



Attachment, Bonding and Communication Parent Infant Partnership (ABC PiP)

Four Years Learning Report: *It's All About Relationships*



South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust

Believe in
children
Barnardo's
Northern Ireland



Supported by

Parent-Infant
FOUNDATION



Foreword	3
What is Infant Mental Health?	4
Northern Ireland Policy on Infant Mental Health	5
About Specialised Parent-Infant Relationship Teams	6
About ABC PiP	7
Service Delivery	8
The ABC PiP Ecosystem	9
Building capacity in the workforce	10
Systems Change	11
Understanding Our Referrals	12
ABC PiP Service Delivery Report Card	13
Measuring Outcomes	14
Capacity Building Statistics	16
Capacity Building Stories	17
Necessity & Innovation:	
Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic	18
Co-production, Voice and Influence	19
ABC PiP Parents' Stories	20
What's Next for ABC PiP?	22
Let's Talk!	23





Foreword

Barnardo's, South Eastern HSC Trust and Tiny Life are proud to celebrate four years of the Attachment, Bonding and Communication Parent-Infant Partnership (ABC PiP).

We know that a loving, responsive parent-infant relationship during pregnancy and the early years can lay the foundations for life-long health, wellbeing and positive outcomes. We also know that life stresses, mental health, poverty and negative experiences during childhood, pregnancy or birth can sometimes make attachment, bonding and communication with your baby more difficult.

That's why we're supporting parents and professionals to understand and improve infant mental health and babies' social and emotional development in the first 1001 days of life.

It's the very best investment we can make in helping children and their families get the best start in life and be stronger from the start.

In this report, we invite you to share in our learning journey and to join our conversation about the future of specialist parent-infant services in Northern Ireland.

Julie Kilpatrick

Assistant Director,
Children & Young
People's Healthcare

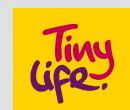


South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust

Michele Janes
Director



Alison McNulty
Chief Executive Officer



24 May 2023

What is Infant Mental Health?



Infant mental health (IMH) describes the social and emotional wellbeing and development of children in the earliest years of life. It reflects whether babies and young children have the secure, responsive relationships that they need to thrive.

Why does it matter so much?

Improving long-term outcomes for the whole population begins with ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life, with a focus on ensuring that children who are the most vulnerable and at risk are especially supported.

A wide body of evidence now acknowledges the link between adversity in infancy and longer term developmental issues. Parent infant relationships during the first 1001 days of a child's life are crucial in shaping their development and future outcomes. During this time infants are developing important brain connections that will influence their emotional, social and cognitive functioning throughout their lives. The quality of the parent-infant relationship is central to this development.

Many factors can impact negatively on the parent-infant relationship. Parental stress related to poverty, poor housing, the cost of living, or parents' own negative or traumatic experiences in childhood, pregnancy or birth can resurface. Domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and serious mental health conditions have a particularly high impact on parent-infant relationships.

Investing in and supporting the parent-infant relationship during pregnancy and in the first three years of life, particularly for children growing up in poverty and their parents, improves the likelihood of lifelong health and wellbeing. A strong parent-infant relationship acts as the foundation for improved education, social and economic outcomes. Investing in parent-infant relationships is also a wise investment.



"The period from pregnancy to age three is when children are most susceptible to environmental influences. Investing in this period is one of the most efficient and effective ways to help eliminate extreme poverty and inequality, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital for economies to diversify and grow."

World Health Organization, United Nations Children's Fund, World Bank Group

Northern Ireland Policy on Infant Mental Health

The Public Health Agency's 'Supporting the best start in life: Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland (2016)' has been seminal in promoting infant emotional wellbeing as a public health priority in Northern Ireland. The framework notes the commitment by the Public Health Agency, Health & Social Care Board and Trusts, as well as academic, research, voluntary and community organisations, to improve interventions from the ante-natal period through to children aged three years old.

In 2019, the South Eastern HSC Trust launched its own Infant Mental Health Strategy and Action Plan to realise these ambitions at a local level through service delivery, capacity building and a review of the wider systems impacting on babies and their families.

The Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy (2021–31) includes an important commitment to ensuring that *"infants' mental health is on the agenda, and that the needs of children under three are included in the development of mental health services and in the delivery of CAMHS."*

Much has changed, for the better, in the policy landscape over the last decade.

However, at the time of publication, Northern Ireland has been without a functioning Executive for over a year.

Progress on the implementation of the Mental Health Strategy is significantly stalled. The Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012–2018 has not been updated or replaced, despite significant changes in demographics, workforce and context of maternity care. Our health system is under unprecedented pressures. The impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown continue to be felt and the cost-of-living crisis is affecting more families than ever before.

The imperative for action has arguably never been greater.

Babies cannot wait.



About Specialised Parent-Infant Relationship Teams

The first 1001 days, from conception to the age of two, offers unique opportunities and challenges. Mental health services for babies and toddlers look different from those for older children.

Specialised parent-infant relationship teams are multi-disciplinary teams of professionals, with expertise in supporting and strengthening the important relationships between babies and their parents or carers. Parent-infant relationship teams include at least one psychologist or psychotherapist with expertise in parent-infant relationships.

Parent-infant relationship teams can help parents to recognise and address their own needs, build on existing parenting strengths and develop new capacities to provide the sensitive, responsive and appropriate care that babies need to thrive. Specialist therapeutic work can help families experiencing severe, complex or enduring

relational difficulties where children's emotional wellbeing and development is particularly at risk. They can help address patterns of relating, rooted in the legacy of the parent's earlier childhood or parenting experiences, especially when such experiences have been traumatic.

There is some overlap between parents and carers who need specialised parent-infant services, and those who need perinatal mental health services.

Perinatal mental health services provide treatment and support for mothers and their families during pregnancy and/or the first year of their baby's life. This includes mothers who have a pre-existing mental illness and require specialist perinatal or postnatal monitoring and support.

Collaboration is essential but the two services provide distinct support. Both are needed.



What?

Multi-disciplinary teams with expertise in supporting & strengthening relationships between babies and their parents or carers. There are 45 specialised teams across the UK, with more emerging.



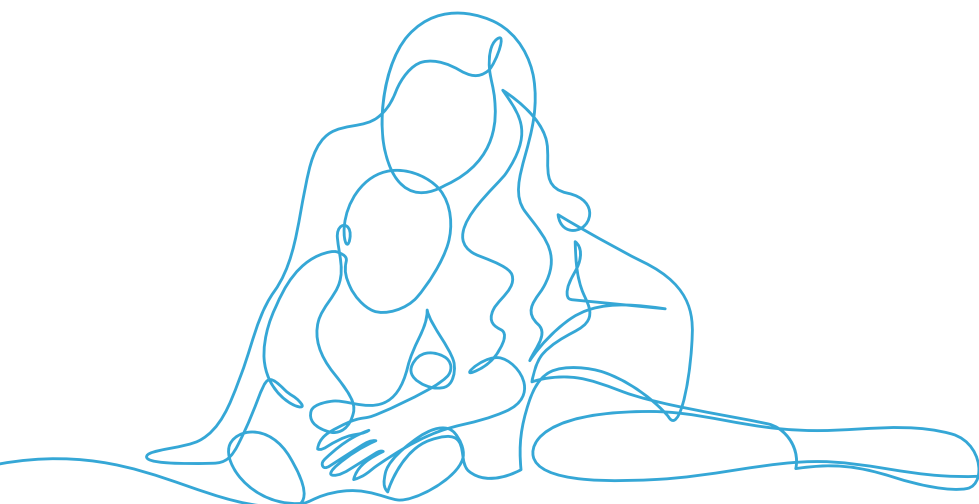
How?

Through two-tier activity: Acting as expert advisors and champions while also offering direct clinical and practical support to families.



Why?

Babies' brains are shaped by the interactions they have with their parents. Supporting these relationships is skilled work that requires specialist expertise in child development.



"These teams work at multiple levels; They are expert advisors and champions for all parent-infant relationships, driving change across their local systems and empowering professionals to turn families' lives around."

(Rare Jewels Report, Parent Infant Foundation, 2019)

About ABC PIP

The Attachment, Bonding & Communication Parent Infant Partnership (ABC PiP) is a Specialised Parent-Infant Relationship Team, based in Ballygowan. The team deliver 1:1 interventions to families across the South Eastern HSC Trust area, within the family home. Parents and infants can also engage in a range of groups delivered by the team.

Our aim is to enhance the life opportunities and outcomes of infants and their families by improving parent-infant relationships and creating stronger bonds and attachment in the First 1001 Days.

We are one of two specialised parent-infant relationship teams in Northern Ireland.

The team is currently made up of:

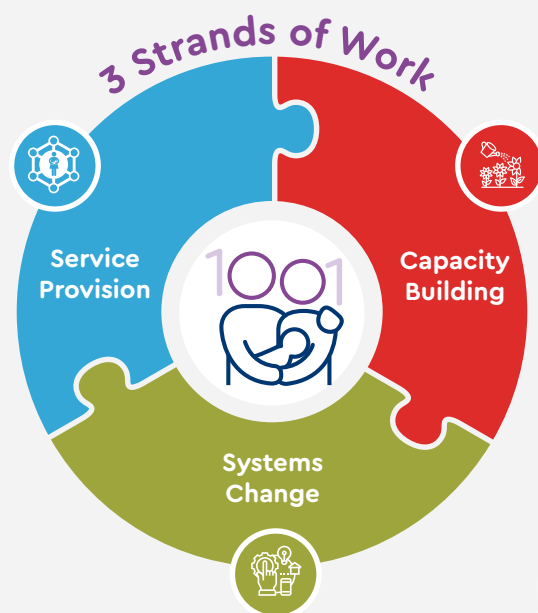
- Clinical Lead (Child & Adolescent Psychotherapist)
- Infant Mental Health Coordinator
- Children's Service Manager
- Specialist & IMH Key Workers
- Administrators

The service has been developed through a strategic partnership between Barnardo's NI, South Eastern HSC Trust and Tiny Life with support from the Parent-Infant Foundation.

Barnardo's NI and South Eastern HSC Trust are joint funders of the Partnership and staff from both organisations deliver our direct services to families at Tier 1 and Tier 2 respectively.

Tiny Life provide expertise to the partnership in relation to parents and babies who are affected by prematurity and traumatic pregnancy or birth. These circumstances can create a unique set of challenges for establishing parent-infant relationships, maintaining whole family mental health and building trusted engagement with service providers.

Staff from our strategic partners work holistically, as one multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral team, to deliver three strands of work: a direct parent-infant service for families; training and support for other professionals; and engagement with the wider systems in which babies and their families receive services.



Service Delivery

We offer a specialist infant mental health service for families experiencing difficulties and requiring direct support and intervention.

The majority of direct therapeutic support is delivered in people's homes to minimise any barriers to uptake. This makes the service accessible to families who feel unable to attend community supports at the time of referral, due to the difficulties they are experiencing in coping with life and parenting, lack of provision of community services in their area or stigma associated with mental health.

Two levels of support are available, and families referred to the service can receive a range of interventions during their time with us. These include:

- Tier 1 support for parents experiencing issues, such as anxiety and depression, which are impacting on parenting and the infant's social & emotional development, but who have some other positive coping skills or resources available to them.
- Tier 2 support for families with more complex difficulties, where parenting is significantly impacted by parental wellbeing or stress (e.g. parents with high anxiety and low mood) or by complex trauma history (e.g. parents who are care experienced).

We also help families who are engaged with us to address problems such as poverty, cost-of-living, lack of social networks or sense of belonging by providing them with practical supports, access to group work and linkage to wider community supports where these exist.

Collaboration and communication with other professionals and services – including Health Visitors, Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Team, Sure Start, New Parent Programme for first time mums and the Parent Infant Programme – enables us to agree the 'best fit' for each family and to escalate or de-escalate service delivery as required.

In this way, we can help ensure that every family receives the right support, at the right time, in the right place.



What?

A preventative service, embedded within the South Eastern HSC Trust, promoting healthy relationships for babies by offering early & effective intervention to those most at risk



How?

Parent-Infant Psychotherapy; Community Resiliency Model (CRM)[®]; Video Interactive Guidance; Solihull Approach; Five-to-Thrive; Infant Massage; Sleep Scotland; Mellow Parenting; Help Kids Talk.



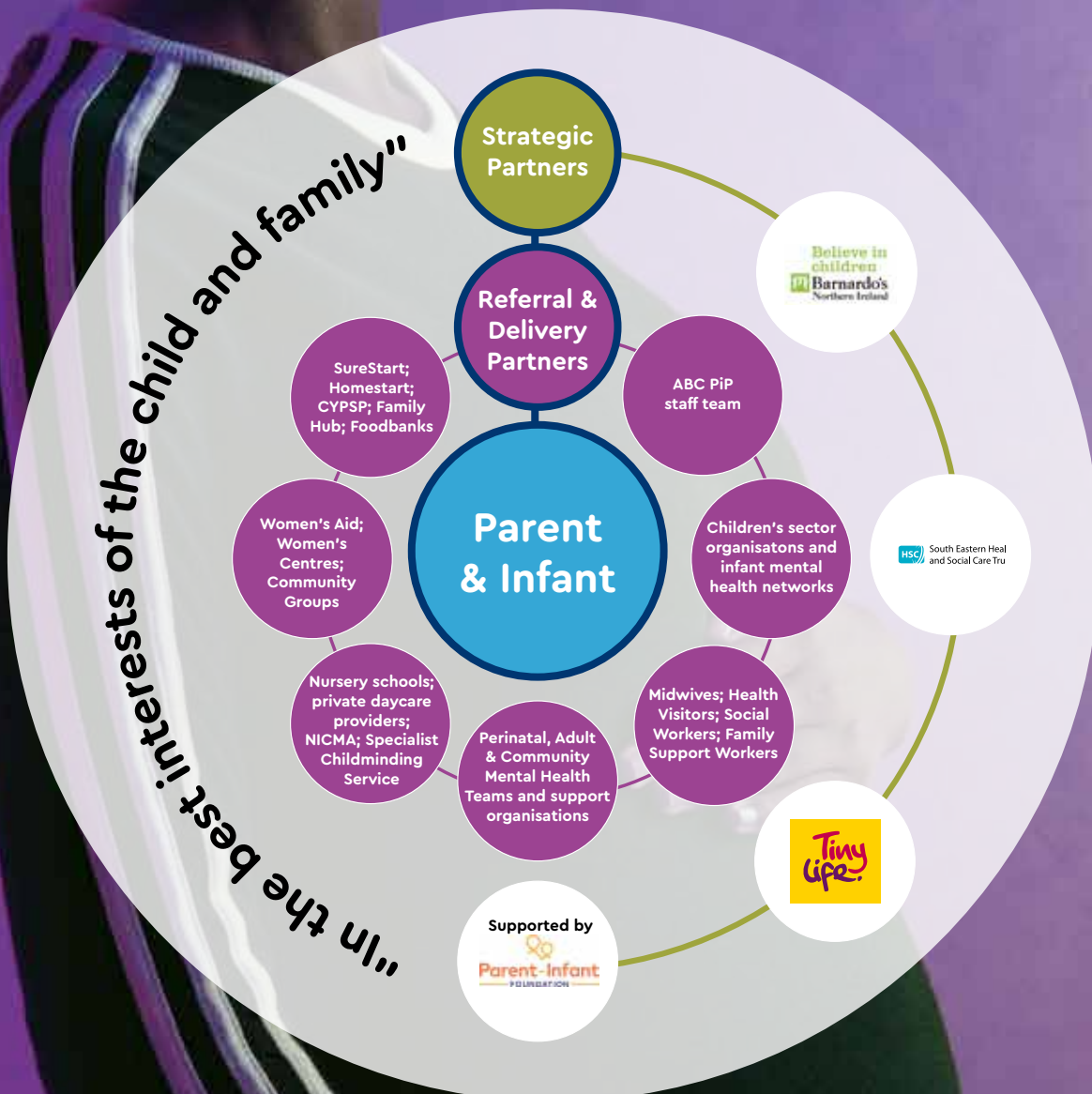
Why?

Prevalence of parental anxiety & depression (Tier 1) and parental mental health or complex trauma history (Tier 2).

The ABC PiP Ecosystem

They say it takes a village to raise a child.

The ABC PiP team, our referral, delivery and strategic partners, and the myriad of agencies in our families' wider system journeys concur!



Building capacity in the workforce

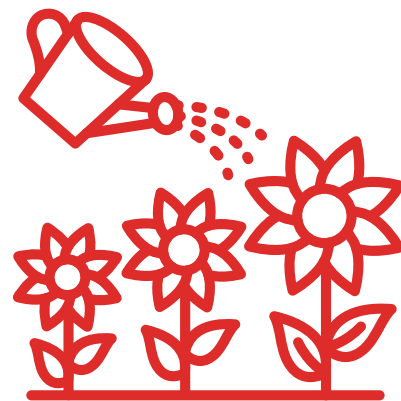
Our aim is to contribute to the continuous development of a Northern Ireland workforce which is sensitive to the specific and unique social and emotional developmental needs of infants and considers infant mental health to be 'everybody's business'.

We use our expertise to help the local workforce understand and support all parent-infant relationships, identify issues where they occur and take the appropriate action.

We work to ensure the practitioners with the biggest reach to impact infant wellbeing are aware of best practice, have access to the best quality information and interventions and are consistent in key messages delivered to families.

Our education, training and support offer includes content on:

- Bonding and attachment
- Baby brain development
- Trauma & resilience
- Speech, language and communication



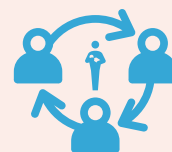
What?

Encouraging and enabling all professions working with families to support relationships and identify infant mental health needs.



How?

Education, training, consultation and support for professionals and parents.



Why?

Infant Mental Health, like maternal mental health, is everyone's business. Many professions working with families do not have child development backgrounds or training.

Systems Change

We are driving change for infants and their families by continually reviewing and constructively engaging with local, regional and national systems related to infant mental health, maternal and perinatal mental health.

Our aim is to influence a system change in the best interests of the most vulnerable families, ensuring their relationships, opportunities and outcomes are improved through early intervention and adequate resourcing so that fewer need high intensity, specialist interventions across their lifetime.

We deliver on this core aim through collaboration and influencing at local, regional and national levels, encouraging and supporting commissioners, referral and delivery partners to understand and align with our agenda for change.

We also represent infants and their families through a range of networks. Through these networks, we have contributed our expertise and practice learning to affect positive change including successfully advocating for the explicit inclusion of infants in the Northern Ireland Mental Health Strategy 2021–2031 and influencing the refresh of the Northern Ireland Infant Mental Health Framework.

We are represented on the Public Health Agency's Regional Infant Mental Health Implementation Group, Northern Ireland Association for Infant Mental Health (AIMH NI) executive, and the newly formed Stronger From the Start Infant Mental Health Alliance.



"The NI Mental Health Strategy 2021–31 includes a commitment to ensure that the needs of infants are met in mental health services."

In Scotland the CAMHS model includes Child and Adolescent Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists supporting the clinical practice of CAMHS staff providing early intervention and case work with parents with 0–3's to offset risks of potential later childhood and adolescent mental illness.

Complementary options in Northern Ireland, resources permitting, could be consideration of investment in Multi-Disciplinary Teams or Parent-Infant Teams with specific referral pathways for parents needing support with and for 0–3's.

Exploring the learning, successes and outcomes of the ABC PiP Partnership and other emerging parent-infant projects is very important and has the potential to inform future service design."

**Maurice Meehan,
Head of Health and Social Wellbeing
Improvement & Chair of Regional Infant Mental
Health Implementation Group,
Public Health Agency.**



What?

- Engagement, education and active participation in policy & practice networks.
- Expert input to commissioning groups, research initiatives, conferences and consultations.
- Representation on regional and local infant mental health groups.



How?

- Modelling the 'possible'; membership & influencing of relevant groups and networks; political engagement; policy responses.



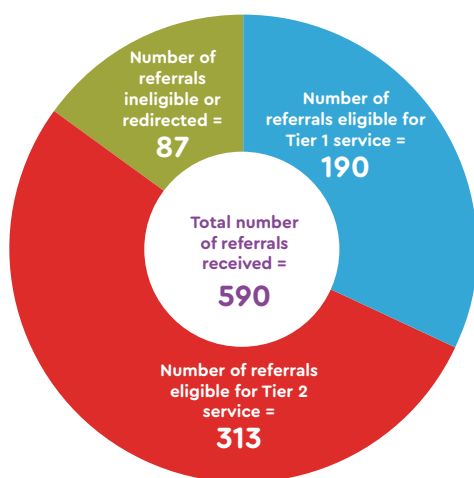
Why?

- Babies and their families cannot benefit from interventions they do not receive. Societal benefits require access to relationship-based services including, but also beyond, ABC PiP.

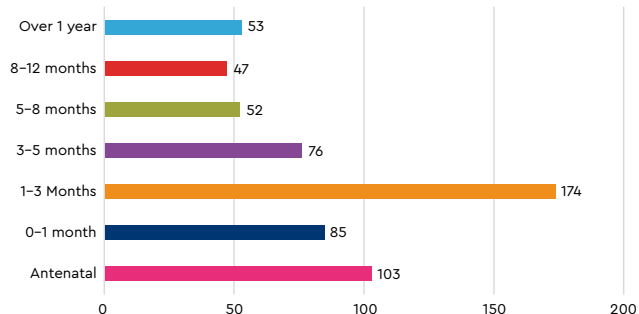
Understanding Our Referrals

All statistics January 2019-December 2022 unless otherwise stated.

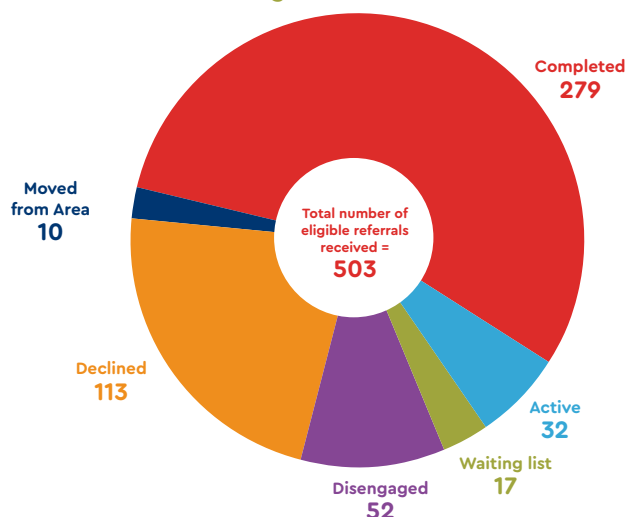
Incoming Referrals



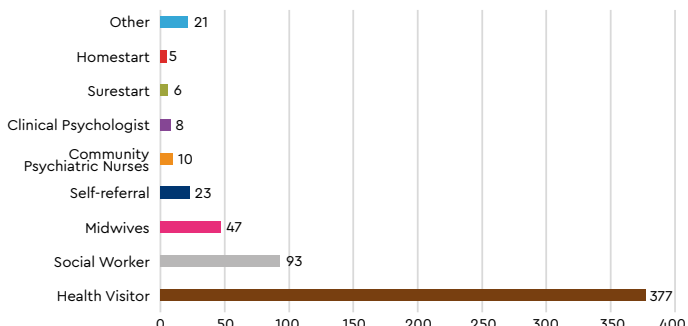
Breakdown by Age of Infant at Time of Referral



Eligible Referrals



Breakdown of referrers



"ABC PIP is such a valuable service for our parents, infants and families. It is person centred and all of the families I have referred have talked positively about the service."

Communication is excellent whether a referral is accepted or not and, importantly, when the service engagement ends.

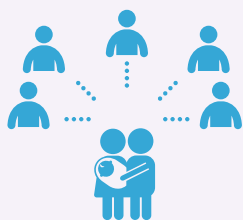
Maternal mental health is improved, clients talk about strategies they use to manage periods of low mood and or anxiety. Parents definitely appear more confident and in tune with their child."

Health Visitor

ABC PiP Service Delivery Report Card

January 2019 – December 2022

How much did we do?



503

families
offered
services



279

families
completed 1:1
interventions



166

families completed
group work
interventions

How well did we do it?*

*125 families completed final feedback forms



98%

of families would
recommend the
service to others



88%

Felt the service made
their situation *much*
better



12%

Felt the service made
their situation *a little*
better

Is anyone better off?



84%

of parents felt their
relationship with their
baby improved a lot



10%

felt the relationship
with their baby
improved a little



6%

felt the relationship
with their baby stayed
the same

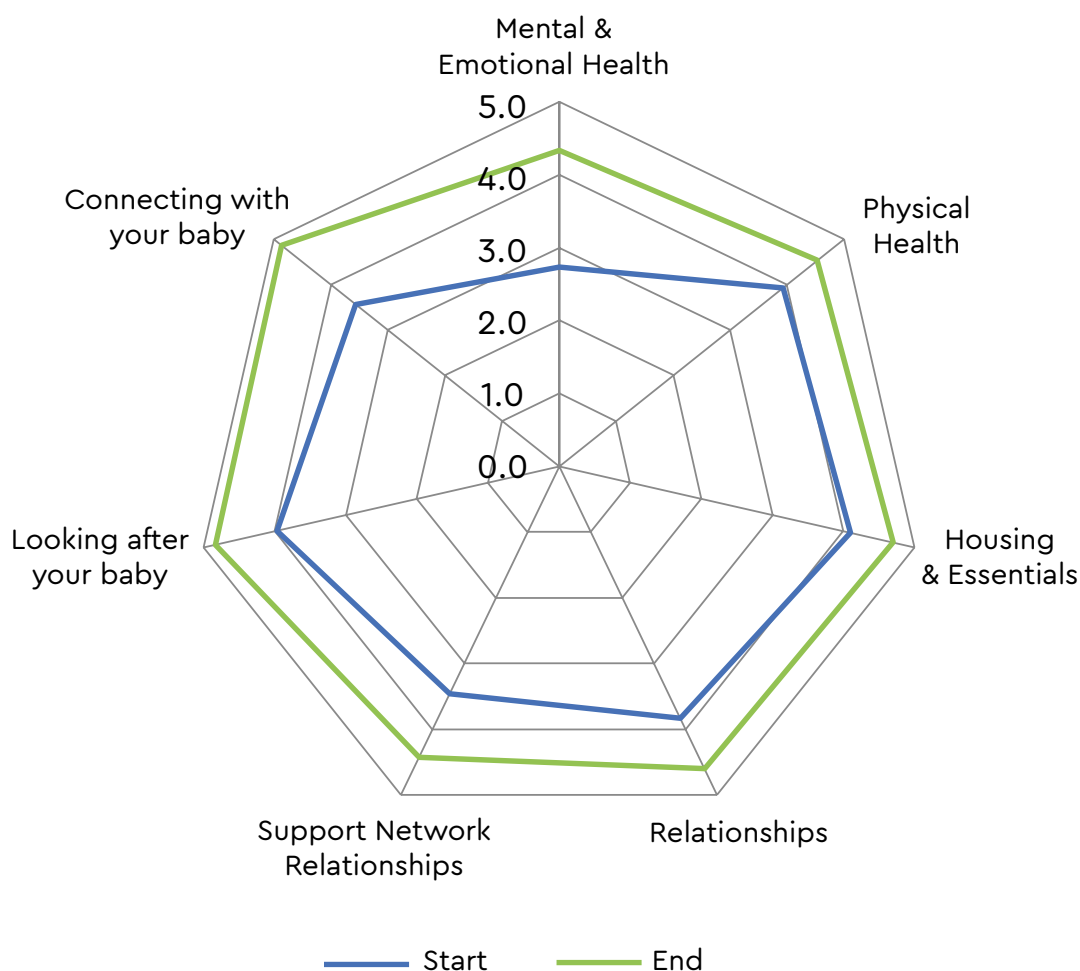
Measuring Outcomes

Finding the 'right' outcomes measurements for use in specialist parent-infant relationship teams continues to be the subject of practice and academic reviews.

To date, we have found both the Parent Baby Star and the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale to be helpful in supporting parents to chart and understand the factors impacting on their wellbeing and caregiving capacities.

We continue to review our use of standardised measures.

Baby Star – Average Scores (January 2019 to December 2022)

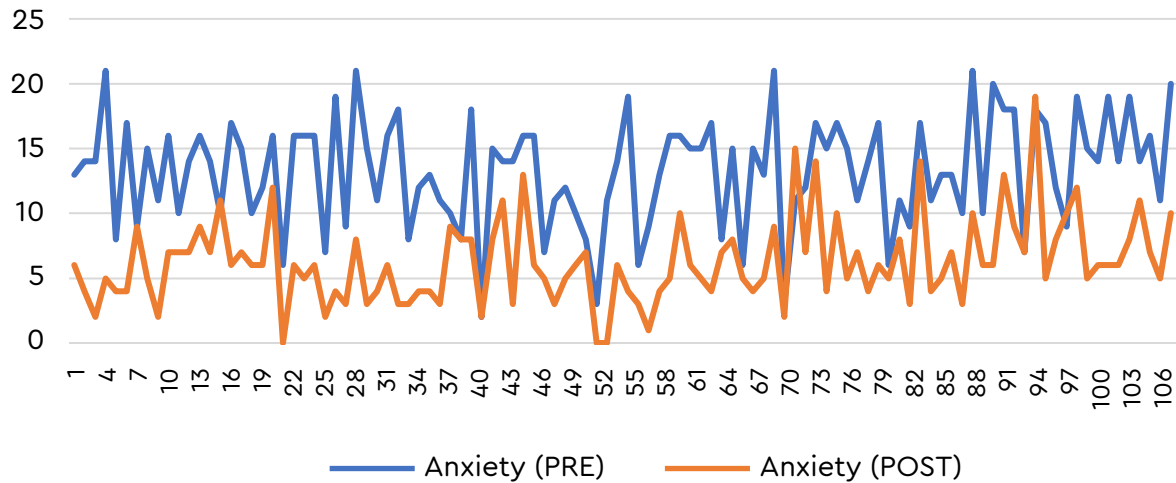


Positive shifts in Mental and Emotional Health and Connecting with your Baby were most marked following service intervention.

Results based on 54 completed Baby Star evaluations.



HADS Anxiety Scores

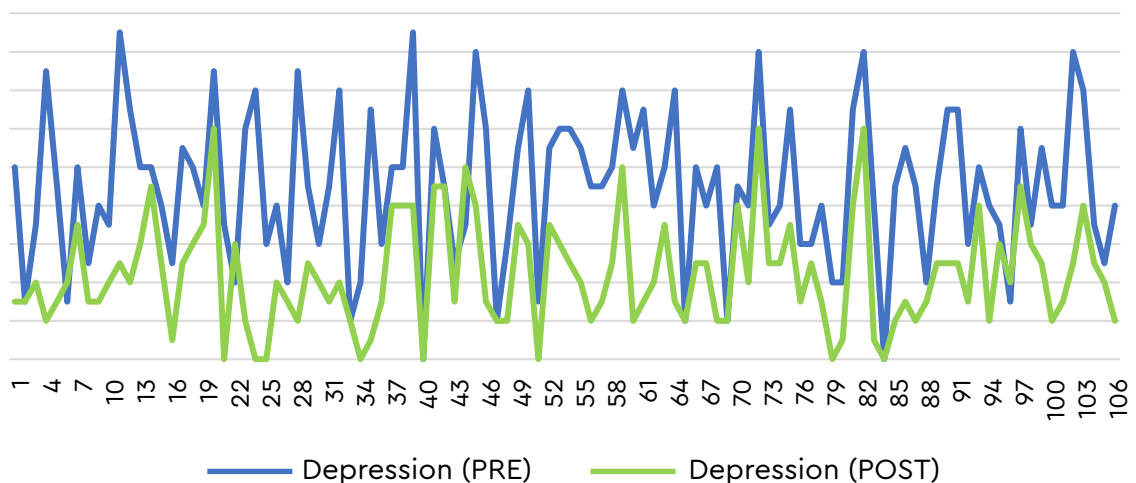


The average reported score for anxiety prior to intervention was 13 which reduced to 6 on discharge.

Data was collected from 106 parents.



HADS Depression Scores

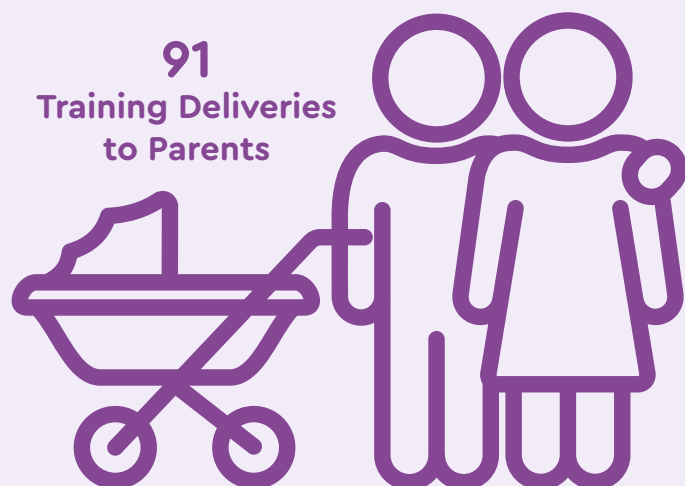


The average reported score for depression prior to intervention was 9, which reduced to average of 4 at discharge.

Data was collected from 106 parents.



Capacity Building Statistics



Capacity Building Stories

"The training that ABC PiP has provided to the South Eastern HSC Trust's specialist childminding and mentoring service has been invaluable. It has included Solihull Approach, 5 to Thrive, Baby Massage and Community Resilience Model training, all of which are now routinely incorporated into the support we provide families."

Parents have welcomed and implemented the practical tools that these approaches provide and have discussed the benefits for their children and for themselves."

**Senior Social Worker,
South Eastern HSC Trust**

"Sure Start and ABC PiP work collaboratively to support families. The ABC PiP team are passionate about their work and the families we have in common speak about them in glowing terms."

My team have availed of Five to Thrive & Community Resilience Model training, both of which have enhanced their practice. I feel very fortunate to have ABC PiP available as a resource in the South Eastern HSC Trust area."

SureStart Manager

"Through our involvement in ABC PiP, TinyLife have adopted a 'Five to Thrive' approach and tailored programme specifically for premature babies and their families."

Families say they enjoy the opportunity to socialise with similar parents who have had a premature baby and that learning through play has helped them to understand, engage with and respond to their own and baby's emotions."

Our team leaders too report feeling empowered both by their training and the opportunity to apply their learning practically in a way that promotes healthy brain development and positive connections between caregiver and baby."

**Tiny Life Family
Support Manager**



Necessity & Innovation: Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic



The Covid-19 pandemic impacted on all aspects of our work at ABC PiP. Our families experienced higher levels of anxiety and stress with social isolation and reduced access to networks of support. Our team, like many others, juggled professional and caring responsibilities and were impacted by ill health and bereavement. Our operational context changed overnight and so, by necessity and innovation, did we.

Despite huge challenges, we maintained face-to-face work, with appropriate distancing and use of PPE, for our most vulnerable, high-risk families. We accepted referrals for more complex issues than ever and held caseloads for longer as many of the pathways for discharge or signposting were not open to families. When restrictions allowed, we

innovated service delivery to include outdoor group work in direct response to families reporting loneliness, social isolation and the knock-on impact on mood and caregiving. Capacity building moved online and we accepted the reduction in uptake as a consequence of both redeployment and furlough. We realigned our system change work to increase the 'voice and influence' of parents, supporting parental contribution to the influential 'Babies in Lockdown' report, engagement with the Conception to Age Two: First 1001 Days APPG at Westminster and media coverage on both radio and television to highlight parent-infant experiences of the pandemic and arising needs.

The impacts of, and complexity of needs arising from, the pandemic continue to be felt by families and services alike. In response to parental feedback, we've made group work – including our outdoor experiences – part of our core offer.



"This service helped me recover from my traumatic covid pregnancy and birth and to gain a sense of perspective. The support helped me understand my anxiety and learn to manage it healthily which has allowed me to bond more with my baby and feel more confident to meet other mothers."

Group Work 2020–2022



**Walkie Talkies –
6 groups with
82
families**



**Tree Babies –
4 groups with
30
families**



**Mellow Bump –
6 groups with
36
families**



**Baby Massage –
1 group with
7
families**



**Baby Sensory –
1 group with
5
families**

Co-production, Voice and Influence

We're committed to supporting and enabling parents to have a say in decisions that affect them and their young children. Our aim is to embed their experience and expertise in the design, delivery and management of services and to lead by example in our own work. That's why we dedicate staff time and resource to focus on co-production activity within ABC PiP, shaping and developing all that we do.

Parents are working with us on the design of parenting programmes and activities which are informed by their own journeys in nurturing and repairing parent-infant relationships. We're incorporating parental voice, anonymised where necessary, into our training outputs,

conference presentations and systems change work, as well as into external publications and media work. We recently supported parents to engage with the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland, led by Professor Ray Jones, to ensure the voices of parents of infants are included. Barnardo's has also worked with practitioners throughout its services in Northern Ireland to ensure their experiences and expertise are considered as part of this review.

This is skilled work and relies on the creativity, flexibility and playfulness of our expert staff in working with parents and infants in ways that work for them and in acting on the views they share. It's the most joyful of all our challenges!


"Voice, influence and co-production is rarely a linear activity. It's not about getting all the ducks in order. It's going to the pond and splashing about. That can be uncomfortable, often revealing blind spots in how organisations do things."

Voice & Influence Worker

"I'm not a tick box exercise. Women want sensitive conversations not checklists. In ABC PiP it felt like a gentler way, a nurturing conversation, a warmth. They're skilled that way."

Mum involved in Voice & Influence workshops



A woman with blonde hair, wearing a light-colored shirt, is holding her 8-month-old daughter high in the air. The baby is wearing a green shirt and dark shorts, and is smiling. They are outdoors in a park-like setting with trees and grass in the background. A blue speech bubble and a yellow speech bubble contain text testimonials.

ABC PiP Parents' Stories

"I am a first time mummy to my gorgeous 8 month old daughter. My health visitor referred me to ABC PiP due to health issues which were affecting my relationship with my baby.

ABC PiP were quick to get in touch and keen to help. A member of the team came out to me and she was just great with myself and my daughter. She helped me to understand the brain development of my child and made it easy to understand. She also taught me baby massage that I enjoyed doing with my daughter, who loved it so much she wiggled all over the place!

I feel that I have become a better parent and I'm able to bond a lot better with my daughter. I have also learned to recognise the areas I am strongest with and improve on areas I would struggle with."

"I attended the ABC PIP online Mellow Bumps programme during my pregnancy. I was unwell during that time and as this was on zoom it enabled me to be at home but also feel part of a lovely community of expectant mothers.

When my baby was born prematurely, I was able to continue under the care of the service and had amazing support at home from the team. I attended the ABC PIP Tree Babies group and again met a wonderful network of other parents. This experience was so therapeutic and special. I also attended an emotional regulation course the team offered. This was fantastic and has really helped me heal after a difficult few months.

I'm so grateful to have had these experiences and I'm so thankful for this vital service."



"Most parent-baby groups I have attended in the past have felt lonely and heightened my anxiety. Tree babies was the complete opposite.

I felt relaxed, calm and comfortable with the facilitators and my peers. I loved the peace and calm and time of reflections. Seeing my colicky, refluxy baby stare in wonder at the trees above filled my heart with joy.

Those wee moments of peace have really boosted my mood. I'm so thankful for being able to attend."

"Finding out I was expecting twins came as a shock to the system and I felt quite overwhelmed. This was exacerbated when twins were born early and spent time in NICU. I started to lack confidence in managing all 3 of my young children at once.

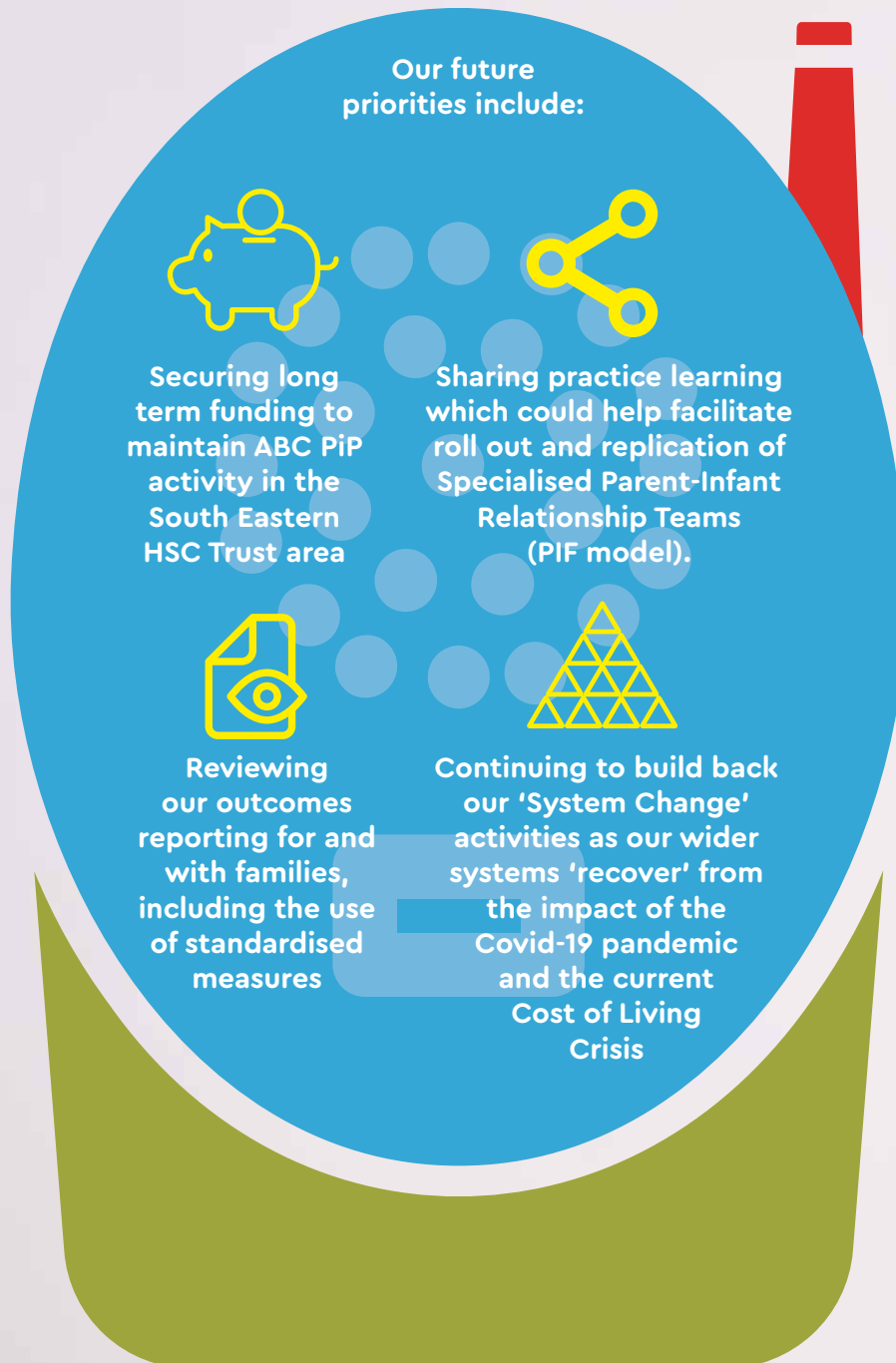
My health visitor recognised how I was feeling and we agreed that a referral to ABC PiP would be helpful.

Through ABC PiP, I have availed of emotional support, Community Resilience Model training, 5 to Thrive and baby massage. Being able to combine this with specialist and peer support from Tiny Life has been invaluable to me and my girls.

It really makes a difference to be surrounded by people who share your experience, understand your anxieties and have the knowledge and skills to support you."

What's Next for ABC PiP?

Sustaining a partnership model and ensuring effective service delivery requires a continuous review of our organisational, competency and leadership drivers. We're doing this in times of economic, political and social crises which affect our team, the families we support and the systems we work in. **We're determined to succeed.**





Let's Talk!

At ABC PiP, we're always talking!

We'd like to invite you to join our conversations on how best we can continue to successfully meet the needs of infants and their families, contribute to workforce development and influence a system that delivers the best start in life for all.

Whether you're seeking support as or for a parent, investing in professional development or working strategically for the prioritisation of parent-infant relationships in policy and practice, we'd love to hear from you!

ABC PiP
8 Moss Road
Ballygowan
BT23 6JE
T: 028 9598 8056
abcpip@setrust.hscni.net

ABC PiP Strategic Partners



South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust



Supported by:



Evaluation & learning partners:



design: www.conordiverdesign.com