‘Baby Steps’ towards a Better Start? Evaluation of a perinatal parenting programme delivered in Bradford

Dr Kate Mooney (1,2), Prof. Josie Dickerson (2), Dacheng Huo (3), Prof. Tracey Bywater (2), Prof. John Wright (2), Dr. Sara Ahern (2), Dr. Sebastian Hinde (3), and Prof. Sarah L Blower (1).

1. Family Wellbeing Team, Department of Health Sciences, University of York; 2. Born in Bradford, Bradford Institute for Health Research; 3. Centre for Health Economics, University of York

Contact: kate.mooney@york.ac.uk

Why support is needed

At least 1 in 10 women nationally experience mental health difficulties after giving birth, with this being up to **1 in 2** women living in in disadvantaged areas.



Untreated mental health could impact:

- Parent-infant interactions and relationships and,
- The child’s long-term wellbeing, cognitive, and behavioural development



Annual cost of perinatal mental difficulties to society, primarily due to impacts on the child

The ‘Baby Steps’ intervention

Developed by the UK's National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the Baby Steps parenting programme is a perinatal intervention designed for vulnerable parents and delivered by trained facilitators.

In Baby Steps delivered in Bradford, parents receive two antenatal home visits and six antenatal programme sessions before their baby is born. After birth, there are three postnatal sessions, and one postnatal home visit. It was delivered by Action for Children in Bradford as a universally available programme, and delivered mostly online.

> “they are telling me any time I’m not okay, I can talk to them, I call them [...] I feel **someone is there, standing with me**, helping me, because I’m pregnant, **I’m not alone,** I have someone who is caring for me, and for the baby.”



Our key findings

Baby Steps was **delivered successfully** in real-world practice, and successfully **engaged diverse mothers** living in disadvantaged areas.

Taking part in Baby Steps **may reduce postnatal depression**, particularly for mothers with higher antenatal depression.

Taking part in Baby Steps helps **mothers prepare for birth**, and feel **emotionally supported.**

Taking part in Baby Steps helped mothers feel **empowered to make birth choices**, potentially influencing healthcare use.

A vision for Family Hubs policies

- Baby Steps is now being delivered across Bradford as a part of the Family Hubs Start for Life programme.
- Baby Steps could be implemented in other areas to support new mothers to give their children the best possible start.

Future considerations

Practice

Could be delivered universally in disadvantaged areas, or targeted according to need.

Research

Evaluation should be embedded in delivery. Further research needed to explore a range of clinical and cost outcomes over longer-term periods.

Appendix to explain research design and key findings



Data for quantitative analysis: Born in Bradford's Better Start cohort study

- 'Interventional' birth cohort study funded from 2015-2025 through Better Start Bradford, one of five sites funded by The National Lottery Community fund
- Ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse cohort, and most live in most deprived area decile in England

Research design of three studies

Quantitative effectiveness:

- **Methods:** One-to-many propensity score matching to achieve balance in intervention and control groups in terms of sociodemographic characteristics. The propensity score matched sample included 335 mothers. (120 in Baby Steps, 215 in the control)
- **Key findings:** Baby Steps did not impact maternal sensitivity at 6-14 weeks postpartum, but may make small reductions in depression and anxiety at 6-14 weeks, particularly for mothers with moderate antenatal depression. Baby Steps did not impact gestation or birthweight, but enrollees did have a higher non-spontaneous vaginal delivery rate.

Qualitative process evaluation:

- **Methods:** 1:1 interviews with practitioners and parents/caregivers and descriptive thematic analysis
- **Key findings:** Perceived impacts including improved emotional wellbeing, reduced anxiety, empowerment to navigate maternity systems, and increased awareness of infant cues. Home visits and the continuity of support and delivery were valued. Online delivery was considered convenient, but the potential positive impacts of more face-to-face contacts, such as community-building and further social support, were acknowledged.

Cost evaluation:

- **Methods:** Estimated cost of programme using internal financials and costs for NHS service use for parents and children from routinely collected healthcare data
- **Key findings:** Baby Steps cost £2,469 per enrollee, based on 381 enrollees during 2022-2024. In the propensity score matched sample of 335 mothers, Baby Steps had minimal impact on overall service use costs from childbirth to 12 weeks postpartum, but disaggregated analyses suggested participation increased mothers' healthcare costs, and decreased infant healthcare costs.

Limitations

- The nature of observational data analysis means that causal impacts of Baby Steps cannot be confirmed
- Most quantitative impacts were estimated with reasonable uncertainty, otherwise known as wide 95% confidence intervals

References

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Contact: kate.mooney@york.ac.uk