



Classes for babies prove popular with mums and tots

BABY, YOU'LL BE THE BEST

A college for babies — whatever next? **Debbie Waite** went to investigate a new class where the learning starts before the pupils can even walk.

WHETHER you think it's a great idea or a new age fad, Baby College certainly seems to have the approval of its young students. Seven babies between the age of eight weeks and eight months in a room without the 'tweenies would normally be a recipe for mayhem. But here they were, with nothing but Mozart to amuse them and you could hear a pin drop. At the New Marston Pastoral Centre on a cold morning in February, seven mums and their precious bundles gathered for their weekly Baby College class.

'We're not trying to make our babies young Einsteins, but I think a lot of parents worry they are not stimulating their baby enough'

From an idea originally conceived by two mums from Reading, a franchise of Baby College opened in Oxfordshire at the beginning of this year, and is run by friends Bea Waterford and Donna Twyford.

The 'college' offers classes based on age: up to nine months, nine-18 months and 18-36 months, and aims to help mums understand how, when and why their growing child develops, and how they can aid that development.

Bea took the class I went to and while setting up the room, told why she helped set up Baby College in Oxford.

"When my son John was born prematurely, I worried about how

little I knew about his development," she said. "I read all the books I could find on the subject, but I wish these Baby College classes had been available then and I could have learned, had fun and been sociable all at the same time."

"Donna and I saw the advert for the Baby College franchises on the same day and e-mailed each other to say what a fantastic idea it was."

"After nine months looking into it, the company trained us and our classes are proving really popular."

While Bea and I talked, the mums started to filter in, including Natasha Richardson, 32, and her eight-week-old son Joshua. This was the first time at Baby College for Natasha and Joshua, and along for support was Natasha's mum-in-law, Anne Richardson, 64.

"We don't really know what to expect," explained Gran. "They didn't have this kind of thing when I was a young mum. But Natasha read about it in the parish magazine and thought it would be a nice way to get out and meet other mums."

While the mums sat on floor mats in a semi-circle with their babies, I took a seat at the back and watched the spectacle unfold.

During the next 45 minutes, Bea took her class through a carefully constructed chain of exercises, starting with the welcome song.

Songs and movement seem to feature highly throughout Baby College classes and while the thinking behind the exercises may be bang up-to-date, I was glad to learn the nursery rhymes are old favourites, like *Ba Ba Black Sheep* and *Ride a Cock Horse*.

This week's letter, Bea said, was M, and the mums' homework was to point out to their babies all the things they saw beginning with M — homework at eight weeks old — gulp!

FIND A CLASS



BABY College infant and toddler classes are held in New Marston and Summertown in Oxford, Abingdon, Kidlington, Wheatley and Witney. Sessions cost £5.50 a week and are paid per term.

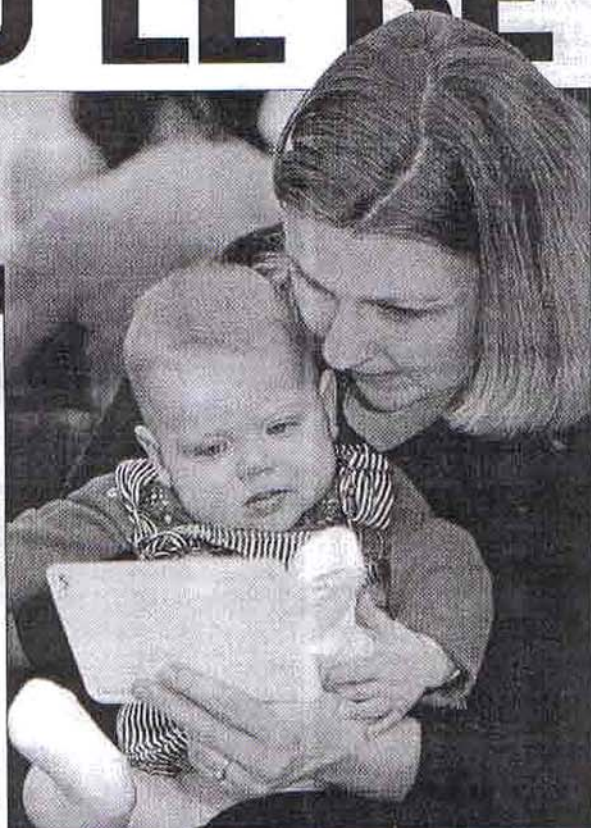
For information, or to book, call Bea, above, on 01865 436920 or Donna, below, on 01865 421879 or complete the online booking form at www.babycollege.co.uk



Also integral to Baby College teaching is the use of sign language and many words spoken during the class were accompanied by their signs.

With most of the babies unable to even sit up it seemed strange they were being taught sign language, but several weeks of signing already seemed to have registered with eight-month-old college 'veterans' Jaya and Henry, and both held out their hands to shake when Bea offered hers.

Bea explained that at nine months, the babies will start to use their signs and even invent



EARLY LEARNERS: Above, Jenny Lewis shows daughter Aimee a picture card; top of page from left, classes at the Baby College; Sangeeta Leahy with daughter Jaya and a tactile ball; Bea Waterfield leads the group using a dummy

Pictures: Anthony Moore Order Nos. 318182 (above), 318160, 318234, 318181

their own, making it easier to communicate with their parents before they can speak.

She also explained that moving a ball or rattle from left to right around the baby makes their eyes 'track' it, promoting their eventual understanding of reading and writing.

The mums were also given animal picture cards to describe to the babies (although the main challenge seemed to be stopping the babies from eating them).

But the highlight for the children seemed to be a giant, multi-coloured parachute which was floated above their heads to stimulate their senses.

Half an hour in and humming along to the songs, I realised that none of the babies had cried or even whimpered since the class started — in fact, little Henry was having such a good time, he was sick without even realising it.

The session ended as it started

with Mozart, plus soap bubbles. Jaya's mum Sangeeta Leahy, 36, told me: "We have been coming since the beginning and really enjoy it."

"I learn exercises to do with Jaya at home and you can tell the babies enjoy it, because they all start smiling."

Isabel Sammons, 28, mum to Lucia, four months, agreed: "We're not trying to make our babies young Einsteins, but I think a lot of parents worry they are not stimulating their baby enough."

"I like to think the sign language will help Lucia communicate with me and stop her from getting frustrated."

Strangely, within minutes of the class ending, the babies began to cry — were they missing school already or were they just hungry? — school's still out on that one.

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