

This article was downloaded by: [Eastern Michigan University]

On: 04 January 2012, At: 12:35

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Infant Observation

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/riob20>

### Learning to wonder together: a group approach to work with parents and infants in a community setting

Nikki French

Available online: 09 Mar 2011

To cite this article: Nikki French (2011): Learning to wonder together: a group approach to work with parents and infants in a community setting, *Infant Observation*, 14:1, 75-88

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13698036.2011.552638>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# Learning to wonder together: a group approach to work with parents and infants in a community setting

Nikki French

This paper describes a group work programme called ‘Together Time’. The group was set up for parents and infants between 10 and 24 months of age, where there was concern about the parents’ ability to ‘play’ and difficulties in the parent-infant relationship. The group ran for 10 weeks with four dyads in total. We used the Watch, Wait and Wonder approach in order to heighten parents’ observational skills, and to stimulate discussion and thinking with parents about their infants’ experiences in the group. Clinical vignettes are inserted throughout this paper, based on my observations of the group and the interactions between each dyad over the course of the 10 sessions.

**Keywords:** group intervention; parent-infant relationship; containment; watch; wait; wonder

## Introduction

The work to be described took place when I was employed as a Senior Family Support Worker in a Family Support Services Team within Children’s Social Services. Part of this role involved co-facilitating group work programmes for parents and infants. In this paper I will be describing a group approach to work with parents and infants under two years of age, that incorporates the use of ‘Watch, Wait and Wonder’ (Muir, 1992). The aim of this approach is to help parents become more responsive to their infants by encouraging them to observe their infant and then think about the infant’s communications and play. It can be used to address early relationships difficulties between parents and infants. During WWW, mothers are asked to be non-directive so that the play becomes infant led and the infant can take more initiative in the interactions. The mother is encouraged to reflect on her infant’s play which then makes it possible for her conscious and unconscious representations of the infant to be explored. Muir (1992) writes:

‘... the instructions to follow the infant’s lead throw a switch that turns off the power of the mother’s projections through stopping her intrusive, impinging actions and reactions’ (p. 325).

Muir (1992) goes on to describe the process that occurs between mother and infant when the intervention is used over several sessions:

The initial sessions appear to involve the infant in securing the mother as a safe base. Following this, the infant starts to use the mother as an object, in a way that appears to reflect the infant’s struggle to gain the aliment, or the missing relational ‘food’ essential for development. Part of this process demands of the mother that she becomes a container (Bion, 1962) ... for the infant’s experience. The final sessions are ones in which the mother is clearly used as a secure base (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978) from which the infant is then free to explore ... (p. 321)

I was introduced to this approach by the Primary Infant Mental Health Worker in our Authority, and through undertaking an MA in Infant Mental Health. Although my colleagues and I did not have any formal training in this intervention at the time, we decided to include a version of it into the structure of a group, as a way of working more effectively with very young infants and their care-givers.

The group work programme is called ‘Together Time’ and is a 10-week course for children between 10 and 24 months and their parents. The group has taken place in various community settings, but most often at a Sure Start Children’s Centre in the Local Authority where I worked. The Authority is made up of mostly urban areas, where pockets of deprivation are easily identifiable. We gave detailed presentations to Social Work and Health professionals in the area where we were running the group in order to generate referrals, hoping to reach vulnerable families who are isolated or have complex needs which would not be met by an average parent-toddler group. We specifically asked professionals to refer to us if the parent had experienced persistent difficulties with their infants’ feeding, sleeping, crying or behaviour. The group is facilitated by three staff, all Family Support Workers. We have run five courses of Together Time to date with five different sets of parents and infants. We have found that our practice is evolving all the time.

### **The group format**

The group runs for two hours. Each week we set out a mat with cushions around the outside for parents to sit on. We put a variety of toys on the mat each week, many of which remain throughout the course, for example, wooden bricks, a shape sorter, a doll’s house, a tea set, some puppets, some wild animals, books, a soft ring with coloured balls inside and some large soft blocks. We have a period of welcome and free play for the first 20 minutes; this allows parents an opportunity to talk about problems and difficulties they have faced since we last met and means that they are then more able to focus on making observations of

their children. A period of 10 to 20 minutes of Watch, Wait and Wonder (WWW) follows the free play time.

Parents need time to get used to the WWW concept and the instructions to follow their child's lead, as they typically find it very hard not to intervene in their child's activity. The amount of observation time is gradually increased week by week, as the parents and the children adapt to the silence that often ensues at this time. After the Watch, Wait and Wonder time, the group facilitators sit with the parents and children around a table for a drink and snack. We use this time to observe behaviours around feeding which are often difficult, and are a 'symptom' of the difficulties in a parent-infant relationship. We comment on the baby's behaviour at this time and on our observations about the WWW time. This is a modification to the technique described by Muir (1992) who suggests it is only the mother's own observations that should be discussed. However, we have found that at the beginning of the group the mother's struggle to notice anything at all about their infants, and therefore need help to articulate their feelings. We have found that by offering our own thoughts about the infant's play initially, we tend to stimulate their thinking and help them to learn how to observe. In fact, in parents' evaluation of a later group, facilitators' observations were one of the things that parents found helpful in enabling them to build better relationships with their children, especially when these observations were positive. When parents start to notice more themselves, we offer them a chance to write their observations down onto a piece of card, and display the cards each week, enabling us to see how their observations become richer and more detailed over the course of 10 weeks.

After the discussion time (which varies in length), we offer the parents a chance to try a creative activity with their child, such as painting, playdoh or water play. This helps us to observe the parents and infant's reactions to 'mess' and provides further opportunity for observations of the level of anxiety within the relationship. We end the group with some singing in a circle, and include several familiar nursery rhymes, which remain the same each week.

### **Shaky beginnings**

This paper is about my experience with our third Together Time group. The group I will describe consisted of four families (in order to maintain confidentiality I have used pseudonyms throughout): Rebecca is a young mum who has a 22-month-old daughter, Amber; Katie is also a young mum and attended with her 15-month-old son, Thomas; Holly is in her mid twenties and attended with her 22-month-old son, Robert. Holly had recently had another baby boy, who she left with her grandmother to come to the group with Robert. Jackie attended with her 13-month-old daughter Megan; Jackie has three older children who are all Looked After. All of the families were referred by their Health Visitor due to a degree of isolation in their community and needing input on developing

their play skills and their relationship with their children. We made pre-group visits to all four families by way of an introduction.

Our initial observations of the group indicated that the mothers found it very difficult to read their children's cues. Neither mother nor infant felt understood by the other. It was the difficulties that Holly was having with her son, Robert (22 months), that were most noticeable in the early weeks. In the second session, Holly arrived pulling Robert up forcefully by his arms to get him to come onto the mat as he was reluctant, his legs flailing around on the floor. After a few moments Robert did want to explore but not without his mother by his side, as he pulled roughly on her clothes and pointed to the toys. Robert soon began to play with the dolls in the cot, pulling them out roughly and throwing them one by one into the ball pool. He went from one toy to the next, picking them up and discarding them just as quickly. When other children and parents started to arrive, he snatched a dolls pram from Amber.

Holly called 'No' in a harsh tone and told Robert to give it back, offering him another. He refused so Amber took the other buggy and Robert then wanted the one that she had. This continued several more times; Holly quickly got frustrated and dragged Robert away, laying him on the floor as he started to tantrum. She shook her head towards him; I felt she was somewhat despairing and also embarrassed by his behaviour ... he was then distracted by other toys. He trampled over them so they became strewn around in a disorderly fashion, sometimes passing things to his mum but also throwing them at her head. Holly explained that she had not attended any other groups in the past as she was worried he would snatch from other children and hurt them. We tried to reassure her that this was age appropriate behaviour and to be expected.

The WWW time allowed us to make observations of the interactions between the other parents and their infants. Amber (22 months) tended to approach staff members to play rather than her own mum; Rebecca sat nervously pulling on her sleeves, her arms curled around her body and she watched the other mothers with their children more than Amber. Thomas (15 months) wandered the perimeter of the room, sometimes stopping to push a trolley or pram. He did not approach his mum at all in this time and seemed to be in a world of his own. Megan (13 months) shuffled a few inches from her mum on the mat, staring at other children who came near her. She was mostly still and looked quite stunned. Her mum commented after about five minutes, 'She's just taking it all in', and smiled; she implied that a setting like this was unfamiliar for her. Megan spent time looking at Robert's mum who smiled in an animated way that was different from the way she responded to her own son. Once the WWW time started, Robert's pace seemed to slow; with his mother's interest and attention on him he started to relax. He liked the large soft blocks and I felt more hopeful when a game materialised:

Robert picked up a block and passed this to his mum; she put it on top of another and Robert copied her by adding another. They built a tower which Robert pushed down. They both smiled at each other and he passed her another block. She hesitated as if not

sure how to respond; I asked, 'Does he want you to do that again?' She said yes and added it on top. The game was repeated and I smiled at her, encouragingly. She played peep-boo around the tower and became focused on their play. I felt heartened.

During the feedback time I was able to comment to Holly that Robert had not hurt others or taken things off them in this time and on the enjoyable exchanges between them. She seemed to receive this positively. However, I was more unsure about how to voice the emotional upset Robert had experienced over the buggy at the beginning of the session and did not take this up.

Megan's mother began to reflect further on the newness of the group experience for Megan and how she was not used to being around other children, 'It feels like she's an only child.' I was able to consider that in observing Megan, Jackie might be put back in touch with the loss of her older children. Her comments perhaps indicated that it was she herself who was 'taking it all in'. I thought that my attention to the meaning of the children's play might encourage a more reciprocal relationship between the mothers and their infants. Robert's throwing of the doll might signify the difficulties he is experiencing in sharing his mum with a new sibling; was he grabbing toys from others because he feels so deprived himself and as if he has lost his mother?

Rebecca and Katie seemed very much on the edge of the group during this session and my memory of Amber and Thomas was lost; it felt hard to hold all the children and mothers 'in mind'. I agreed with my colleagues that we would take turns to carry out practical tasks so that at least one person would have a sustained focus on the parent-infant interactions and the emotional experiences that were happening in the group.

I recognised that the mothers were bringing very difficult feelings to the group and this impacted on us as facilitators. During the start of session four we seemed to have difficulty in holding the structure together; we got muddled with everyone's names. Jackie and Holly talked over our instructions about WWW time, and Robert, being excluded from their conversation, began to tantrum and tried to leave the room. I felt uneasy as I observed Amber seemingly being ignored by her mother. Soon my attention was drawn to Katie and Thomas.

Thomas knocked down some large soft blocks that Amber was building with. Katie thwarted him, telling him he would 'go home' if he can't play nicely. He looked at the floor and lifted his arms to his forehead, and wandered away . . . I was soon startled by Katie's loud voice again, saying 'No!' to Thomas when he took another child's toy. He frowned and brought his hands up to his eyes and lowered his head.

Katie's tone felt humiliating and there was an uncomfortable feeling in the room. I wondered if Thomas was experiencing a feeling of shame, his hands shielding his eyes, and felt he was too young to understand the threat of being taken home.

Gerhardt (2004) suggests it is vital for the toddler to re-establish a warm connection with the parent after experiencing a display of negativity and

displeasure from them in response to unacceptable behaviour. The child finds this stressful and unpleasant, experiencing humiliation, and needs help to regulate these feelings. She points to work by Schore (2003) who thinks that later narcissistic disorders are linked with poor regulation of shame in infancy. She writes:

Parents who are not good at regulating their toddlers may leave the toddler in a distressed state for too long. They may be parents who have difficulties in bearing negative feelings, so they may attempt to distance themselves from the child's feelings instead of entering into them and 'containing' them. These parents often tease or humiliate a child in a state of shame. (p. 158)

My attention was also with Rebecca and Amber in this session. I observed that Rebecca had great difficulty in playing with her daughter.

Amber was keen to play with a ball, and I encouraged Rebecca to join her; she replied 'She won't let me play with her.' I struggled to take this up with her, and decided to focus my attention on Amber who easily engaged with me in kicking a ball to and fro. I ask her to take the ball to mummy so that she can have a turn; she did this but Rebecca remained unresponsive and Amber wandered off.

I felt puzzled as to know what to do to help Rebecca and Amber. We were battling hard to try and meet each dyad's needs.

### **The group as 'container'**

Despite the early sessions feeling quite over-whelming, we started to notice some subtle changes in the way that the parents were responding to their infants. Although they would arrive back to the group in a state of chaos after a week without seeing us, we could start to gather them together more quickly and often the second half of the session would feel quite different to the first. We were beginning to receive some of the mother's unbearable feelings and anxieties and to offer some 'containment' (Bion, 1962) to them. Towards the end of WWW time in session four, I felt some hopefulness when the mothers intervened in a squabble in a more effective way. Robert had been playing with a push-along toy and when he saw Thomas having a turn, he snatched it back and pulled Thomas heavily onto the floor. Katie attended to Thomas who was quickly soothed, and then talked for him, saying to Robert, 'Please can I have a turn now?' Holly, in turn, helped Robert to cope with sharing the toy.

I felt pleased when she scooped Robert up, holding him in her arms and saying softly it was someone else's turn now but then he could have another go afterwards. He calmed quickly.

During the feedback time, I asked the mothers what they had noticed about their child's play. Holly began to talk about why she thought Robert had difficulty in sharing toys.

She said, 'It's my fault, I've spoilt him completely.' I asked her gently what she meant. She replied, 'I've always given him everything he wanted.' I highlighted 'What an awful lot of people there are to compete with here and to have to share his mummy with.' Jackie was sensitive to Holly's distress and talked about her memories of her older boys showing similar behaviour.

In trying to ensure that each mother was 'heard' I asked Katie what she had noticed about Thomas. I talked with Katie, pointing out that she had supported Thomas at times, by voicing what he wanted. I mentioned my observation of his behaviour when she raised her voice, asking 'What do you think he is thinking when you do this?' Katie replied 'He's thinking Oh no, you've caught me! I'm doing something that I shouldn't.' I suggested he might feel quite ashamed and that he is sensitive to her tones of voice. Katie watched Thomas and smiled tenderly; she looked thoughtful.

One of the difficulties of working with parents who have a chaotic lifestyle is that often they cannot commit to completing all 10 sessions, and this causes further disruptions to the group. Half way through this group Holly told us that she was moving house and would not be able to attend next week. I thought about the impact of this change on Robert and how this would interrupt his experience of the group. Unfortunately, Holly and Robert never returned. We telephoned to encourage them to come back, but life seemed hectic for Holly, having moved for the third time in a matter of months. She was also now a considerable bus ride away from the Centre where the group was running. The other parents asked about Holly and Robert when they didn't return. We were able to acknowledge their sadness about losing them from the group.

### **Making connections**

It was Megan who arrived in a state of upset in session five. Jackie said she was not planning to come today as she felt unwell but that Megan was banging on the door, saying 'Mummy out.' I observed Megan's behaviour in the first part of the session.

Megan was face down on the mat a short distance from Jackie who chose to sit away from her today. Jackie called Megan's name. Megan put her head down to face the floor and began to sob loudly. She did not seek comfort and there was an uncomfortable feeling in the room. Jackie fetched her, pulling her up by the armpits awkwardly and sat her in front of her back on the mat.

During WWW time, Megan reached forward to a puppet, with an 'upset' face; she waved it in front of herself and passed it to her mum, who suggested, 'Would you like me to show you how it works?' Megan climbed into her lap and Jackie held her while putting the puppet on her hand and making it say hello. Megan took it back and Jackie smiled, saying, 'What have you got?!' Jackie helped her to get her hand in but Megan soon shook it off and then watched the other children.



It wasn't until I began writing up some notes about the session that I made a link between Megan's distress and her choice of puppet with the 'upset' face; her distress evoked anxiety in me and this anxiety had got in the way of talking with Jackie about Megan's upset. There seemed to be a need for Megan to get herself and her mummy to the group today, as if recognising its importance for them. Although difficult to do, I realised that by voicing the emotions in the group, the mothers might be better able to recognise both their own and their children's emotional states.

The time we spent on reflection and discussion with the mothers within the group was becoming invaluable. During this week's discussion time, I commented on Megan's play with a doll and suggested that children often use play as a means of expressing their thoughts and experiences. Jackie then talked about wanting Megan to have what she hadn't had as a child, what she felt she had missed out on, but reflected that maybe she is too over-bearing and one day she expects Megan will tell her to 'get off'. She said she worries that she shows her too much love. Was Jackie expressing a fear that one day her daughter will leave her? It seemed that her own need for 'love' was taking priority over her daughter's need to be helped with difficult feelings, and that she was desperate for her daughter only have positive feelings towards her.

Whilst we missed an opportunity to talk about Megan's upset, at feedback time this week we were able to comment on changes observed in Thomas and his vibrancy during the session.

My colleague said Thomas seemed very lively today and Katie reflected with a smile, 'He's been lovely this week.' Thomas looked content as he babbled to us and used a beaker with handles instead of his bottle. We noticed his language was coming on and I said how much talking he is doing now.

I wondered if my comment to Katie last week had helped her to think about Thomas as a person with feelings and emotions of his own. He seemed to be 'blossoming' through the experience of having a mother who could think about him. Later in the session, the mothers and infants had the opportunity to play with jelly and 'slime'. The children noticeably relaxed with their hands in this, mothers too; there was some humour in the group when Thomas wandered into the kitchen area and Katie responded, 'Hang on Thomas, mummy's playing!' and he happily returned to her. I wondered if the mothers needed the opportunity to be nourished and to experience play for themselves, before they could help their children to play. Puckering, Evans, Maddox, Mills, and Cox (1996) also refer to the benefits of mothers enjoying messy play, art and crafts in their 'Mellow Parenting' programme, particularly if the mothers did not experience these kinds of activities as children.

Jackie and Megan did not attend the next three sessions because they were ill. My colleagues and I continued to work with the other two families, focusing on voicing the children's emotions whenever possible. I began to feel more

confident about making links between the children's play and what might be happening in the parent-infant relationship. Arriving for session six, Amber flamboyantly threw herself into the arms of my colleague, as she had done every week thus far. Later, during WWW time Amber began filling and emptying the shape sorter and spontaneously climbed into her mum's lap for a cuddle, saying 'Baby' before getting down and initiating play with Katie. During the discussion about WWW time, I tried to think with Rebecca about some of Amber's communications.

I wondered to Rebecca about Amber's comment 'baby' when she cuddled her mum. Rebecca said she was unsure as to what this was about. I suggested to her that perhaps Amber is reminding us that part of her is still very much a baby, half in and half out of toddlerhood, and perhaps still needs comfort as well as wanting to become independent. Rebecca nodded.

During session seven, I and my colleagues were amazed to see some progress between Rebecca and Amber. It seemed as though some connection had been established between the two of them. As WWW time ensued, Amber approached her mum to play:

Amber gathered six small soft blocks and gave them to her mum. Rebecca put one on top of another and steadied the tower as Amber added more and then gleefully knocked it down. Rebecca responded in a quiet voice 'Yay!' and smiled. The game continued and Amber began to vocalise tunefully, 'Mum-my, mum-my'.

Amber followed Thomas onto the slide and Rebecca sat at the bottom, watching her come down and smiling at her as she landed.

During the discussion time we commented on how much Amber enjoyed her mother playing with her. My colleague asked Rebecca how this felt and she smiled coyly and said 'Good'. Later in the session she sat with Amber to paint. Again, Amber was keen for her to join in. We also noticed that talking on behalf of the children seemed helpful for Katie who had difficulty in understanding Thomas at times.

Katie sat Thomas at the table ready for snack time but she then wandered away to the kitchen. He began to cry. Katie seemed unsure about why this was. I tried to voice his upset, saying 'Mummy is too far away from you now Thomas.' She then moved closer to him and offered a cuddle. He settled back at the table, having been reassured.

### **Ending the group**

As the ending of the group approached we began to remind parents that we would soon be having our final session. In the penultimate week, I noticed that Amber entered the room excitedly but did not throw herself into the arms of a staff member. I wondered if she was being thought about by her mother more and so did not feel the need to. Jackie arrived with Megan, who seemed anxious

about being put down and began to cry. Jackie seemed to find this mildly irritating, announcing to her 'I'm not going anywhere!' This was their first week back after a period of illness and Jackie then talked about how she was going into hospital to have a small operation. I was able to make the link between Megan's anxiety on arrival and this forthcoming 'separation'. Katie came in with Thomas who was asleep but woke as he was lifted out of his buggy, clinging to his mum and not wanting to be put down. This seemed to help Jackie become more responsive to Megan.

Jackie commented to Megan, 'You're not the only one look, who's clingy.' Megan made an approach towards her mum and Jackie allowed her to cuddle into her now, as if seeing Thomas had normalised her daughter's behaviour.

We had not yet started our WWW time but surprisingly, the mothers had begun observing the children and commenting on what they were doing.

They were all on their feet, Megan venturing towards the middle of the mat, Thomas exploring books and taking them to his mum to show her, and Amber taking the blankets off of the doll in the cot and re-adjusting them carefully. It was pleasing to see them all so engrossed in their own play, and a stark contrast to their initial clinginess and reluctance to explore purposefully at the beginning of the group.

Amber put a yellow 'builders' hat on her head (we had dressing up clothes out today) and then fetched another, taking it to Thomas who was now in the ball pit and gently placed it on his head. He smiled and later went to the mirror, peering in and babbling to himself, much to the amusement of his mum and others. He beamed.

I wondered whether the children's play in this session was indicative of an improved sense of emotional security between the mothers and infants. Katie in particular seemed to take pleasure in Thomas' humorous and exploratory behaviour. However, interactions between Rebecca and Amber had begun to deteriorate again. There was more thinking to be done in order to understand why this was. Amber approached her twice during WWW time, initiating a game with blocks as she had done in the previous weeks, but this time Rebecca's body language was 'closed'.

Rebecca smiled but did not build or move or make any comment. Amber started to jump around the outside of the mat, in a manic way, and shouted 'Aaahhh.' I wondered if this was her way of trying to be 'heard' and perhaps a way of reminding us of her existence, which was not being acknowledged by her mother. I felt sad but also frustrated and puzzled by Rebecca's behaviour.

I later tried to take this up with her at the feedback time when all children and adults were sat around the table for snack time.

I commented to Rebecca that Amber also goes to her more often than she used to; she smiled and nodded. I said, 'I wonder if when she brought you the cups, she wanted you

to build with her?’ Rebecca replied, ‘No, you’ve just got to hold them, like, they’re mine.’ She looked at Amber and away from me. I felt despondent after last week’s progress.

I reflected on the impact of the group ending for these mothers. Rebecca’s reaction to Amber’s approach to play might have indicated how difficult she was finding the ending of a group that she had benefited from and would miss. Her comment about not needing to play with Amber but simply having ‘to hold onto her toys’ might represent the difficulty that she was experiencing in not having the group anymore; soon this would be ‘taken from her’. Due to staffing issues we had to have a planned break of three weeks before our final session, which was a more informal Christmas party at the mothers’ request. When asked, all four mothers said that they would like to do a second course of ‘Together Time’ if it was offered to them. My colleagues and I felt that we would like to continue our work with them; there was still much that we had not managed to change.

## **Discussion**

The evidence from these sessions of the Together Time group shows that the group was therapeutic. The WWW approach helped the mothers to be non-intrusive and especially helped them to watch their babies and begin to wonder about their communications. By encouraging parents to ‘notice’ their infant each week, there were times when they became more responsive towards their infants. Indeed, observation seems central to many parent-infant ways of working. Reynolds (2003) in her paper on Mindful Parenting Groups, highlighted the value of parents ‘simply slowing down enough to notice’ (p. 362) and suggested that the enhancement of reflective capacity begins when parents direct their attention to both the child and their own internal state, and follow their child’s lead.

Our use of the Watch, Wait and Wonder approach differed from the description that Muir (1992) provides, though the focus of the group is still on parent-infant interaction and on helping parents to be reflective about what they have observed in the sessions. One of the key differences is the role of the facilitator in articulating feelings and finding the vocabulary for feelings, so that the mothers can put emotions into words. Salzberger-Wittenberg (1970) suggests that if parents have the capacity not just to care about, but also think about, differentiate and give a feeling a name, then distress can become safer to experience. In addition, research by Fonagy, Steele, Steele, Moran, and Higgitt (1991) found that the ability to ‘mentalise’, that is, the ability to reflect on one’s own and others mental states is a strong predictor of a child’s secure attachment.

Bion (1962) proposed that when a mother is receptive to her infant’s state of mind, she can provide a kind of emotional ‘containment’ for difficult experiences. A young infant does not have the ability to think and deal with overwhelming feelings; his mental capacity is too immature. Therefore, the role of

the mother is to be receptive to these feelings, accept them and process them for the baby, so that they can then be delivered back in a more manageable form (Bion, 1962). However, receiving unbearable feelings is fundamentally disturbing; the baby's feelings may seem quite over-whelming for the mother and she may try to seek ways of avoiding the emotional impact on her. This then disrupts the ability to offer containment; "the 'container' may then itself be in need of containment" (Miller et al., 1989, p. 27).

It was helpful to think about how these ideas might apply in the group. In 'receiving' and articulating feelings for the mothers, the facilitators were able to provide emotional 'containment' for them, and this in turn supported the development of mother as 'container' for the infant. It also seems plausible that the mothers were offering some mutual containment to each other during the discussion time. The mothers had an experience of being emotionally 'held' in the group and this may have contributed to the changes that we were observing.

By the end of the group, the infants were more curious and more able to explore the toys and objects in the room. Referring to Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment, Brisch and Kronenberg (2002) highlight that once a child is able to experience emotional security with an attachment figure and their attachment needs are met, the child's curiosity can be indulged and they take pleasure in exploratory behaviour. They write:

Secure attachment is a precondition of an infant's ability to explore his environment and experience himself as an agent and self-effective individual. (p. 18)

It was also helpful for the mothers to have the opportunity to watch other infants and parents in the group. Parents could reflect with each other about what they had observed and about their relationships with their children, and also see that some behaviour was 'normal' which in turn, helped them to become more responsive. They could also observe their infant interacting with other children and parents and not just with them; seeing their infant being sociable and co-operative was positive. The mothers left the group more able to make use of social support; they agreed to exchange telephone numbers so that they could keep in touch with each other after the group had ended.

However, using the WWW approach in a group format rather than on an individual basis did have some limitations. At times, there were lots of competing demands for the attention of the facilitators. We were aware that often the mothers had so many unmet needs of their own that it was hard to keep the infants simultaneously in mind. Similarly, Rance (2005) comments on this in her paper on the use of WWW with babies and parents:

As often happens in traditional infant observations, at times the baby in the room would be obscured by the mother's voracious hunger for the therapist's attention. (p. 136)

For example, during session four of the group, Jackie disclosed painful information about her older children's violent father and her past addiction to

drugs, to one of the facilitators. It was difficult to take this up with her in the presence of three other mothers and their infants. Individual counselling may have been beneficial for mothers such as Jackie as it was not possible explore the individual parents' histories in detail within the group. Other approaches such as 'Mellow Parenting' (Puckering et al., 1996) do incorporate separate time for the parent to reflect on their own issues related to their childhood and current relationships in their weekly programme.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have attempted to offer a description of my experience within a 'Together Time' group. The use of WWW in a group format has helped us to get in touch with the mothers' feelings and perceptions of their infants. It has encouraged the mothers to really observe and notice their child; it was clear that they found this difficult to do before they started the group. Through the learning on the MA course, I began to reflect more on what the infants were communicating through their play and, although difficult, became more receptive to the emotional content of the group. The mothers were offered valuable time to think and reflect on their infant's experience within the group. Towards the end, we noticed that the infants displayed less clinginess and more exploratory behaviour. Our effort to 'contain' the mothers as they struggled to offer containment to their infants has been a central theme throughout this work.

## **Acknowledgements**

I must acknowledge the significant contributions that my colleagues Fidge Jenkins and Allie Baxter have made to this work since the Together Time group was developed in 2005. I would like to offer my thanks to all of the colleagues who have co-facilitated this group with me over the past four years, not forgetting the work of Tess Price and Nicky Nutt. Thank you all for your support and enthusiasm; without you, this work would not have been possible.

## **References**

- Bion, W.R. (1962). *Learning from experience*. London: Heinemann.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss: Volume 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Brisch, K.H., & Kronenberg, K. (2002). *Treating attachment disorders: From theory to therapy*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Fonagy, P., Steele, M., Steele, H., Moran, G.S., & Higgitt, A.C. (1991). The capacity for understanding mental states: The reflective self in parent and child and its significance for security of attachment. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 12(3), 201–218.
- Gerhardt, S. (2004). *Why love matters: How affection shapes a baby's brain*. East Sussex, UK: Routledge.

- Miller, L., Rustin, M., Rustin, M., & Shuttleworth, J. (Eds.). (1989). *Closely observed infants*. London: Duckworth Press.
- Muir, E. (1992). Watching, waiting and wondering: Applying psychoanalytic principles to mother-infant intervention. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 13(4), 319–328.
- Puckering, C., Evans, J., Maddox, H., Mills, M., & Cox, A.D. (1996). Taking control: A single case study of mellow parenting. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 1(4), 539–550.
- Rance, S. (2005). Attending to early relationship difficulties: Applying the ‘watch, wait and wonder’ approach in a pilot project for babies and parents. *Infant Observation*, 8(2), 125–138.
- Reynolds, D. (2003). Mindful parenting: A group approach to enhancing reflective capacity in parents and infants. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, 29(3), 357–374.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I. (1970). *Psycho-analytic insight and relationships: A Kleinian approach*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Schore, A. (2003). *Affect dysregulation and the disorders of the self*. New York: Norton.