

# Impact of Covid

## Common Challenges

### *Impact on Babies*

#### During the pandemic

Babies were particularly absent from considerations on the impact of the pandemic. Amy Brown's Covid Babies is a welcome exception in that it particularly focuses on pregnancy, birth and early experiences of parents and infants.

Pandemic measures were particularly stringent in health settings where almost all babies are born, and home births were curtailed as a pandemic measure. Partners' presence during maternity appointments and during labour was restricted. There were further restrictions on postnatal visiting which meant the wider family was less involved in the birth of their new family member which may have had long lasting consequences. In neonatal wards, where new parents experience particularly high levels of stress, there were significantly higher levels of separation of mother and baby. This is particularly devastating because babies in neonatal units are already exposed to a medicalised environment which may negatively impact on healthy development. Kangaroo care (where baby is in skin-to-skin contact with a parent) or containment hold (where a parent holds a baby in an incubator with their hands) are known to reduce stress experienced by the premature or sick baby, and depriving of this comfort poses a significant risk for health and developmental outcomes. A mother and baby spending less time together also impacts on lactation which is another protective factor for premature and sick babies as the provision of breastmilk reduces the risk of serious and potentially fatal complications.

All these restrictions could impact both on the development of secure attachment, so foundational for long term social and emotional development, as well as postnatal maternal mental health. Fathers too reported that they felt excluded and disempowered, impacting on their parenting confidence.

The wearing of masks in hospital settings and in public resembles to the baby a parent or adult who is not attuned to them, which can be a distressing experience and cause elevated stress hormone levels. Research shows that the first weeks of life are particularly important for babies to relate to human faces (Brown 2021). There is a significant risk that young babies' exposure to extended interactions where their caregiver was wearing a mask has impacted on their earliest social and emotional development. Early years practitioners have noted that some babies [struggled to respond to facial expressions](#).



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## Ongoing Impact

Limited early responsive interactions may also have had a negative impact on babies' and children's speech, language and communication development. Delays have been observed, both in relation to their vocabulary and their confidence to speak.

Babies and young children also missed out on social interactions beyond the family unit. They were exposed to a considerably smaller number of people and had significantly less peer interaction. This has resulted in some children being reluctant in group settings or needing support with sharing and turn taking.

Many parents observed that there was an increase in separation anxiety when children re-engaged in social settings. This can be worrying for parents and a barrier to accessing early education and childcare settings, further exacerbating the lack of social contact that the youngest children experienced.

Early Years practitioners have observed a [delay in babies' physical development](#) and gross motor skills. This can be attributed to less availability of outdoor play and play settings where young children were able to be physically active. Oftentimes, social outdoor play encourages physical play and opportunities for this were particularly restricted.

