- Imaginative play space and encouraging environment.
- Small group size (approximately eight parents).
- Use of a play space to bring the parents and children together, so they could immediately implement the discussion.
- Play workers reinforced the messages positively and modelled the practice.
- The trainer personalised the course by using photos of the parents and babies on the flipcharts.
- A mixed group of parents, including some targeted parents.

- 'Learning journey' books – an incentive to participate and a way to spread the message to family and others.
- Building up a connection and trust with parents.
- Peer support, enabling parents to share real-life parenting experiences.

Resources required

One worker developed the course by studying the original *Five to Thrive* materials and the e-learning module. She created one short session for each of the seven weeks, and produced materials like:

- flipcharts – which are reusable, but also personalised for each course
- covered books ('learning journeys')
- small laminated cards for the parents to take away.

The staff estimated that it took two days each week for two workers to run the course, including setting up the room, preparing for the session, clearing up, taking photos, printing off and selecting photos, and writing comments in the 'learning journeys'.

There was also some follow-up work, for example contacting parents who missed sessions to check whether they were ok. One worker felt that the time commitment was similar to other parenting courses, although they were working with fewer parents.

Case study: Sam

Sam joined the *Five to Thrive* course in Kendal when her daughter was around eight weeks old. Her daughter is her third child (her older children are both at primary school). Sam had decided not to go to any baby groups this time, as she had attended groups with her oldest and found them a bit 'cliquey'. One of the workers suggested that she went to the *Five to Thrive* group when she was at a baby clinic. At first she didn't know what to expect, and wasn't going to go. She wondered 'what am I letting myself in for?', especially as she only knew one other mum when she first went.

But she was really glad she attended. *'It was just brilliant, the people there were all new, it got me out of the house and talking.'* She liked the atmosphere – the fact that staff were welcoming and knew everyone's name. She felt that people 'wanted you there' rather than many other groups where you 'just fend for yourself'.

Sam said that one of the best things about the course was the different types of play activities available, which gave her new ideas.

'It was great, the different types of play. Messy [play] was lovely, I don't often do that at home... the gloop and ice block and the painting was a really good week. They made it all dark with different sensory lights and a dark tent so you could watch the lights. The babies loved it and we did too. They had five different areas to take your child – they loved it – and [you were] trying new things that you wouldn't think about at home. All the different things set out and it was lovely and warm.'

Sam also found the sessions informative and enjoyed getting ideas and hearing from other parents in the discussions, as well as having some time away from her baby.

'They took us out in the group with a white board and would show us and get ideas from us. That was nice. For example, how would you make your baby feel comfortable? It was nice to hear what others thought and they would look after your baby for five minutes, so you had five minutes out.'

Even though Sam had three children, she learnt a lot – particularly about different play ideas. It reminded her to stop and think about spending more time with her daughter, and helped her relax.

'I think sometimes you know it all but it's just a reminder, like these little cards on the fridge. Sometimes you get sidetracked with everyday life and you have to stop and think and read what they gave us and think "oh yeah, I'm going to make a brew and go and sit down and I'm going to play or give her a cuddle and have a nice little play time together."

That's how it helped quite a lot and just having a weekly reminder of it was nice.'

Sam felt that the sessions on how your baby is affected by cuddles were particularly interesting. The course helped her bond with her baby in a way that she had found harder with her older daughter.

'I think the 'cuddle', and just talking [was helpful]. With my first daughter I don't think I bonded with her straight away, and it was nice to try it with [baby] and try and get that bond.'

She also found that she talked more to her baby, for example talking about the weather and the scenery when they went for a walk and when cooking. The sessions reminded her to talk about what she's doing all the time.

Sam's partner and mother were both really interested in what she was doing and read the leaflets and 'learning journey'. Sam really appreciated the 'learning journey' too, which she used as a replacement for a baby book. She continued to complete it after the course ended up to her daughter's first birthday. *'You wrote what you wanted and they printed pictures off for you, which is nice because not everyone has a printer. It is nice to look back. They would write the odd thing in it to refer to.'*

Sam attends other baby groups now, which she wouldn't have gone to without having attended the *Five to Thrive* course and *'learnt to socialise again with other mums'*. The parents from the course have kept in touch and talk about trying to meet up.

Sam recommends the course, especially for single parents, who may feel isolated and find it hard to get out, and for first-time parents.

'I think it's very worthwhile. It's informative. It does get lonely stuck inside with a child. [The course] is the best thing to do... I can't recommend it enough really. I could have done with it years ago. I'd give it top marks. I think a lot of the other mums would too.'

4. Benchill Children's Centre

At Benchill Children's Centre in Wythenshawe, Manchester, staff have integrated *Five to Thrive* into nearly all aspects of practice. This included:

- displaying ***Five to Thrive*** messages in reception
- providing a bespoke **simple leaflet** about ***Five to Thrive at baby registration***
- **discussing *Five to Thrive* with parents** in 1:1 sessions, as well as modelling behaviour and reflecting back to parents
- bringing *Five to Thrive* concepts into **Stay and Play** sessions
- integrating *Five to Thrive* messages into **baby massage** practice, for example, spending five minutes relaxing at the start, teaching parents to pick up on cues, and emphasising eye contact and how babies respond to the different movements
- incorporating *Five to Thrive* into **supervision and group meetings**, and thereby encouraging conversations with parents. For example, in supervisions and team meetings, a manager or leader may say 'tell me about any *Five to Thrive* work you are doing'
- establishing an **evaluation** notice board for practitioners to monitor *Five to Thrive* practice examples.

Feedback from parents

For this research, a discussion was held with eight parents attending a baby massage group. Half the group had been attending for three to four months, the other half for several weeks. Two parents were nursery workers elsewhere before having children. Five had older children aged between two and 15, and three were there with their first baby. One mother and father both attended together.

Apart from one parent, who had been a volunteer working on *Five to Thrive* previously, the parents had experienced 'light exposure' to *Five to Thrive*. They had been given leaflets when they registered their baby and some messages were integrated into the baby massage sessions. They may have seen the display about *Five to Thrive* by reception at the centre.

Some said they had not heard of *Five to Thrive*. Two parents remembered being handed a leaflet and two said they would have put it straight in their baby bag without looking at it. Two said they had briefly looked but 'scooted' over it. One who read it recounted the concepts of 'respond, talk, play and cuddle' and fed back that her health visitor had commented about how she had been interacting with her baby:

'A lot of it is the common sense side of it – I understood all that bit... It's about making sure that you make time to play with them and show your affection and talk. It was a big thing when the health visitor came. She said "I could tell you're talking to her because of the way [baby] is responding." It's just covering all the aspects to help them learn... It's giving them affection like cuddles...'

Parent participant

Although one parent had been on a 'parent's survival course' with older children and one had been on an NCT course with an older baby, none of the participants had heard of *Five to Thrive* from other sources.

The *Five to Thrive* building blocks had not been explicitly worked through with the group. However, the parents still showed understanding of each building block and could describe their own actions relating to them.

	Activities as described by participants	Quote
Respond	Babbling; turn-taking when talking; comforting when sad; getting excited when the babies are excited.	<i>'When they are smiling and you feel excited with them, if they are sad comfort them – respond to whatever they are doing.'</i>
Cuddle	That's automatic; helps their emotions; skin-to-skin cuddles when trying to relax them to get them to sleep or when [they're] upset.	<i>'It is essential, my health visitor said you should do skin to skin because the baby gets the hormones off you and it makes them feel better.'</i>
Relax	You have to stay calm to keep your baby calm; bedtime routine; lie on the bed with baby for half an hour; avoid rushing to get chores done, stop stressing.	<i>'You have to stay calm to keep your baby calm. I found that out the hard way. I was really tense doing the bedtime routine: bath-bottle-bed. I now find I have half an hour with the baby lying on my bed while the bath is getting ready, it calms her right down and then I feel calm as well. Just on my bed lying next to her. It doesn't happen perfectly every night as my five year-old usually comes bouncing in, but I try!'</i> <i>'I try to get away from stressing about getting the washing done and I need to do the ironing – need to do this and that, it can just wait. If the tops are not ironed, I'll just wear one creased. Spending more time with him, I noticed that he is better now that I don't stress about other [things].'</i>
Play	Need to play; changing activities over the day; tummy time; building a tower; television; sounds.	<i>'There are all the toys around – and the learning toys. At her age she gets restless quite quick and you need to change things quite a lot. We got through the day with different things, putting her on the floor, things that she doesn't understand yet, building up a tower, sounds and I don't rely on it but there's the TV too – the colours, the sounds they do enjoy it.'</i>
Talk	Turn-taking; saying hello; mimicking; repetition.	<i>'I usually just mimic her, which I've been told helps. The last few days she's been saying hello but only because I've been saying it and really dragging it out. She now says it when we look out of the window and when people go past and say hello.'</i>

4. Benchill Children's Centre

Apart from the participant who was very familiar with *Five to Thrive*, none of the parents knew anything about baby brain development (including the two parents who had worked in a nursery), and none recognised the idea of 'attachment'.

Although few of the parents were explicitly aware of the different aspects of *Five to Thrive*, it was clear that they were applying some of its principles (as illustrated by the table above). It also seemed that some professionals were giving advice in keeping with *Five to Thrive*. For example, one parent reported a health visitor reinforcing the good practice of talking and responding (see page 21). Another example was given of a health visitor focusing on cuddling and responding:

'My health visitor is really nice because [the baby] hardly sleeps so she said to hold her as much as you can and cuddle her as much as you can, and let my other children cuddle her, it helps. "Forget everything else; just cuddle her because that's what she needs."

Parent participant

However, in the group discussion it became clear that parents were exposed to a range of conflicting advice, sometimes from professionals. This was mostly described in the context of very practical issues around feeding (including how to make up bottles, the kind of milk to use and weaning), sleeping and approaches to colic and reflux. The parents said this was frustrating and stressful, and that they ended up feeling like they should do what they thought was right.

'[You] shouldn't listen to anyone, just do what you think is right because everyone says something different and if you did everything everyone told you... you should do just what you believe.'

Parent participant

'If you do listen to everyone's advice... I did with my first and that's why I could never relax, as you're constantly thinking of what everyone said all day. This time I thought "I know what I need to do and I'll do it my way" and that's what I've been able to relax around.'

Parent participant

'They'd be having a nap and they'd go over by ten minutes and you're thinking "should I wake him to feed him or let him sleep?" and "what did that one say and what did this one say?"'

Parent participant

There were also some examples of parents receiving advice that went against *Five to Thrive* messages, as well as their instincts. One parent said that when she had her first child, some peers were following Gina Ford, who advocates a strict routine, and, by inference, not responding to a baby's needs.

'It also goes against – this might be controversial – the Gina Ford thing. Because when I was having my first that was really big and the big debate was whether you were going to do Gina Ford or not. The 'respond' bit of Five to Thrive really goes against that – the feeding on demand, not letting them cry it out goes against that strict routine... So [in a strict routine] if they are hungry half an hour earlier – tough, they have to wait, which went against my natural instinct, but it is interesting that the Five

to Thrive also talks against it – if the baby is hungry you feed them irrespective of what time it is.'

Parent participant

Another parent explained how she felt when other parents advocated the Gina Ford approach:

'I couldn't understand why you would do it. It went against what I felt emotionally and logically. I don't eat the same thing at the same time every day, so why should you expect your baby to go to sleep exactly the same time? I couldn't understand why anyone would feel that was the right way. I could see the advantages of knowing that your baby was going to sleep at a certain time, knowing that you have to feed at a certain time, but it didn't logically or emotionally square up.'

Parent participant

One described how conflicting advice can also cause confusion:

'When my oldest was tiny I got told by my mum and sister "you're giving him too much attention. He wants attention all the time because I was giving it to him". When I was in the supermarket he would cry as soon as I went away, so they said not to give him too much attention, but now [others] are saying give them all your attention.'

Parent participant

Parents' response to the messages

The parents didn't necessarily feel that the *Five to Thrive* messages were 'too obvious', as they felt some parents would not always know the importance of interacting with their children at a young age.

'When I first saw that [leaflet] and she was only just born, I thought why would anyone not do that anyway? But some don't.'

Parent participant

'Some parents just change and feed, change and feed, they don't want to give them attention.'

Parent participant

'I think for young parents – even though it sounds very basic – who want to spend time with their children, not everyone understands that you are supposed to do that. They might think that they're doing it wrong by playing with them.'

Parent participant

One parent who had read about *Five to Thrive* described how it could be integrated into daily life.

'One of the beautiful things about Five to Thrive is that it can be incorporated, you don't have to think "right now I'm going to do 20 minutes of this", like when you go to the gym. Every day it becomes your routine, as you're in the supermarket you're chatting to your baby. It's not an extra thing, just something that you bring into your life.'

Parent participant

Approach to attending a workshop

Many of the parents at Benchill had signed up to a future workshop based on *Five to Thrive*. When asked what their expectations were, they mostly described wanting to be in a group with other parents.

'It's nice to hear other parents' stories and not just being given loads of information. Having children the same age is really helpful.'

Parent participant

There was a strong sense that parents were more likely to learn from each other than from leaflets or health professionals. This was partly from a sense that professionals often had to go 'by the book' and did not necessarily understand the reality of parenting.

'It's better than having someone coming and leaving a pile of leaflets. My first lot of leaflets just piled up in the living room until she got to the next age and then went straight in the bin.'

Parent participant

'I've taken more information [from sessions] like today than I did from the health visitor.'

Parent participant

'If I hear that something works for [another parent] then I'd rather try that than what the health visitor who probably hasn't got children [says].'

Parent participant

'Here you get the reality of parenting, whereas the health visitors give you the theory of it and how it should be done.'

Parent participant

They felt it was useful to have parents of similar-aged babies in a group, but also a mixture of ages to get advice from those with older babies. It was also important to reassure new parents that it is ok to admit that parenting is hard.

'Don't be afraid to say how hard you are finding it as a new mum. Everyone makes out that it's going to be all really easy like the adverts.'

Parent participant

'With my first it wasn't like that at all. I wasn't depressed by any scale, but I found it a lot harder than I was expecting.'

Parent participant

5. Staff perspectives

This chapter draws on discussions with eight members of staff from both visits to Kendal and Manchester.

Feedback on *Five to Thrive* training and concept

The training was very popular, with staff describing it as *'inspiring'*, *'brilliant'*, and *'incredible'*, and stating that there was real enthusiasm for it within the teams. For many, the overall themes weren't new, but the science behind brain development was.

'[It was] absolutely brilliant, really inspiring. The trainer was just incredible, it was so interesting the whole day. It felt amazing.'

Staff member

'I found the training itself very interesting, the presentation was excellent. It created a real enthusiasm in the team, I felt very inspired.'

Staff member

'After being a nursery teacher for years, running crèches, and mother and toddler groups, and I've got two kids... now I've got it! I just got it from that one course.'

Staff member

Advantages of the *Five to Thrive* approach

The workers discussed the advantages of the *Five to Thrive* approach, especially in relation to other parenting approaches.

It used simple messages

'I like the way material is gathered together and it's more like a

building block than a subject as a whole that you just throw at people. Giving them a little bit at a time rather than overwhelming them with info.'

Staff member

It provided evidence to back up good practice

Workers saw *Five to Thrive* as providing evidence to back up good practice, so that they could explain why they were making certain suggestions.

'I liked the way it showed that what you were doing before was right. You now have evidence to back up what you are saying about talking and playing with babies, and letting them see your facial expressions, and naming feelings and cuddling them... it all fell into place.'

Staff member

It gave staff an opportunity to praise and reinforce good practice by parents

Five to Thrive was also seen as an opportunity to reinforce good practice and to demonstrate to parents that they are doing a good job.

'They liked getting praised, not just in the groups, but [in us] writing [it up]. Especially when they can take [the 'learning journey'] home and show the partners. "Hey you think I'm useless, just look at this."'

Staff member

Parents felt empowered

Workers also felt that it was empowering for parents, as they were being given the knowledge behind the messages, rather than being told what to do.

‘What I’ve realised with this and with other things we’re doing – parents really want to know why we are saying what we do. The fact that we can evidence it through Five to Thrive is a huge benefit because we can say “this will work” ‘til the cows come home but if... you have nothing there to actually say this does work... It’s in a really easy way for parents to grasp and take away with them.’

Staff member

Staff integrated the approach into the team’s overall ways of working

Some staff members also noted that they were using *Five to Thrive* in their interactions with each other.

‘I find Five to Thrive is being integrated into the way staff are working together... when you can see if someone is upset or needing help and they are responding to that need and listening to what they say.’

Staff member



Implementing *Five to Thrive* training

This paper demonstrates how the messages of *Five to Thrive* can be implemented into practitioners’ work with parents, and the advantages of the approach. Some staff members, however, fed back that it was quite difficult to translate the training into practice.

‘The training was really good and gave you lots of info but it was really hard to translate that into what we do.’

Staff member

Integrating *Five to Thrive* into Stay and Play – staff perspective

At both Benchill and Kendal Children Centres, staff have integrated *Five to Thrive* into Stay and Play settings.

At Stay and Play sessions, staff members traditionally run activities with the children, and parents tend to sit and talk to each other. Now, staff at both centres have started to work with parents to encourage them to play and interact with their children more. One approach is to have a short discussion about *Five to Thrive* with the whole group, but this is not always feasible with larger, more chaotic groups. Staff members felt it was more effective to go to small groups of parents in an opportunistic way to introduce the idea and encourage them to play.

Key learnings from staff about embedding *Five to Thrive* in Stay and Play include:

- Bringing *Five to Thrive* into Stay and Play can be good opportunity to rethink the aims of Stay and Play, and staff members' overall approach to the sessions.
- In larger Stay and Plays there may be options to work with smaller groups of parents sitting together.
- It can be more difficult to implement *Five to Thrive* with parents in a 'drop-in' setting due to inconsistent attendance and less focused attention.
- Universal Stay and Play settings offer opportunities to identify parents who may need additional support, without them feeling stigmatised.
- Workers can model ways of playing in groups.
- It would be useful to have a resource such as an 'elevator pitch', with parent-friendly literature, which parents can come back and talk about the following week.

Some staff members found it difficult to begin talking specifically about *Five to Thrive*, in particular when they were trying to open a conversation with parents – for example, when registering their babies. New parents are given lots of information and leaflets at registration, which can be quite overwhelming. Staff described feeling 'tongue-tied' when trying to discuss the messages with new parents, particularly as they can seem a bit too simple or patronising.

'In some ways [the messages] are too complicated, but it also feels quite patronising to say "did you know you need to cuddle and talk to your baby?" And actually if they'd had the training we've had they would totally get why you're saying it. But just on the face of it if you say "you need to do this." It feels like it's been over simplified to

the five blocks and that's all we say about it... It feels very patronising, "well done, you're cuddling your baby"... most parents would say they are doing all of [the building blocks] anyway, it does feel an awkward conversation to have.'

Staff member

'I have to say, I feel a bit tongue-tied, because to start a conversation with parents at the stage they are coming in and then to talk about theory is really hard – it didn't feel quite right. We developed a leaflet. I don't know whether it is being heard at baby registration, as they're so in the moment on that day.'

Staff member

5. Staff perspectives

Although some staff found it hard to open a conversation specifically about *Five to Thrive*, they found it easier to make positive comments about good practice when they saw it being demonstrated.

‘There are moments in baby registration where you can see them interacting with their babies and you can say “did you see how they are looking at you?”’

Staff member

‘I wouldn’t start off a conversation about Five to Thrive. I would just encourage their actions and how they are doing. I don’t know if it’s a bit off-putting saying “you’re doing Five to Thrive” but just praising the actions, the way the baby is looking at you... If I was just passing through the centre and seeing a parent doing it, I’d stop and talk but I wouldn’t mention the Five to Thrive.’

Staff member

‘I would like a leaflet for parents of about two sides, which you could introduce to parents in a busy Stay and Play and they could take away, read through and then talk about it the next session. Something really quick – less intense than the existing parent one.’

Staff member

Another member of staff had learnt how to just ‘slot it into the conversation’.

‘I felt comfortable in that Stay and Play and I hadn’t been there before but when they started to talk I could see how to bring Five to Thrive into the conversation... slotting it into the conversation.’

Staff member

One staff member came across language barriers for a parent who she thought would have benefited from *Five to Thrive*.

‘I knew a mum who was struggling and finding the attachment really difficult. [I wanted] to be able to say “I know it’s really difficult, but these are the things that are the benefits for the baby and hopefully the benefits for you.” She was Polish and communicating with her in English was hard and I think [Five to Thrive] would have been completely lost, which is a shame.’

Staff member

Challenges of implementing *Five to Thrive*

- Some practitioners found it hard to discuss the *Five to Thrive* messages with parents – they struggled to ‘open the conversation’ and became ‘tongue-tied’.
- Some felt the key messages were ‘a bit patronising’. As most people would think they were doing the five activities, discussing them would imply they were in some way inadequate.
- A few felt the brain development aspect was too complex to introduce to people when they had young babies.
- Practitioners needed to ‘work through’ the approach and devise a course themselves to feel really confident talking to parents about it.
- Even some of those working with *Five to Thrive* routinely felt anxious about presenting it or having discussions with parents.

Some settings are harder than others:

- Stay and Play – too chaotic to present the information.
- Baby registration – too much information for parents at once (leaflets remain unread in their baby bag).
- Settings where parents drop off children and are in too much of a hurry to stop and discuss.



6. Conclusions

This report is based on a relatively small amount of fieldwork with parents and staff at Barnardo's Children's Centres in Kendal and Benchill. The parents at Kendal had experience of a specific *Five to Thrive* course, while those at Benchill experienced 'light touch' *Five to Thrive*. The staff had all attended *Five to Thrive* training and some were directly engaged with running *Five to Thrive* activities.

This research has highlighted the way *Five to Thrive* can be adapted and used directly with parents. The feedback from both staff and parents about the seven-week course in Kendal is very positive and shows, both through parents' self-reflection, staff and the evaluator's own observations, the benefits that this approach can have.

Parents at Kendal reported responding to, talking to, reading to and playing with their babies more, and at least one parent recognised that it helped her bond with her baby. In this context, the advantages of the *Five to Thrive* approach included the simple nature of the messages and that it provided evidence to back up good practice. *Five to Thrive* provided an opportunity to praise and reinforce good practice by parents and felt empowering to parents.

The Kendal course was also successful because of the skilled and imaginative way it was developed, the welcoming atmosphere, the peer support element and the ability of staff to reinforce the messages through modelling and encouragement. There are ways of monitoring this kind of interaction between parents and young children that could be applied more systematically, although there are still challenges in attributing change specifically to interventions developed from this approach.

Embedding *Five to Thrive* in services, however, is wider than developing a time-limited intervention. At Benchill, *Five to Thrive* was being developed as the underpinning ideology on which to embed change in practice across all of the centre's activity. Although it is more difficult to capture the value of embedding principles in this way,

feedback from parents showed that many of the *Five to Thrive* ideas were being integrated in their care of their babies and, for a few, this could be directly traced back to information leaflets they had received.

The discussions with parents also identified the importance of peer learning and interaction, and, in some cases, a general lack of confidence in an 'expert view'. This has implications for how the *Five to Thrive* messages are disseminated. Group work with other parents can also provide opportunities to observe each other, reinforce messages, model behaviour and provide ongoing mutual support.

The staff members consulted at Benchill were enthusiastic about *Five to Thrive*. However, nearly all fed back that it was challenging to apply the approach in their work directly. Several stated that it was hard to discuss the *Five to Thrive* messages with parents – on the one hand feeling that the messages are so simple that it could appear patronising, and yet on the other, that the brain development aspect is too complex to explain easily and with confidence.

In conclusion, there is evidence that the approaches taken at Kendal and Benchill to integrating *Five to Thrive* into services both have value to parents. They can increase parents' knowledge and understanding of how they can best support their child's emotional development, and build their confidence in their ability to meet their child's nurture needs. However, there is key learning around ensuring that staff members feel enabled to support parents, by encouraging them to reflect on information they are given and through recognising and praising positive interactions.

References

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