

Report

Evaluation on project, “Building Babies’ Brains: A Mater Parent Aide Project”.

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Introduction

This report presents findings from a program evaluation of “Building Babies’ Brains: A Mater Parent Aide Project in Partnership with Noah’s Ark (BBB)” conducted by the International Program of Psycho-Social Health Research.

The findings indicate that the BBB program assisted parents to better understanding infant brain development and methods of infant communication. Participants indicated that they were better able to apply this new knowledge and understood the importance of positive nurturing and interaction with their infants.

Participants also indicated that the course provided opportunity to socialise with other parents who were also experiencing similar phases of development with their infant. This social component normalised their parent experience and alleviated social isolation. The provision of transport, venue location and easy parking was also noted as a positive practical component to course attendance. Participants indicated that this social component and knowledge gained from the course assisted in raising their confidence levels regarding their parenting skills and ability.

Due to the positive aspects associated with the social component of the course, the report recommends that course organisers ensure adequate participants attend the course with a balanced social composition. It is also recommended that course convenors are aware of participant expectations of the course objectives and perceived course outcomes and any material, promotional items, and recruitment strategies, and accurately reflects the course content, structure and style.

In regards to course materials and structure, it is recommended that course convenors increase the scope of content to include, where appropriate, wider discussion on practical issues such as sleep and fatigue management and the reality and time commitment of caring for an infant. In addition, it is recommended that course convenors provide the opportunity to discuss the effects that caring for an infant can have on family and personal relationships. It is also recommended that a lactation consultant and child-health care nurse be included in the course framework. All participants expressed a need for expert, evidence based information concerning breast-feeding and child- health issues and the opportunity to raise such issues with a professional in a supportive environment.

Using this Report

The findings documented in this report represent a complete coverage of all topics addressed and insights provided by the participants in the research. Each heading

introduces a major topic of the research and is often presented with sub-themes and categories. Accompanied with the findings and research presented in this report is textual data, which is a verbatim transcript of participant statements. These statements are prefaced with a de-identified code unique to each participant.

The document is divided into two sections that correspond with the participant's insights:

- 1) The Course Experience, which describes the experience of involvement and attending the course.
- 2) Recommendations, which posits findings from participants in relation to course improvements and suggestions.

The Building Babies Brains (BBB) Program

The Mater Parent Aide Unit (MPAU) at Mater Children's Hospital in conjunction with Noah's Ark Children's Resource Centre has been conducting a pilot project titled, 'Building Babies Brains' (BBB).

BBB aims to educate new parents, particularly parents of children 'at risk' about the vital impact their interactions have on their child's brain development and mental health. This is response to peer-reviewed recognition of the importance of 'brain wiring' and the need to promote emotional availability and secure attachment during a baby's first 12 months of life. Literature indicates that good infant mental health places the child at a lifelong advantage for sound teenage and adult relationships.

BBB is a support and education package delivered to new parents who have been referred to the Mater Parent Aide Unit from the Community Hospital Integration Nurse and who have difficulty being 'emotionally' available to their newborn. The program offers enrolment in the 'Getting to Know You' (GTKY) workshops, 12 months support services offered by the Parent Aide Unit and membership to Noah's Ark play group.

The GTKY workshops are run over a 7 week period and are designed to educate and support new parents who have difficulty being 'emotionally available' for their newborn. The program teaches parents to recognise and respond more appropriately to their infant's earliest communications, including: enhancing the infant's brain development, promoting emotional wellbeing and facilitating the development of 'secure attachment'. The program is offered to 4 groups of parents over a 12 month period and started on the 21st of July 2008. The GTKY program has been designed and developed by the NSW Institute of Psychiatry.

The BBB program offers a comprehensive support package which includes recruitment into the GTKY workshops, 12 months Mater Aide follow-up support and 18 months subscription to Noah's Ark services.

Methodology

A qualitative evaluation using data obtained by in-depth interviews with parents enrolled in the five GTKY sessions was conducted by the International Program of Psycho-Social Health Research, CQUniversity.

Approval for conducting research involving humans was obtained from each institution's respective Human Research and Ethics Council prior to commencement of data collection.

The program evaluation focused on perceived changes that participants experienced in their parenting skills, relationship with their infant and in the infant's development. Interviews were conducted after the participants had completed the course.

MPAU provided in-kind administrative and project support for the project. This included, but was not limited to, providing support in terms of access to databases and identifying potential participants, and assistance with enrolling participants. Potential participants were identified by a MPAU member, who was independent of the course, with the assistance of an IPP-SHR Project Officer. A MPAU member promoted and provided project information about the study during the end of the GTKY courses. Included in this information was a project description and potential requirement if agreeing to participate. Participants were informed that they may be contacted by an IPP-SHR project officer and if they did not wish to participate, that they could either tell the MPAU member or IPP-SHR Project Officer. If they agreed to participate, the IPP-SHR Project Officer arranged an interview time. Participants were verbally informed of their full ethical rights and were provided with written material detailing their ethical rights; informed consent was obtained before commencement of the interview.

Interviews were conducted by an IPP-SHR research member. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and de-identified. Once transcribed, the interviews were loaded into the QSR NVivo computer package and coded (free nodes). The coding was conducted by IPP-SHR project officers experienced in the NVivo computer package. The naming and development of the codes was driven by the exact words of the participants. All data collected were entered into codes. The data were then thematically analysed by collapsing the free nodes down into broad thematic categories and used to provide an evaluation of the BBB program.

Participants were selected from the five Building Babies Brains' courses. Twenty-three potential participants were contacted, with ten declining participation or being unable to contact. Thirteen parents participated in the in-depth interviews, consisting of twelve mothers and one father who ranged in age from 21 to 43 years. A diverse family composition was represented in the cohort with nine married, two separated and two single parent families. Twelve of the families had one child whilst one had a family composition of two children.

Project management and collaboration was managed using Quadrant™, an online Qualitative collaboration software tool. www.quadrant-pm.com

The Course Experience

Manner of Course Enrolment and Referral

Most participants were referred to the course by Mater Parent Aide staff, with some referrals originating from the Young Women's Program and from other health care professionals at the Mater Hospital. In general, participants indicated that they wanted additional support and appreciated the referral to the program:

Participant196: (P) I kind of went along because I felt that I needed as much support as I could get.

Participant537: (P) yeah no cause I was just in quite a difficult situation with my on and off again partner and so he wasn't there that much after our first was born so... (which) he pretty much did the same thing when I got pregnant the second time and so I had a parent-aid assigned to me from the Mater which is fantastic.

However, one participant expressed bewilderment of being asked to attend the class:

Participant200: (P) I think it was like the first week we came home with our daughter and so I was a bit like, well when we actually went there I was sort of like, are we special needs? I was wondering why she picked us and she just said that she wanted a mixture of special needs and just normal people like us and she just actually told us that she asked some of the nurses at the Mater Hospital if they could recommend anyone and so they recommended me and you know I just wondered maybe cause we were having a bit of a hard time with it like at the beginning cause we were there a bit longer than normal.

Timing of the Course

Participants noted that attending the course after the birth of their baby was beneficial as it allowed the mothers to raise issues associated with their newborns as they happened. It was also noted by fathers that timing of the course coincided with information need and assistance:

Participant410: (P) It definitely helped (partner), yeah for sure, yeah. Yeah she was learning more about (baby) as well and she was getting more confident in her abilities and because sometimes you don't know if you're doing the right thing or you're not doing the right thing.

Class Composition

Participants indicated the informality of the course and the small class sizes gave them confidence in expressing issues to the group:

Participant200: (P) Cause it was only two mothers we had a bit of time just to talk generally, just about us rather than the course and so in that sense I think I got my needs met in that I was able to talk about those issues, yeah.

Participant996: (I) Putting out there issues about you know babies sleeping in their bed and breastfeeding issues and problems and challenges like that. Did it feel comfortable for you or? (P) Yeah, yep.

The participants also appreciated the opportunity to express their thoughts in an open and non-judgemental environment:

Participant196: (I) was there an accepting feel within the room that you could pretty much throw anything out there? (P) Yeah yeah it was pretty open for it, yeah it was fine yeah, it is nice to feel that space.

Participant627: (I) You felt pretty comfortable putting all your questions out there? (P) Yeah, I felt comfy.

Participant537: (P) yeah no it was really comfortable actually, it was really good like that and if we did have anything to ask, the coordinator always said if there's anything sort of want to focus on just let me know and I'll sort of get a video for next week or whatever so she was really good like that.

For courses that did not have a high attrition rate, the ability to socialise following the formal component of the course was also valued:

Participant196: (P) that was great actually. The best thing I liked was very, very friendly. It's not like formal meeting sort of thing [unclear] having sandwiches and then tea, watch DVD and then talking about things with other mums.

However, for courses in which the majority of attendees failed to attend, participants indicated that the course did not offer many social opportunities:

Participant575: (P) not really much because the ladies that started with me didn't continue, I think that they were also disappointed. Well there was one she continued to the end with me and we really didn't have much to share because we were to hear the ladies explaining and projecting a video.

Course Structure and Delivery

A few participants indicated that the course was disorganised, lacked structure and was overly drawn out:

Participant196: (P) Yeah it was quite sparse; the course was like very, very drawn out. I thought that they could've maybe tackled that in what they did in the eight weeks was it, could've probably done it in two or three weeks. You know we're all new mums and you know got new babies to deal with so you know it would've been better to have, yeah better time management I think from the girls that were running.

Participant156: (P) that's what the other mothers would say, it was more, the way that it was constructed was more about how you were coping as a mum and it was a bit airy fairy, disorganised. The lesson didn't start till probably about half an hour late than it should've done and there wasn't really a good structure.

In particular, participants indicated that the DVD was not long enough and did not cover enough content for the time dedicated to the course:

Participant575: (P) yes it was plenty of time because I repeat, it was very repetitive and we were seeing the same thing many times, the same video at least three times and a long time to have the sandwiches and then a long time to speak and to socialise.

Participant196: (P) They really kind of only showed the videos that I'd already watched in hospital on the education channel. (I) Aw did they already show them there? So it was a bit repetitive then? yeah, yeah. (P) Yeah rather than just showing the videos that we all saw in hospital which the video was probably about 20 minutes long and they drew it out to be eight weeks.

However, some participants indicated that the DVD was the correct length as due to fatigue from caring for a newborn, they were not able to remember much material and appreciated the reduced information and content:

Participant200: (P) the fact that they repeated from the week before and they gave us literature and with all like videos and then the segments were very you know, weren't very long at all. That was great because you know if they had've given us a big lengthy you know, lot of material I basically wouldn't, I wouldn't of been able to concentrate cause I was only really able to concentrate for short periods you know.

Participant196: (P) that was great actually, the best thing I liked was very, very friendly. It's not like formal meeting sort of thing [unclear] having sandwiches and then tea and watch the DVD.

Written Information and Materials

There was a strong indication that the amount of written information provided to course participants was adequate, with many indicating that they already felt overburdened with information and written material from other sources:

Participant223: (P) ah I don't know, I never really read handouts to tell you the truth. I got a whole pile of them before (baby) was born and yeah they never, they got shelved under the bed and that was about it.

Participant537: (P) I got so much stuff the first time around and I was really depressed and I actually ended up in child health I think when my baby was eight months old [unclear] and everyone just kept giving me more stuff to. I've got piles of piles and piles of stuff in my house and I can't get through it all, I can't stay on top of it all, I can't you know it was ridiculous and so I was saying to her I just need to really talk to someone face-to-face and feel like I'm on top of it, if I really want to get something I can look it up on the internet or whatever but I found all that paper and all that stuff that I kept getting handed by everyone was really frustrating, yeah. It's a lot to wade through.

Fathers' Experience of the Course

Two participants indicated that their male partners attended the course and that they were appreciative that the course was open to partners:

Participant537: (P) So this is the first thing he was kind of welcomed to be at, yeah he really felt that it was okay for him to be a part of it ...and the fact that he felt that he could go along and take the kids by himself, you know he obviously felt welcome enough to do that, that was great.

One participant also appreciated the learning opportunity that the course provided for her partner, particularly as this was the first child for her partner:

Participant537: (P) because it was my second baby and I was the only there who had already had a baby, for me I think it was kind of, I was open to

learning new things but a lot of the stuff I'd kind of gone through the first time anyway so it was really more for my partner, yeah.

However, due to the lack of other fathers present in the course and the consequently high number of mothers present, participants indicated that, after the initial welcoming experience, their male partner felt intimidated and ceased course participation.

Participant410: (P) Yeah yeah, I did find myself a bit intimidated because, really I think because like I think at times it was just, well the first time I think I did go a few times when it's just myself and (partner) and yeah I think like, yeah well as a male and being surrounded by all these females I did find it a bit intimidating.

Participant537: (P) yeah I think actually the first time that she went I was actually really sick, I think I had a vomiting bug or something so her dad took her and the baby, he went by himself. So he was really good for the first little bit and I think that was really, really good for him but it was quite hard, most of the guys only came to the first one or the first couple and so after I think he was feeling a little bit, aw this is not really my kind of thing.

Continuing Relationships after the Course Ended

The development of a playgroup attributed to continuing relationships between course participants after the course had finished.

Participant400: (P) Yep, yeah so it's been really good because ... we decided you know we all got on so we made like a baby group that we see every fortnight.

Participant537: (P) well it's still kind of going, I haven't been since last year but people are still getting together for like meeting up as a group so even though it wasn't actually still doing the course, yeah everyone was still getting together.

Participant221: (P) Well like I said, instead of just having the 'Building Babies' Brains', when we finished that it kind of merged into a more playgroup thing. Have you heard of Noah's Ark? Anyway we get to borrow toys but also talk about you know what's going in our lives and how the babies are and very non-judgemental and laid back. (I) Yeah no it sounds like you've gotten particularly with that playgroup you've got going on as a result of that class, very good support there? (P) Yeah.

Participant223: I still hang out with one of the mums and you know go to her house regularly.

For some, travel distance inhibited relationships with course participants after the cessation of the course despite participants mentioning that it may be beneficial.

Participant196: (I) did you make connections with some of the other mums then? Did you have a playgroup outside the class? (P) yeah just a local one though [unclear] playgroup. Yeah I'm a little bit away from the area. I actually got a phone call from the other mum I met in Triple B, but I couldn't make it to see them so, yeah.

For others, lack of formal organisation inhibited continuing relationships.

Participant575: (P) Like a playgroup thing? yeah we were going to set up a playgroup thing afterwards but never did.

Two participants indicated that returning to work, made it difficult to attend playgroups and continue relationships after the initial course.

Participant221: (P) I did with one mum but I think she's working too so [unclear] easy to get on. Yeah, that's hard when they have to work, yeah .
Participant200: (P) I didn't know why they were asking me to be in a playgroup you know and then I just let it be and then I think (Name withheld) rang me up about it or someone rang me up and that's when I asked those questions. But anyway I was going back to work so I mean I was planning on going back to work and it would've been on a Monday. (I) yeah not convenient for you (P) So I said no, yeah we did join a playgroup near where we live so. (I) So you actually have that interaction with other mums. (P) Yes.

One participant indicated that they did not participate in continuing activities due to feeling uncomfortable in group situations.

Participant537: (P) Yeah for me personally I found it quite difficult, I've had a pretty tough time throughout, yeah having both of them so yeah I find the whole group thing quite -difficult personally but not because they're not lovely and everything.

Practical Issues to Course Attendance

Transportation to Course

A majority of participants indicated that the provision of transport, and communication with BBB concerning the arrangement of transport facilitated course attendance.

Participant575: (I) Come pick you up and come drop you off, was that helpful? (P) yes yeah, that was very nice, yes it was good of course because we didn't have another car. Now we have but at that point it was impossible for me to go without help. Participant537: (P) I'm in a bit of a tough situation as well where I don't drive so sometimes to get there was a bit tricky and they were really great with paying for cabs cause I was sometimes a bit funny about taking the baby in a cab so yeah, sometimes just getting there and getting back was a bit tricky, yeah but otherwise. (I) They had ways of getting round that for you? (P) Yeah, yep. Yeah so they were really good about that.

Some participants indicated that the provision of transport assisted them in leaving the house with their baby and decreased isolation, apprehension and anxiety:

Participant200: (P) They did offer to come and pick me up so but then I think, aw it was probably the third week I went by myself with (baby) and I think by then I was you know, I wasn't as apprehensive you know but. (I) well it is, there is more anxiety associated with packing up and heading out. (P) oh exactly, yeah it's just, even that first time we took the dog for a walk and went down to the shop, it was huge.

Participant200: (P) yeah they did, they did at first cause otherwise I'm not allowed to drive for a couple weeks (I) yes cause your operation, yes. (P) yeah that was really helpful, so I wouldn't feel confident drive myself and the baby at that time, really nervous as well.

Participants also noted the ease of parking helped in maintaining course attendance.

Participant200: (P) And parking-wise was okay. I mean sometimes we had to sort of park further up the street but I mean really it was fine. No drama there.

Participant223: (I) And was parking and getting there tricky with a newborn baby? (P) aw no very easy for me, there was always parks there, good location.

Participant196: (P) It wasn't that hard actually and then the road in front of the [unclear] wasn't busy, wasn't too busy and then there are heaps of spaces that you can park on the road and yeah. As long as the parking, yeah thing is okay I

think it's not that, yeah, not that difficult. If you have to park like 200 metres away or something like that it's gonna be a problem. Course Benefits

Social Support

A majority of participants indicated that the BBB's course allowed them the opportunity to leave their domestic premises and attend a social function which catered for themselves and their infants:

Participant200: (I) And what do you think was the thing that helped you the most out of that attending and going to see that course? It could be as simple as hanging out with other people, just being out and about? (P) I think so yeah because it's so unreal when you're at home and just, you know, doing the same thing really and so yeah, I mean, yeah there were definitely times when I looked forward to going there and just talking with people who actually had a lot of knowledge about babies and children you know.

Participant627 (I) And what parts did you think worked best? Was it just being around other mums? (P) yeah other mums and getting (name) out of the house.

Participant400: (P) it does help because I know a lot of people they won't really go out. If they have some sort of social interaction they've got more of a reason to you know be social with their babies and that.

Indeed, social contact and creating a network was mentioned as a strong factor for continued attendance:

Participant996: (P) It was more the social side of things; I think that's why I kept going.

Participant223(P) I guess the main reason was just to meet people, sort of get a bit of a support network.

Participant627: (I) yep and what was the best part of it for you? What did you find that was really the most useful bit? (P) Hanging out with the other mums and getting advice from other people.

Participant537: (I) So what do you reckon was the most valuable thing that you actually came away with that course from then, what would you say was the most useful part for you? (P) Probably just spending time with us [unclear] I'd been really isolated through my whole experience so I haven't really done any of that.

Many participants found that being able to attend a social situation in a safe and relaxed environment assisted in creating confidence to be able to leave their house with their new born:

Participant156: (I) Cause you've got a newborn baby, was that tricky to do the, you know getting out of the house thing?(P) no actually to get out of the house was quite good otherwise you start putting it off and putting it off and then it becomes more of an anxious situation. My boy was a couple of weeks old and we're out and about so I thought that was a good thing being out and about then (I) yeah it is, it can increase your confidence a bit (P) Absolutely.

Participant537: (P) no it was good, I think getting there for me is really difficult. When I'm there it's lovely, yeah and I feel good about having gone and got out and everything so yeah, it was good to have them sort of calling me up and encouraging me to come cause sometimes I just you know, wouldn't have gone looking for it myself so I did feel better every time that I went, yeah.

Participant221: (P)but its good thing [unclear] help me to get out of the house [unclear] so stressed out over the housework .

A majority of participants indicated that they felt an affinity with staff and described them in positive terms. Participants noted that this helped them to continue participation in the course:

Participant200: yeah, aw yeah, I mean no it was lovely, they were all lovely you know and they provided lunch and that was nice.

Participant223: They were always friendly at the centre.

Participant575: No no. I really didn't, I have a beautiful family and it was, well I repeat, I had a nice experience, the lady was nice, lovely lady.

Participant537: P: I think like (name) who ran the course and the parent-aids who were there, they're just really, really lovely people and they knew lots of stuff and they've also been through a bit of stuff themselves and it was, yeah, they were really, really great.

Peer Support, Learning and Normalisation

Participants indicated that the informal method of the class and strong social environment assisted in raising questions to peers, learning from others and normalising their own experience of caring for an infant:

Participant410: (P) It can be very overwhelming but I think that these classes are good for her to talk out, to talk everything out as well and to get advice and yeah you could see that she was getting more confident, she was going 'okay right I'm doing the right thing, I'm on the right track'.

Participant221: (P) Not really but sometimes you sort of listen to other people probably thinking, yeah I also got that too you know, sort of start with that. Some other problem [unclear] too, yeah. (I) yeah so you let others voice their issues and then they were the same as yours by the sounds of it.

Sharing experiences of parenting allowed participants to reflect on their practices and gain confidence and lessen anxiety associated with their perceived parenting abilities:

Participant223: (P) No I really enjoyed it, I enjoyed all those little moments because of it and you know I knew things were normal and I was doing things right so it just made me more relaxed and happy with what I was doing.

Participant627: (I) A lot of new parents you have a lot of anxious feelings. Did it help with getting rid of some of those? (P) yeah it helped me to relax a bit more.

This was particularly important for parents that did not have many other parents in their immediate social network:

Participant400: (P) well I do have friends but none of them are mothers and but so you don't really get to you know go through the same sort of things with them so it's good to meet – because when we met our babies were only born like a few weeks apart and now they've grown up together, like they're nearly one so you know it's nice seeing all the different changes and what they can do and stuff.

Participant221: (P) I guess it's to get along with other parents and to see other babies, how they grow and what we can discuss, different problems or what you know, that sort of thing so expecting something happening and then talk to a typical you know [unclear] you know so I can learn something from other

people Especially if it was the same age as the child so expecting, so expecting what exactly the [unclear] sort of thing. So that was very helpful.

Participants also noted that it was helpful to compare and observe babies of similar age and their development.

Participant537: (P) that's been one of the really nice things about it, is to actually see everybody else's baby's growing as well, particularly for me cause I, you know I might miss a couple of them and then try and make it to one so there were times where I hadn't been for you know a couple of months or something and you'd walk in and go, 'oh my god, look how huge that baby is!' And you're gonna see your own baby everyday so you don't have that – (I) you don't notice (P) Yeah, so that was really nice to be able to see you know their babies as well and how they're growing up and compared to yours and also that thing of how different babies, the speed with which babies learn things you know or do things or whatever and sometimes you're a bit like, 'oh god should they be doing this by now?'

One participant indicated the course provided a supportive alternative to Post- Natal Depression therapy groups:

Participant537: (P) I went to a group after I had my first baby which was a group for women with post-natal depression and it was awful. Everyone was just desperate to talk about their situation and I wasn't at all because I was in, I was finding it really, really hard to cope and I was in a really bad situation the first time and so I was [unclear] all these women who were married and having a good experience from my point of view. (I) yeah from where you were sitting it was probably looking good. (P) so I found that really, really hard and I just stopped going to that and I then was completely isolated for about the first two years of my first baby.

Confidence as a Parent

Many participants indicated that the information provided by the course made them more confident parents, enabling them to better interact with their newborn:

Participant200: (P) No just keep on doing that and yeah, just keep helping out other mothers who, like me who you know, haven't had a lot to do with kids and sort of been thrown into the deep end so yeah it's good. Yeah I did, I actually was very thankful that I did that course because I was, when I was

telling other people about the course they were like, wow I wish I had done that when my kids were little so you know, yeah so.

Participant627: (I) No, did you feel more confident – one thing, did you feel a little bit more confident as being a mum after you had the finished the program? (P) Yeah I felt better after.

Baby Development Issues and Bonding

Most participants indicated that the course helped in understanding development, nurturing and the importance of interaction. Participants indicated that the course enabled them to understand cues and gestures made by their infant and how to respond appropriately to such communications:

Participant200: (P) oh like you know maintaining, just like you know some of the things like eye contact and learning how when they're tired and when they're hungry and how they communicate and you know that smile that they give right at the beginning isn't wind, it's actually, you know they're actually smiling at you. I got some beautiful smiles and I appreciated that when she said that cause when (baby) did smile it was like, 'yes she's smiling, it's not wind' you know.

Participant223: (P) ah well the initial things that we did, (partner) came along for the first couple of sessions I think and so did a few other dads and they had a video that was running, it was that connecting with the baby even though they can't communicate you can still connect with them. (P) I think building relationships and understanding – like we got so much great information out of that, just what their little looks mean and things like that, how to communicate non-verbally I guess and even just how they're looking into your eyes is a really big thing for them, just cause they look away doesn't mean they don't like you, it just means they're tired and things like that.

Understanding subtle cues associated with infant fatigue was also commonly noted and appreciated by course participants:

Participant200: (P) yeah, yeah just, yeah you know like things you learnt about you know, like when she did the tired signs. That was helpful because it was like, okay she's tired, you know like if you didn't know that you'd think, you know like it's awful for them isn't it because they're tired, they just want to go to sleep so. You know and you see why they're crying, in some instances still have no idea. But yeah it's helpful like that, just knowing those signs.

Participant410: (I) And did you feel like what you learnt was useful and helpful for you at the time? (P)Aw for sure, what I do particularly remember was like we were talking about looking out for baby signs, like baby messages. Like when they're tired, when they blink a lot and when they're you know because of their attention span they, it's quite small, yeah I never really knew much about that.

Likewise, it was noted that the participants learnt the importance of activities such as eye-contact and its impact on infant neural development:

Participant996: (I) what bits did you find that was the most useful to learn about that they did cover? (P) you look into your baby's eyes and the amount of, can't even remember the word, the brain connections that grow per second when you get the eye contact.

Participant627: Yeah yeah and I saw DVD, even really brand newborn baby can see who's their mum [unclear] contact them with eyes, things like that. I really didn't expect that, I didn't know that so that was I think, that was you know the biggest information that I got from.

The course also assisted participants in understanding the impact that a positive social and caring environment had on brain development:

Participant400: (P) only a small amount because they showed us a diagram that was quite recent about a baby's brain and how to make it positive and you know a good childhood how many things in the brain there was whereas if they had I don't know, I guess parents that were mean to them and like from an abusive childhood the development would go back because the first five years are the most important as childhood like with the developmental and foundations and making them safe and that.

Content associated with learning baby cues and signs were appreciated as participants indicated the material had not been covered in other parenting classes:

Participant196: (P) In the course, basically because my husband and I went to [a] parenting course, like two day course beforehand basically we knew what happened but see for me the biggest thing was like baby's signs that I didn't actually learn from the parenting class. Like baby's signs, signs your baby shows their emotions and what they need and things like that and then because I learnt the baby sign thing from the class, not the baby sign itself but baby actually gives you some yeah, some idea and signs that they want.

Course Recommendations

Course Recruitment

Specific mention to course recruitment was made by a number of participants. In particular, participants indicated that it would have been beneficial to know about the course and make the decision about attending before their baby was born, as expectant parents are better able to understand the course structure and objectives without the stress and fatigue associated with a new born baby:

Participant223: (P) Very subtle, I think it would've been great if could've been that before actually, before we had the baby. I was lucky cause I started after (baby) was born, only one week old. Yeah just to prepare you. I think the scary thing for me was the black wall cause once you have the baby you know well when you're preparing to have the baby you don't know what's ahead, don't know how you're going to cope, what the baby's going to be like, what the you know, everything's just a mystery and it's a bit scary. I did see a couple of them beforehand and that really helped.

This concept was carried further, with many participants indicating that not only would they have liked to know about the course before birth, but to have the chance to meet and develop relationships with other expectant parents and develop familiarity with the course convenors:

Participant400: (I) and then would you of liked to of met with the group before you even had your baby? Like you know towards the end (P) yeah I think that would've helped like when you were pregnant cause I did go to a like a mid-wife group with all different pregnant women at the same stage but they weren't very friendly so you kind of can't force relationships you know, so it would've been nice to of met them yeah before the babies came.

Participant537: (I) Some people have said they would've liked to met with folks before their baby was born just to have that space you know where you can really concentrate on being in a group and having questions answered and forming a relationship before you're baby was born? (P) yeah no I think that would've been really good.

It was also noted that convening the course before the birth would have been a good opportunity to provide information regarding the immediate time after birth:

Participant627: (P) maybe a bit before he was born. (I) can you talk a little bit about why that would've been helpful? (P) So you know what to expect (I) To get that information a little bit beforehand. What do you think would've helped? (P) yeah lack of sleep, the first feeding, how if they have any bad health when they were born.

Participants who were experiencing a complicated pregnancy or had co-morbidities indicated that the formation of the group beforehand would have assisted in normalising their experience and sharing their thoughts and concerns with other likeminded persons:

Participant200: (I) Yeah and some of the mums said it would've been helpful to meet with the folks before the baby was born (P) yeah, yeah that sounds pretty good. Yeah I mean, yeah I think, I'm 80% there with that cause why I say 80% is that just another to, like if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed you know what I mean it's like another thing that you've got there that you're going to and cause I had, cause it gets rid of the anxiety.

Course Name and Expectations

Special attention needs to be paid to participant constituents who will benefit from the basic information presented at the course. In particular, when marketing and positing the course numerous participants felt the DVD and course content was too basic and condescending:

Participant200: (P) Not that I, no it was pretty basic and it was repetitive which was good because like I couldn't of taken much in. Like so yeah. (But) for the information that I got if it had've been more I don't know, more information in that time I would've maybe captured my attention span for a little bit longer but by about the third week, yeah I was just like, aw I'll just go along and you know see what they do this week and have a cake and bit of coffee and yeah that was kind of it.

Participant575: (P) it was just more basic things about babies' behaviour and how to manage their signs and how to understand when they were tired, when they were hungry etcetera etcetera and nothing to do with the brain. Even though I was a first time mum it was not new for me because I had been reading and not really sophisticated things, basic things but the course is really basic. I really can't understand why they do so much research and pretending to be something so scientific when it's something so basic.

Some participants felt that the information presented in the course was already readily available and wished that they had been informed of the content before participation. It is recommended to accurately explain the course content and objectives before enrolment:

Participant156: (P) I went to evening classes, parent evening classes [unclear] you know the pre-baby evening classes and that was all done in the lessons there and stuff so it wasn't really necessary for me but I'm sure there were people in that group that found it quite useful so it depends on your level of how much research you do prior to actually having the baby.

Recommendation: Consider renaming course to better reflect learning objectives and course content

It was suggested that the course name could be changed to better reflect the course content. Participants felt that the title 'Building Babies Brains' was incorrect as it did not reflect the course's primary emphasis on understanding babies cues and the impact that positive relationships have on neurological development:

Participant575: (P) I think that the number, sorry the name of the program, that Triple B; I think that is really not accurate [of] what you obtained there. I had absolutely different expectations. I really can't understand why they call it like this, I think that is just because it sounds interesting but it's something really basic that you have there. So perhaps saying that it's just that, learning the basics of the baby would've been better to name it.

Participant156: (P) I just think the, I think I would probably liked to of known a little bit more stuff on how to develop the baby's brain and that wasn't really covered. It needs to be changed really cause it gives you a misinterpretation of what it is. It's more about observing cues and I don't know, getting to know your baby or coping with your baby in the first few weeks, along those lines.

Appropriate names could include, 'Understanding Your Baby,' and 'Interaction with Your Baby.'

Recommendation: Accurately explain course content, delivery style and objectives before enrolment.

An issue associated with concerns about the name of the course, is that participants were not informed of the content before attending.

However, participants that met with the course facilitator indicated that the course met their expectations as they were clear on the course's content and objectives.

Participant537: (P) I think because I met up with (the course convenor) first and she told me about the course I kind of knew what to expect .

Course Material

Most participants indicated that after completing the course they were able to detect baby's cues, understand basic neurological development and the impact that positive relationships and bonding had on development. However, participants indicated they would appreciate information and the opportunity to discuss issues associated with fatigue, time management and relationship information. This is particularly important as many participants indicated they had fragmented relationships and instable living situations.

In addition, it is strongly recommended that a lactation consultant and child health nurse be integrated in the class content and delivery. All participants indicated that they would appreciate the services and insights of those professional groups and believed that the class was a positive environment to raise such issues.

Recommendation: Include information on sleep and fatigue management strategies

In relation to practical issues, some participants noted that they would appreciate a discussion regarding ways to calm a baby to sleep and fatigue management strategies:

Participant223: (P) And even also sleep, I know (friend's name) had a lot of trouble with her son with sleep and so have other people and I guess knowing the right way to do it right from the start rather than starting out bad habits and bad little trends. I guess the course was more psychological and you know, your health and baby's happiness. I guess more practical things would've been handy as well. Yeah cause they really help you psychologically if you can sleep and if you can feed, just getting the physical done helps the mental.

Participant200: (P) Aw I mean you know here I am, how old was I? 37, first 37 years of my life I really hadn't had a lot to do with kids. Yeah so it was just yeah, you know, overwhelming and yeah sleep deprivation, yeah you know really plays a part so yeah. I mean you know you get warned about the sleep deprivation and other mothers tell you about it and all that. I don't know, I mean, I don't know how that related, I mean I know it all related but I don't know how that would relate to what we were learning.

Recommendation: Include information and discussion regarding the reality of caring for a newborn

In particular, a majority of participants indicated that they would have appreciated more discussion regarding the reality of caring for a newborn and the time and energy required:

Participant223: (P) Yeah the reality, you can prepare yourself if you know, yeah that's a good idea.

Participant196: (P) Well the reality for anyone is different you know so that's not really anything you can tell someone how to deal with but it's all different for every person so yeah I guess so but you know that's why people go to mother's groups and stuff like that and hear you know how everybody else's baby didn't sleep through the week and you went 'yes!' I'm not the only one you know and that's kind of what mother's groups are for and not this Triple B kind of yeah.

Participant400: (P) No-one talks about it so it'd kind of be better if maybe they could have what it really feels like when you've actually you know given birth and you're exhausted and your breasts are leaking and they're huge. The baby's screaming and you haven't had any sleep and your body and everything is still getting over the birth and the fact that you've had hormones in your body for 9 months and then suddenly they kind of go AWOL and you know, your husband thinks you're crazy, I'm sure they would Yeah, I'm just telling it how it is so I guess it would be helpful if, I don't know [if] there was someone that was honest about what actually happens so then when they go through it they don't feel, 'what's going on?'

Recommendation: Include advice, counselling and opportunity for discussion regarding relationships

Participants also spoke of the desire for advice, information and practical strategies to assist in maintaining relationships:

Participant400: (P) yeah, aw that brings another point, intimacy. Even if you're not in the mood for sex anymore, too tired you can at least set aside you know even just ten minutes a day to talk to them or give them a cuddle or a massage to at least make sure that your relationship's still strong otherwise you know you could break up, that's why they celebrate the first birthday, is the fact that you're still together a new year. I mean know your baby, how it's going to impact you, how it's going to impact your relationship with your partner and make it a bit more of a wider scope by the sounds of it.

Some participants indicated that this should be discussed in a group situation and through the context associated with the fatigue and stress that having a newborn

brings to a relationship. One participant indicated that it was helpful to be able to discuss her relationship separation with a staff member.

Recommendation: Include lactation consultant at meetings

Every participant expressed a desire to obtain more information regarding breastfeeding and would have appreciated the support and advice of a lactation consultant:

Participant223: (I) and you touched on it, a lactation consultant, somebody who really is an expert on breastfeeding, would you appreciate that? (P) Yes yeah, luckily it went perfectly well for me but the amount of trouble I've seen my friends have and you know seems to really upset them quite a lot as well.

Participant156: (I) and they were sort of asking us, if they had a lactation consultant or a child health nurse there as well, would that of been a useful thing do you think? To ask all those practical types of questions. (P) yep definitely.

In particular, participants expressed a desire to obtain information from a qualified lactation consultant that was non-opinionated, non-judgemental and well informed:

Participant200: (P) you know and at one stage I got sick of people just telling me what their opinion. (I) yeah I know, you just had enough after a little while. (P) yeah and some of them are like bloomin' Nazis, like some of them don't understand, like they've never had problems themselves and they actually can't see it from your point of view, [they're like] 'why do you have problems?' You know like, know what I mean? [They're like] 'it's easy for me, why can't it be easy for you?'

Participant196: (I) and what about a lactation consultant? Somebody who's an expert on breastfeeding, would that've been useful for them to come to that class to answer questions as well? (P) I think so, yeah because too many information is around, you don't know which one you should trust. (There is) like three different opinions from three different like professional practitioner. I got really confused.

Participant400: (I) To have somebody like a lactation consultant, you know somebody who specialises in - would that be useful? (P) I guess you could have one of them but also to not have as much judgment with breastfeeding if you can't breastfeed or if you have problems doing it maybe it could have I don't know, some people who have gone through that and be able to talk about it so you don't feel so alone.

Recommendation: Include child health care nurse at course

Likewise, all participants indicated that they would have preferred the expertise of a child health nurse to provide information concerning health and physical development related issues such as, teething, bumps and cuts and nutrition.

Participant410: (P) Yeah that would've been a good idea because yeah we did, (baby) did have some skin allergies at times and we did have to have medication. We had the nurse come out every week for a while yeah to check on (partner's) breastfeeding and yeah actually that would've been quite valuable, yeah because there's always, we always have, questions do rise up and we're calling up the child health just for some advice so. I mean it's such a big learning curve. They teach you a lot in the pre-natal classes but then when it's in practice it's just, yeah it's totally different.

Participant573: (P) because that's the other thing, they've been on the family care program through child health so I've had the child health nurse coming as well and that's made a massive, massive difference to feel like I'm really on top of where I'm supposed to be with feeding or any concerns. Yeah it's quite scary, you know you've got this tiny little person, they can't communicate with you, you have no idea if you're doing the right thing and you don't really want to tell anyone that you don't have any clue what you're doing so.

Participant223 (P): yeah like you could keep going on and I'd be happy, you know it's really good. Would've been lovely if [they] had sort of guest appearances I guess and guest experts on certain areas and health, things with health, you always worry that you know they bump their head and you think 'oh no they're gonna die'.

In addition, some participants indicated that it would be good to have the advice and judgement of a child health nurse to be able to lead discussions on sensitive issues such as co-sleeping. Participants felt that this could be achieved without judgement if the facts are presented by an expert.

Participant400: (P) and try not to have so many expectations about how you're going to parent your child cause everyone's different and the fact that, like some babies might sleep in a cot, some babies might co-sleep, you know ... I think they need more education about that, like as long as you're not overweight or the under influence of drugs or you've got a safe bed, you know or you're not that exhausted that you could accidentally roll over your baby.

Course Structure

The course structure which consisted of showing an element from the DVD and proceeding with a discussion was generally appreciated by participants. Most participants appreciated the informal nature and opportunity to socialise with other parents. However, those who participated in a class with small numbers indicated that the course did not have enough content and the DVD did not contain enough detail.

Recommendation: Ensure adequate course attendance

There were problems with the program for those who attended groups with small numbers. Indeed for some, the group numbers were sometimes as small as two attendees.

Participant200: (I) Would've been perhaps nicer with another mother so it's just the two of us (I) yeah more mums in the room, yeah.

Participant223: (P) there were quite a few at the start but then a few left cause I don't know, I guess they had problems. Things like that but no they were others, the three main mums and then another couple I guess on top of that but more would've been nicer. (P) yeah not too big but you know you could probably get another three or four in there and would've been quite comfortable and nice.

Recommendation: Consider holding classes on days other than Monday

Some participants indicated that holding the course on a Monday morning was a challenging time. This was particularly evident for participants who were looking to return to work or had partners that were at work.

Participant221: (P) you know go back to work or something it'd be different but not at this moment.

Participant410: (P) Like if they could get it open yeah after 5:30pm for a night class, yeah evening class where like parents could go because I think when we, was it 9 o'clock or 10 o'clock Monday morning. So either parent could be working so yeah if there's – I mean I know people do shift work so. If they did have after work class might be accessible for everyone, yeah.

Course Involvement (Fathers)

For those with a male partner, there was agreement on the need to incorporate greater partner involvement. Such participants thought that a group specifically designed for fathers would assist in their parent confidence and skills, understanding their baby and contribute to having a greater involvement in parenting.

Participant537: (P) I think he would've really liked that. I think there needs to be a lot more for guys to be a part of, yeah. Especially like just because his upbringing was really difficult, he has no idea what a father is suppose to do, so yeah the more stuff for guys there is I reckon the better .

Participant400: (P) yep and also the dads, it might be good to somehow make them more confident cause a lot of women will talk about how their husbands don't help out and the reason why is because the mum's keep on saying, 'no you're doing this wrong' and all this sort of thing... yeah the thing is they need more confidence because if the woman keeps on saying, 'no you're doing this wrong' and they keep on putting their parenting style down then they're obviously going to give up and say 'well if you keep on doing that to me then I'm not going to help with the baby' and then that makes a bad relationship with the father and the child because they don't really get to you know, play with them or look after them so I think that would be a really good one.

Development of Program for Ongoing Socialisation and Connection

Participants that attended the BBB program which had adequate attendance valued the social aspect of the course and the informal environment for discussing issues and for normalisation. Such participants indicated that it would be valuable to have a formal program organised that would facilitate ongoing connection amongst course participants.

Recommendation: Facilitate follow up support or play groups

It was noted that ongoing parent-aid support following the BBB course would be helpful.

(P) what you're talking about, like a program where there's somebody coming in regularly? (I) Yeah just chatting and playing with you and the baby and yeah, I know exactly what you mean (P) I just think it would help some people.

Indeed, some participants were surprised that there was not ongoing follow up or formal avenues to extend the relationship beyond the course.

Participant196: (P) yeah well it was good to have someone that you were talking to every week that's familiar with you and your baby, yeah but when it was over it was just over, that was it and 'see you later and thanks very much for coming and we spent our Triple B bonus for this eight weeks and we sat here and had coffee and thanks very much, see you later'.

In particular, participants that were in groups that had few in attendance indicated that they would prefer ongoing connections, support and follow up from the course convenors or parent aide units.

Participant400: (P) yeah I think it could help because one of the big problems in today's society is that there's no, you know how in the old days there use to be like a community? Like the baby would be raised by the village and all that sort of thing, nowadays a lot of people you know they either work or they don't have family close by and it's just the parents and sometimes they can get very frustrated by the baby, yeah but the fact that if you don't have anyone it can be very stressful and frustrating when it's just you and the baby so in order to not get to the point where you feel like screaming and maybe taking it out on the baby maybe they could have more I don't know, people visiting to I don't know, something so it just doesn't get.

Such follow-up contact was seen as an important safety net at a vulnerable time, for example,

Participant537: (P) In fact I found it quite difficult sometimes 'cause I was having a pretty hard time but just having those people call me up. So it kind of kept me plugged in a little bit so that was, yeah really helpful. (I) bit of a safety net really in some ways (P) Yeah very much and I coped much, much better this time, really cause I was actually really, really scared.

Contact Details:

IPP-SHR, Brisbane Office. PO BOX 1307, Kenmore Q 4069 Australia.

Telephone: +61 7 3374 1792 Email: pmcgrathu@gmail.com or hholewa@gmail.com