Baby and Toddler Groups

A guide to running and setting up a baby and toddler group
First steps

Baby and toddler groups, also known as parent and toddler groups or stay and play sessions, cater for a wide range of parents and carers, including grandparents, childminders and nannies. They provide an opportunity to meet new people and to enjoy play activities in a safe, informal and friendly atmosphere, and help to support children’s transition to the *Early Years Foundation Stage* when they start pre-school, nursery, or Reception class.

Most groups run sessions that last for up to two hours. There is no requirement to register with Ofsted as parents and carers are responsible for supervising their children at all times.

You will however need to take account of legislation such as health and safety, fire regulations, food hygiene requirements, data protection and the Equality Act.

Groups often run in local venues such as church halls, scout huts, community centres or clinics. Whatever the venue, there must be enough space available for storing items such as buggies and pushchairs. Other important considerations will include accessible toilets and kitchen facilities, as well as the security of the premises.
You need to be clear about your outgoings so that you can decide how much to charge for each session. Attendance will vary and so will your income. Collect contributions and keep them secure. You will need a post office, bank, or building society account with at least two signatures. Keep simple accounts of income and outgoings so that you can cover expenses such as:

- rent - including any additional charges for storage
- refreshments
- equipment and resources such as paint, sand and glue
- insurance, which is essential

Baby and toddler groups are an essential part of the community. They offer the opportunity for young children to have fun and mix with other children, in a safe environment, with a familiar adult.
Sharing the load
There are plenty of tasks that must be done before, during and after your session, including clearing up, collecting contributions and banking. Other tasks include:

- booking the venue and agreeing a tenancy agreement or lease
- maintaining security in the venue, and making sure it is left as you found it
- maintaining an inventory of equipment for insurance purposes
- keeping a register at each session of everyone who attends in case of fire or other emergencies
- maintaining a file of members’ names and contact details so that you can let them know about important information

You’ll need to tell parents and carers exactly what information you will hold about them, how you will store their information, for how long and how you will use the information, as a requirement of the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.

Many baby and toddler groups form a charitable committee as a way of sharing the workload. The Alliance Baby & Toddler and Family Support Group Constitution, provides an agreement for how the charity should be run and how decisions should be made.
Meeting and greeting
It is very important to welcome newcomers as they arrive. Give them information on how the group runs, the group’s ethos and statements of practice, including health and safety and data protection. Then follow up with termly newsletters, so that everyone feels part of the group, with ideas for play activities at home, social events and skills available among members.

Publicise your group through your Family Information Service - who will provide parents with information on your service - and place posters or leaflets in libraries, clinics, schools and on community notice-boards to guarantee a steady flow of members. If the session becomes too crowded, start a waiting list or consider opening another session on a different day.

It is important to be clear about your expectations for the session and to share these with all those attending. You may wish to base your guidelines on the following:

*Children should be encouraged to be kind to each other at all times and parents should be asked to help to ensure that their child’s actions do not affect other children’s enjoyment of the session. Members are expected to show respect for each other and treat everything that is said or overheard in confidence.*

*Members should be advised that there is a no smoking, shouting, swearing or smacking policy, and mobile phones should not be used whilst on the premises.*
Involving parents and carers in play
Parents and carers can gradually introduce their children to a social environment where they can learn with other children and gain more confidence. Taking part in different activities with their children helps parents and carers to understand how their children learn and what their interests are.

Parents and carers also have the opportunity to socialise with and support one another. Providing activities in the session that reflect the diversity and ethnicity of families that attend can help them to feel welcome and provide rich learning experiences for their children.

Create a welcoming environment with plenty of activities to stimulate the full age range of children who attend. Big floor cushions for adults will encourage them to sit and play with their children. Create a separate safe area for babies with a washable rug, cushions, play mats and baby toys, and separate areas for sharing books and playing with ride-on toys. You may have to work around existing fixtures and fittings, so ensure that you have considered how to block access to certain areas if needed. Other health and safety considerations include:

- chairs stacked no more than three high
- no access to kitchen areas
- outside door must be secure
- a safe space for babies
- no hot drinks in the room or near children

If you decide to serve snacks at your session, keep it simple and choose healthy options. You should also be aware of the ingredients in your snacks in case of any allergies.
Activities
Toys do not need to be new but they do need to be clean, safe, in good condition and appropriate for the ages of the children in the session. Remember that most children attending will be under five, but on occasion parents and carers may bring along an older child, which must be at the discretion of the organisers. If you share premises with a pre-school, it may be possible to borrow equipment, but if not, ask parents and carers for toy donations. Play dough is cheap to make (but do check for allergies), cardboard boxes are free and water for play can be put in a baby bath. Tables and chairs usually come with the premises, but check their height, condition and safety.

You will need cups, beakers for children and a kettle; these may be available on the premises for general use, but do check first. You will also need a register, accident book, first aid kit and access to a land line or mobile phone. It is very important that all equipment conforms to CE safety standards and carries the British Toy and Hobby Association Lion Mark.

**Activities for new borns**

A basic range of toys and play materials encourage babies to explore with their fingers and mouths. Create a stimulating environment for them to:

- *look at* pictures, mobiles, shapes, colours, patterns, mirrors, shiny and dull objects, and moving toys
- *listen to* someone singing, rhymes, music, rattles, bells and musical mobiles
- *touch and handle* soft toys in different fabrics and safe objects of different texture, shape and weight
Activities from three months

As small babies grow they need resources that encourage them to:

- *kick and reach* soft balls or toys
- *reach or grasp* toys that rock, roll or squeak when touched, rattles, teethers, household objects such as wooden spoons or plastic bowls
- *use both hands on* rattles or teethers which the baby has to hold with one hand and manipulate with the other

Activities for crawling babies

Crawling babies need space to explore and test their mobility skills. They continue to learn through their senses, so colour, shape, sound and texture are very important. Provide equipment for them to:

- **manipulate:** activity centres and mats, buckets, boxes and baskets to fill, household and natural objects to handle, soft bricks to build and knock down, posting boxes, pop-up toys and cars to push around
- **use to make sounds:** shakers, lids and spoons to bang, humming tops, bells and squeakers
- **move towards:** balls, plastic bottles, cars and other toys which roll slightly when pushed
- **look at:** simple books and catalogues showing everyday objects, and an adult to share them with
Activities for toddlers

Toddlers will require more space to move around without getting knocked over and large stable equipment to help gain their balance. At this stage children will enjoy equipment they can push and pull for example:

- *baby walkers*, that are heavy with a low centre of gravity to avoid tipping
- *push-along toys*, such as prams, animals and ‘pretend’ machines, such as grass cutters and vacuum cleaners

Activities from 18 months

Children can enjoy a wide range of play experiences that will extend their development. Some activities will require more planning and adult supervision, particularly for ‘messy play’, however it is these activities that are particularly valuable to children. The following types of play should be provided:

- **Creative play**: focusing on the process rather than the end result. Encouraged by materials, such as crayons, chalk or soft pencils; painting using thick brushes and non-toxic paint in non-spill pots and large pieces of paper on a table or low easel; collage and junk modelling using non-toxic glues with spatulas or brushes; a variety of musical instruments, bought or homemade, to shake, bang, scrape or pluck.
**Imaginative play:** dressing up with hats, bags, shawls; simple kitchen and household utensils from different cultures; dolls representing a range of ethnic groups; road mats for cars; toy animals; a home play area; dough with rollers and cutters; train sets.

**Books and stories:** attractive picture books; stories about familiar events and situations.

**Exploratory play:** homemade play dough with different colours, textures and smells; sand or water play with an assortment of containers; clay or wood (carefully sanded) for children to handle and build with; goop (corn flour and water).

**Energetic play:** slides and climbing frames with safety mats; large cardboard boxes; rocking horse or rocking chair; sit and ride toys; tunnel; small set of steps.

**Manipulative and skill building play:** interlocking bricks, blocks and shapes; lacing and threading, peg boards; shape sorters; toys to screw and turn.

**Mathematical play:** opportunities to sort, match, sequence and count objects; to make patterns; to talk about volume, weight, shape and size of objects.

**Technological play:** small scale vehicles; cranes and pulleys; old radios and clocks.
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