

Briefing Paper

Mental health in the Early Years



In 2024 Children in Wales undertook a baby voice consultation in response to the Welsh Government's draft mental health strategy. This was the first time a formal baby voice consultation had been submitted; it recognised the importance of listening and advocating for babies' unique needs and rights. A wide range of professionals working with babies and families came together and responded to the consultation from a baby's perspective.

The First 1000 days of a baby's life (from conception to aged 2) is a time when the brain develops faster than at any other period. It provides the foundations for physical, emotional, and social development and supporting the mental health and wellbeing of babies contributes to healthier outcomes throughout life. When babies do not have access to secure and responsive caregiving their mental health may be affected, disrupting healthy brain development, affecting the functioning of their stress response systems, and leading to lasting implications for their long-term wellbeing. Increasingly, early experiences are recognised as critical to long-term wellbeing, and policy and service delivery in Wales is evolving to reflect this. The Welsh Government's Mental Health Strategy (2025-2035) highlights the importance of secure, responsive caregiving and identifies babies emotional and social wellbeing as essential for healthy development. The NYTH/NEST framework reinforces this promoting collaborative, nurturing, and relationship-based approaches across health, education, social care and early year settings. In addition, perinatal and infant mental health training has been introduced to strengthen the skills and confidence of practitioners working with parents and babies, recognising parent-infant relationships as a key focus for early intervention.

Recent data from Public Health Wales^[1] indicates a sustained rise in emotional difficulties among children, with 1 in 6 8–10-year-olds with a diagnosable mental health condition, highlighting the need for strengthened and timely early intervention measures. Prioritising baby mental health through strengthened early attachment, responsive care, and support for family wellbeing is essential for healthy development and enabling children to achieve their full potential throughout life.

[1] [Joint Statement CYP MHWB](#) - Joint Statement on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, November 2025

Understanding mental health in the early years

Mental health is often considered in the context of older children and adults, which can lead to the needs of babies being overlooked. Indeed, it is hard to conceptualise the mental health of babies, especially if we apply adult mental health models of mental health which locate problems within the individual. Babies always exist in the context of relationships, and it is these relationships that mediate the impact of early experiences - both positive and negative. This is why parent and caregiver relationships with babies are so critical in supporting their mental health and wellbeing.

It can be difficult to think about babies' mental health because they are not able to explain their feelings in words. Viewing mental health as a medical issue can make it challenging to understand what it means for babies. Mental health is more than just the presence or lack of a condition. It includes how we manage emotions, build relationships, and cope with everyday experiences. Mental health for babies is shaped by their relationships and the experiences in the world around them. Forming secure relationships with their caregivers, learning to express and manage their emotions, and feeling safe and supported to explore and interact with their world are key aspects of baby mental health. These early experiences lay the foundations for their wellbeing now and in the future.

Infant mental health encompasses the emotional, social, and cognitive wellbeing of babies, reflecting the earliest foundations of their development and long-term wellbeing. Early childhood is a critical developmental period that significantly influences long-term emotional, psychological and overall wellbeing, primarily through relationships with parents and adult caregivers. Rapid brain development during early childhood makes babies particularly sensitive to their relationships, environments and experiences, positive or adverse. These relationships and experiences can have a significant impact on their future health and happiness. During this stage of development babies begin to build essential abilities, such as emotional regulation and early language, that form the foundation for later learning, relationships, and overall development.

When their mental health is supported through warm and nurturing relationships, babies are better able to develop core competences that contribute to lifelong wellbeing. These early capacities, including managing emotions, feeling confident to explore, and forming positive relationships provide the foundation for future engagement, achievement and healthy social development. Supporting babies to be mentally healthy increases their likelihood of achieving their full potential.

Welsh Government's 10-year mental health strategy and early years mental health

In April 2025 the Welsh Government published its ten-year mental health strategy outlining a commitment to an integrated health and social care approach to mental health and ensuring that individuals' needs, priorities, and goals remain central to every service and professional. The strategy sets out four core vision statements, which aim to:

- Ensure the essential building blocks are in place to support good mental health
- Equip everyone with the knowledge, opportunities, and confidence needed to protect and promote their mental health and wellbeing
- Develop a connected system in which people receive the right level of support wherever they seek help
- Deliver seamless, person-centred mental health services that are needs led and ensure individuals are directed to the right support first time.

This vision for mental health in Wales is particularly significant for babies, as it establishes a comprehensive, holistic, and long-term framework for supporting wellbeing from the earliest stages of life. The Welsh Government's strategy emphasises the importance of the First 1000 Days as a critical

period of development in a baby's life laying the foundations for future mental health and wellbeing, emphasising the early identification of mental health challenges, recognising that timely intervention during infancy is essential for detecting emerging concerns and providing appropriate support to prevent difficulties from escalating later in life.

Many babies are supported within families where parents may be navigating their own mental health challenges, and with the right services in place, these families can be well-equipped to promote positive early development and wellbeing. Ensuring that services are accessible and that comprehensive support systems are in place for the whole family is essential for addressing trauma, attachment difficulties, and early signs of developmental delays. Providing parents with appropriate guidance and resources helps to foster healthy emotional and psychological development from birth. Babies rely on well-integrated care systems capable of identifying early signs of distress or developmental concerns. Effective service integration enables coordinated and timely responses that address both the baby's needs and the wellbeing of their family. A holistic approach to mental health and wellbeing, one which prioritises safe, supportive environments, is vital to fostering secure attachments, emotional regulation, and nurturing relationships, all of which are fundamental to foundational development of a child's mental health.

The Welsh Government's mental health strategy recognises the importance of initiating mental health support from the earliest of stages of life. It is important that babies are not just regarded merely as passive recipients of care, but as individuals whose emotional and psychological development plays a central role in shaping their overall mental health and wellbeing.

Babies' mental health and Children's Rights

Article 6: Right to survival and development

Baby mental health is a foundational aspect of this right, as emotional and cognitive development starts at birth and is crucial to the overall wellbeing of the child. Supporting baby mental health through early intervention, nurturing environments, and responsive caregiving helps to promote full development and growth in a way that enables the child to reach their full potential as they grow and into adulthood.

Article 19: Right to protection from harm

The mental health and wellbeing of babies can be significantly impacted by exposure to adverse childhood experiences, such as abuse, neglect, or family dysfunction. Babies are particularly vulnerable to emotional harm because of their dependency on their caregivers for their physical and emotional needs. Ensuring babies have safe and loving environments, free from neglect or trauma, safeguards their mental health. Policies and interventions need to recognise the interplay between socio-ecological factors that impact upon a baby's mental health to ensure they address their unique needs to provide protection against negative factors that influence their mental health and wellbeing.

Article 12: Right to participation

Early childhood mental health interventions require actively listening to babies through non-verbal communications, such as crying, facial expressions and body language. Professionals and caregivers act as advocates for babies through interpreting and responding to early signals.

Babies are highly capable communicators and have a voice that must be listened to. This voice is heard and seen in the noises and movements they make, their response to the environment and in

their interactions with the people who are with them. Babies have unique nonverbal ways of expressing themselves, this can be through sounds, but also physicality: body language such as reaching or nodding, or facial expressions like smiling.

Providing support to caregivers, and professionals is crucial to understanding babies needs and respecting their rights to be listened to and have their emotional and developmental needs recognised and responded to.

The **Pledge for Babies in Wales** recognises that babies are born ready to communicate. They have their own minds, unique needs, and a right to be heard and responded to, long before they can use words. The Pledge aims to help those caring for and working with babies, to recognise, value and respond to their voice and needs, ensuring babies are heard and their rights upheld.

Article 24: Right to health and healthcare

All children, including babies have the right to the highest standard of health, which includes mental health. Babies' mental health needs must be addressed from birth onwards as mental and emotional development is as important as physical health during the early years. Access to mental health services, preventative care, and early interventions contribute to the overall wellbeing of babies.

Next steps

Babies are born ready to communicate, with their own minds, unique needs, and an undeniable right to be heard and responded to from the beginning of life. The **Pledge for Babies in Wales** provides a practical and principled framework to ensure these rights are upheld. Embedding the Pledge into everyday practice helps to consistently recognise, value, and respond to babies' voices, however they are expressed. Committing to the Pledge helps create environments in which babies are truly listened to, their wellbeing prioritised and their rights fully respected.

Building on existing frameworks – including the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, Best Start in Life: Early Years Framework for Action, NYTH/NEST Framework and the Early Intervention and Prevention Framework – strengthening early childhood mental health services and ensuring mental health policies are integrated into early childhood services helps create a coordinated system that prioritises babies' mental health and wellbeing. To enable the vision statements for the mental health strategy for Wales there needs to be a focus on strengthening early intervention and prevention programmes and specialist support for parent-infant relationships.

Currently babies are the only age group that do not have access to dedicated and equitable specialist mental health support. There needs to be more focus, specifically on the mental health needs of babies, through the development and expansion of services aimed at identifying and supporting mental health challenges early, including specialist parent infant relationship services for those babies most at risk. Training should be provided for professionals working with babies to enable them to recognise early signs of mental health difficulties, with particular emphasis on equipping them to support parents whose babies may be at risk of developing mental health concerns. This requires an investment in the workforce to develop specialised mental health professionals whose focus is on babies' mental health, integrating these into existing child health services and early years education.

The interconnection between baby mental health and parental mental health means that any focus on baby mental health needs to explore increasing access to services for parents.

Parental mental health plays a vital role in supporting the mental health and emotional wellbeing of

babies and the parent infant relationships. A focus on baby and whole family mental health requires integrated services that enable effective coordination and collaboration. There is a need for specialist parent infant relationship services and development of perinatal mental health services that are accessible to all parents, ensuring equitable support from pregnancy through the earliest years.

Lastly, research plays a crucial role in deepening our understanding of babies' developmental needs. It also provides valuable insight into how early interventions influence long term outcomes, strengthening the evidence base for effective support in the early years.

Relevant links

[Children in Wales | Pledge for Babies in Wales](#)

[Training and Events | Children in Wales](#)

[NEST framework \(mental health and wellbeing\): introduction | GOVWALES](#)

[Early Intervention and Prevention Framework to support Babies, Children, Young People and Families in Wales](#)

[Mental health and wellbeing strategy 2025 to 2035: children and young people's version](#)

[Best Start in Life; Early Years Framework for Action](#)

