



Froebel Trust Podcast

Transcript : Episode 22 Birth to Three

July 2026

[00:00:08] **Colin Kelly:** Hello, I'm Colin Kelly, and it's all about birth to three and the baby room in this episode of the Froebel Trust podcast, which we're releasing to mark the launch of the first title in the new Froebel Trust Research Insights series. This series aims to draw together evidence from projects funded by the Froebel Trust, and summarize key insights and [00:00:38] implications for anyone with an interest in early childhood education and care.

[00:00:42] **Colin Kelly:** Birth to Three Research Insights is the first in the series, and has been written by Dr. Zeny Melissourgaki, who you're about to hear from on my panel of guests for this episode. Zeny is a clinical psychologist working with parents and children in an early years service in the NHS.

[00:01:01] **Colin Kelly:** She's joined by three early years professionals who've each been involved in birth to early years research projects of their own.

[00:01:08] Annamaria Bevan is a Froebel Trust traveling tutor and head of center at the Ely and Caerau Integrated Children's Centre in Cardiff. Maria Cooper, associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand.

[00:01:23] **Colin Kelly:** And Polly Bolshaw, a senior lecturer in early years at Canterbury Christchurch University. Each of my guests will discuss their work throughout this episode, and you can find full biographies and details of their respective research [00:01:38] projects in the podcast description. Well, let's make a start then. And Dr.

[00:01:43] **Colin Kelly:** Zeny Melissourgaki, as the author of these research insights and the full report that accompanies them- Why would you say it's so

important that we take this opportunity to focus on this youngest age group, those birth to three-year-old babies and very young children?

[00:01:59] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** Essentially what we know about this, um, this age, birth to three, it, it, is that it's a very critical period in our development, [00:02:08] and by that I mean cognitive development, social, emotional, and physical development, and that in fact a lot of what happens in these first three provides the foundation and all the building blocks for who we become later in life.

[00:02:23] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** So there's one way to think about this, is that our brain grows faster in these first three years than in any other time in, in our life. And there have been some very important publications, like the 7, [00:02:38] one days, Critical Days Manifesto, and then kind of policy changes that built on that, kind of that really reminded us of just how important these first three years are.

[00:02:47] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** I guess there's a little bit of a paradox between we know these years are very, very important, and at the same time babies, toddlers, and very young children have been neglected slightly and received less attention, I should say, in, in every years' research and policy debates.

[00:03:02] **Colin Kelly:** Uh, Polly, just building on Zenny's comments, it sounds like educators [00:03:08] and parents with these youngest children in this birth to three age group, th- they've almost had a sort of d- a disproportionate level of influence.

[00:03:15] **Colin Kelly:** You know, if you get that bit right, then the things after that are maybe a bit easier. Is that fair to say?

[00:03:21] **Polly Bolshaw:** Yes, definitely. And I, I'm always drawn to, um, a quotation by an American, um, psychologist called Alison Gopnik. She describes babies as, and I'm quoting now, "The most powerful learning machine in the universe."

[00:03:37] **Polly Bolshaw:** And what she means [00:03:38] by that is that the rate at which babies are making links, um, in their brains, so the synapses between their brain cells, is kind of faster at this, at their, this period of life at any other time. So they're the most powerful learning machines in the universe. So you're right, the experiences that our babies are having and very young children are having, and the, the people that are facilitating those experiences,

like parents and, and educators, are so important because this is the time [00:04:08] that humans are really kind of building their knowledge of the world and, and how their brains work.

[00:04:13] **Colin Kelly:** If it's so important, w- why do you think it has been neglected or, or overlooked, uh, as Zenny put it, in, in certain projects and research up till now?

[00:04:26] **Polly Bolshaw:** I would argue that that might be because people kind of, or society in general in some cases, not in all cases, don't kind of see that what babies are [00:04:38] capable of.

[00:04:39] **Polly Bolshaw:** So I've written with colleagues, uh, Nicola Kemp and Jo Josephidou about how there's a deficit conception of babies, and what that means is it kind of links to the idea of being deficient, so kind of not having particular qualities or particular abilities, and how often babies are seen in terms of what they can't do rather than what they can.

[00:04:59] **Polly Bolshaw:** And we see this, you know, when we have conversations with new parents and we say things like, "Oh, has she smiled yet? Can he crawl yet?" We focus on [00:05:08] what they can't do rather than the amazing things that they can, and perhaps that's why babies have been, and very young children have been overlooked in research.

[00:05:16] **Colin Kelly:** Mm-hmm. Is that something you've noticed as well, Anna Maria, the, the, the birth to three age group maybe gets a comparative lack of research?

[00:05:24] **Annamaria Bevan:** Yeah, absolutely. A lack, a lack of research or a lack of awareness of that research. Um, there's a lot that's come out in the last couple of years on the importance of the first thousand days, um, from conception, and we know now that babies [00:05:38] are learning from that time.

[00:05:40] **Annamaria Bevan:** I think the term childcare and daycare hasn't helped over the years, that we see care and education as separate, whereas actually our children and babies are learning from conception. So I think the research just hasn't trickled down into, into our childcare settings. Um, and also there hasn't been investment in those educators that, you know, that they're not, they've not always been seen as the professionals that [00:06:08] they are and should be seen as.

[00:06:10] **Colin Kelly:** And Anna-Maria, I know as part of your current research you've done a lot of observation recently in baby rooms, and we hear that there's an increase in provision. We know there are more under twos. Um, are baby rooms changing? Are they getting busier? W- would you say they're more difficult places to work?

[00:06:26] **Annamaria Bevan:** They are busy places. Um, in Wales we've not yet had the, um, the childcare offer from nine months like you've had, they've had in England, um, although there's talk of that coming in. So [00:06:38] it's quite, um, a key time really for us to be really thinking about the baby rooms and really thinking about the difficulties, the challenges, and also the absolute privilege that it is to be a baby room educator.

[00:06:52] **Annamaria Bevan:** There's a lot to think about. Where are we putting our babies? What does their environment look like? Who is looking after them? Have the educators got experience, qualifications? Um, it's, it's, it's really important that we get it right for that [00:07:08] age. Um, and, and what we see here at the Children's Center is when we're offering the right environment and the right experiences in our baby room, those babies that have come from us, to us from that young age are more settled, more relaxed when they move to the next room, more confident exploring the environment, more sociable.

[00:07:30] **Annamaria Bevan:** It's, it's really important that we get it right in those early, early days.

[00:07:33] **Colin Kelly:** Mm-hmm. Yeah, and i- if we look at how the Froebelian approach might be able to help in the [00:07:38] baby room, you know, it seems to me that there's so much of a baby's routine is triggered by feeding, changing, sleeping, these kind of functional elements.

[00:07:47] **Colin Kelly:** Does the Froebelian approach help with that? Can it help with getting it right in the early days, as you mentioned, Anna-Maria?

[00:07:54] **Annamaria Bevan:** Absolutely, the Froebelian approach helps with that. Um, so we adopt the Froebelian principles here as our principles for the children's center. Um, and through the observations I've been making recently in the baby room, um, I can [00:08:08] really see where those Froebelian principles have helped.

[00:08:11] **Annamaria Bevan:** So, um, for example, the importance of relationships. The babies are learning through those secure and responsive

relationships. So there is a lot of time taken o- taken up by care routines. But if we are using Froebelian approaches, then while we're interacting with children during those care routines, we'll be remembering the importance of relationships.

[00:08:34] **Annamaria Bevan:** We'll be talking to them, using those opportunities to talk and [00:08:38] engage with them, to have shared moments of interaction with them, um, mirroring the things that they're doing. All of, all of this supports those, um, relationships and makes the most of those moments where practitioners are dealing with those care routines, feeding, putting them to sleep, changing nappies, and this sort of stuff.

[00:08:58] **Annamaria Bevan:** And also the central importance of play. What I've noticed is that play definitely begins at birth, and probably in the womb, [00:09:08] actually. And in our own baby room, it's been really lovely to see, um, that play begins with the baby's sense of curiosity. Um, even our youngest babies that are not yet mobile, it's, it's watching those really intricate movements that they're making with their eyes, with their eyebrows, with their fingers and toes.

[00:09:29] **Annamaria Bevan:** An adult supporting that, that play by noticing what the babies are doing, taking their time to really look at what the babies are [00:09:38] doing before jumping in and responding

[00:09:42] **Colin Kelly:** So, Zeny, we've talked about how the Froebelian approach can help with getting it right in those early stages. What does the research say?

[00:09:49] **Colin Kelly:** How would you sum up this research insights project? I know you were the reviewer on this piece of work, so I understand it's a series of cards. What's that about and how's it going to help people?

[00:10:02] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** So the, the task was to collect all the research projects that the Froebel [00:10:08] Trust have, has funded over the years that focus specifically on this age group and review them and summarize their findings so that we can support educators with research evidence and provide them some suggestions with it for how, uh, the practice can be informed by the evidence that is emerging from the, from these research projects.

[00:10:32] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** Was really interesting to see just the range of projects that were included. So I think it was a [00:10:38] very, it's overall a very rich piece of work. We have a detailed report that people would

be able to read, and we've also created some cards as a more accessible way to see those insights. The cards summarize the main findings and also have some tips, key takeaways for educators and policymakers.

[00:10:58] **Colin Kelly:** Well, let's ask Anna-Maria for an educator's perspective. Anna-Maria, you're head of a children's center in Cardiff, so are these cards something you think would [00:11:08] be useful to your team?

[00:11:09] **Annamaria Bevan:** A lot of things that we do in the Froebel Trust comes back to research-based theory and ideas. I think it'd be really handy for educators to just pick up these quick cards and get ideas from it, and know that it's steeped in research.

[00:11:26] **Annamaria Bevan:** And also be useful for if they need to justify why they're doing certain things as well.

[00:11:31] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. It's, it's a really interesting way of getting the research into settings. I mean, you could put them on [00:11:38] walls. It's like they live and breathe. You can almost see at a glance what the research is saying. Uh, now Maria, your research features in the research insights around learning to care, and cultures of care.

[00:11:51] **Colin Kelly:** Could you summarize what you found, and what the implications are for educators working with very young children?

[00:11:58] **Maria Cooper:** Yeah. I think, um, to summarize, it was about really recognizing the youngest child as being a more active [00:12:08] participant in their caring relationships than people might assume, and really understanding that relationship of care is reciprocal.

[00:12:16] **Maria Cooper:** So this, you know, requires us to think more about how children are participating in their own care moments with support from the educator. These ideas are based on Nel Noddings' work on care ethics, which suggests that in the process of being cared for, children learn to be the one caring. So it [00:12:38] really asks us to pay attention to the quality of those care moments, the quality of the, the interaction, and how we are d- expressing care through the way we are looking after children.

[00:12:53] **Maria Cooper:** But it, to be able to take up these ideas and practice, it really does start with that belief that children are capable of participating, of being active participants, of communicating. If you don't have that belief, you

won't [00:13:08] see that. And it also asks us to slow down and pay attention in order to see what might be unseen.

[00:13:16] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. Thank you, Maria. Um, Polly, I know a lot of your work and research is around nature and outdoor engagement, so if we take what Maria's saying, how much of this is just best practice for that age group, and how much of it would you say is a uniquely Froebelian approach? Where does Froebel fit in, and what difference does the Froebelian [00:13:38] approach make to the way that we would treat birth to three-year-olds?

[00:13:43] **Polly Bolshaw:** That's a really good question. I think in terms of kind of having an awareness of the Froebelian principles that can help us recognize the ways in which it's, it is best practice to work with very young children. And if you think about, uh, what Maria was saying about that idea of, of needing time to, to have relationships, this kind of links to this idea of, uh, of kind of connectedness.

[00:14:06] **Polly Bolshaw:** And I suppose that [00:14:08] is echoed in our research as well, which is about babies outdoors and babies in nature, and seeing the relationships that we can have with nature and the natural world as well.

[00:14:17] **Colin Kelly:** Now, Anna Maria, I know you're in the midst of a research project at the moment. Can you tell us a little bit about anything particular that stands out that you've learned so far?

[00:14:27] **Annamaria Bevan:** One important thing that we observed was when there were key, and it's similar to what Caroline Guard observed in her research, when there were, when there were key moments of shared [00:14:38] interaction, and that could be really small, like a peekaboo game, or it could be adults, um, and babies taking in turns to make faces or noises.

[00:14:49] **Annamaria Bevan:** We really saw moments of intensity in the children and babies' faces, like moments where in an older child, we'd say, "Oh, it's real high level of involvement." They're gaining, we know they're gaining a deep learning experience because we know that they do when they're [00:15:08] highly involved. And we saw that in the babies when there were these lovely interactions between baby and educator, even if that's really brief.

[00:15:19] **Annamaria Bevan:** Those little micro moments of, of interactions, mirroring, turn-taking, were re- really important. And I can't emphasize enough the importance of watching and waiting as well. I've got lots of examples of

when you think, "Oh, did the child really want you to do that?" Or, [00:15:38] "Yeah, that was really positive that you waited there."

[00:15:41] **Annamaria Bevan:** Um, one lovely observation was, um, a baby was taken out of his seat to, he'd finished his snack, and he toddled over to the water tray, and there was another older baby at the water tray. And the younger baby started splashing with one hand, and the older baby then copied. And there was this lovely interaction between the two.

[00:16:02] **Annamaria Bevan:** The older baby was mirroring, and the younger baby was, like, watching and waiting for him to copy. [00:16:08] And the older baby walked off, and the younger one just stayed there splashing, waiting for somebody to notice. "Come on, who's gonna take his place? Somebody come." And then he took a spoon out of the, um, water and was tapping on the side with the water then as well, like making that noise to get attention.

[00:16:27] **Annamaria Bevan:** And we saw, we saw a lot of babies, toddlers using objects to try and interact with the- Mm ... with the adults. So either handing them things or tapping things or bringing [00:16:38] things to them. We saw a lot of that use of resources and, and equipment to try and engage with the adults.

[00:16:45] **Colin Kelly:** Now, Maria, one thing that's always interested me, my, my wife and I have two sons, and I've been in that baby room, and I've seen what goes on, and I know that there's a lot of sleeping, there's a lot of changing, there's a lot of routine, and I'm sometimes struggling to see where do practitioners get the time for that Froebelian approach.

[00:17:07] **Colin Kelly:** Uh, do you think [00:17:08] that's an issue, or do you think it's something that with training and support, practitioners should be able to overcome that?

[00:17:14] **Maria Cooper:** Oh, absolutely. Um, I research leadership as well in, in early childhood education, and but this requires us to really pay attention to the conditions of learning for, for educators as well as children.

[00:17:29] **Maria Cooper:** And the, um, value of reflection and reflexivity can't be underestimated. It doesn't cost anything to be more [00:17:38] analytical about practice, and I think that to care and educate the youngest child well requires knowledge, and leaders can nurture those kinds of conditions. To access knowledge, y- you know, even for those educators who are not qualified, uh, it's a collective commitment to children in that those who do have

professional knowledge can share that with those who don't have the professional knowledge.

[00:18:05] **Maria Cooper:** Parents can have a parenting body of [00:18:08] knowledge that they can share with educators. So I think we have to see ourselves of, as a kind of a system of relationships that can nurture more knowledgeable and nurturing educators as Froebel inspired us to think about

[00:18:22] **Colin Kelly:** So thinking about relationships, Zeny, I know from your work that there's quite a number of parents when they have babies that age, parents who are experiencing postnatal depression.

[00:18:33] **Colin Kelly:** So I'm interested in the impact that might have on their communication with the babies and [00:18:38] toddlers, 'cause I suppose if, they might be less inclined perhaps to be so playful because they're going through a challenging situation themselves. And so if that baby or toddler is in a setting, then the educators in that setting might not always know what that parent is going through.

[00:18:55] **Colin Kelly:** So if the relationship with the parent is more challenging, if the communication is not what it otherwise might be, what does that mean for the birth to three-year-olds in the setting with these educators?
[00:19:08]

[00:19:08] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** The, one of the research projects that were reviewed as part of this, this process was the work of Eirinaki, who very much focused on mothers with mental health difficulties.

[00:19:18] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** The research took place in a mother and baby unit, that's an inpatient setting for, um, mothers who experience things like postnatal depression. And what that research project really highlighted was that so babies will adapt to this, or babies will... Something about their communication changes in trying to [00:19:38] engage a mother who perhaps, because of her own difficulties, might find the process of mothering harder.

[00:19:45] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** And I suppose really want to say at this point that the transition to becoming a parent brings up a lot for, for many people. It is a difficult task, and some people will really be impacted, and these are the kind of people that we might give a diagnosis of postnatal depression. But we know it co- because babies exist and learn and grow in relationships, we know that they might be impacted as well.

[00:20:10] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** So for example, they might be escalating their attempts to engage a parent, or they might be withdrawing from communication because they might quickly learn that there is no response. And all of these patterns Um, may persist later on. So when a, um, a baby or a toddler reaches a nursery setting, some of the communication patterns that they've picked up along the way [00:20:38] because they've had to adjust to the environment might be manifested, might be present still in those nursery settings.

[00:20:46] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** And it's important to know because there's adaptive relationships, but there's also repair. And babies do connect with educators in nursery settings, and so that's an opportunity to provide a different relational experience. But of course, we need to know something about the family and the environment that this baby has found themselves in to be able to really attend to how this baby [00:21:08] communicates and understand where that might be coming from.

[00:21:12] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** Just as an example, if one baby is doing a little bit of the withdrawing, it would really be a shame for that baby to be perceived as an easy baby or a quiet baby by an educator. A baby that's not demanding, therefore doesn't need very much, and so we can maybe pay attention to a different baby because that can reinforce something about the retreating or the withdrawing as an emotional experience for the baby.

[00:21:36] **Colin Kelly:** That's so [00:21:38] interesting, Zeny, and I, I'm sure will be really helpful to a lot of, a lot of people listening. Now, Maria, you've been talking a lot about care, and, uh, I've got a, a interesting question for you. How do one-year-olds learn to care while in a childcare setting? So this is, this is one-year-olds doing the caring rather than receiving it.

[00:22:03] **Colin Kelly:** What, what's that about?

[00:22:05] **Maria Cooper:** I think- What we [00:22:08] see as care in our one-year-olds, and even younger, depends on how we understand care and whether we believe very young children can participate in the process of, uh, being cared for and caring for others. And I think it also depends on how good we are at reading body language as a form of communication.

[00:22:30] **Maria Cooper:** If we're not good at reading body language and those subtle shifts in facial expressions or, you know, movements, [00:22:38] we miss a very important part of how the youngest child communicates with us. And so I think it's important for us to think about for babies, one-year-olds,

we're better to understand those care practices in relation to how they participate in the care process.

[00:22:57] **Maria Cooper:** And so what we might see in practice is a baby who relaxes their body in our interaction, who turns towards our voice, who [00:23:08] leans into our interaction. We often see babies searching for our face, say, during feeding, and just that reaching out and wanting to touch our face as, as exploration is a way of them participating in that care process.

[00:23:24] **Maria Cooper:** And so if we're so busy and thinking we have to look busy, we will miss those subtle moments of feeling cared for being expressed to us. As children get older, those care expressions perhaps [00:23:38] become a bit more visible. They might seek us out for reassurance, some comfort. They might touch us gently. I recall having sprained my wrist.

[00:23:48] **Maria Cooper:** The next day when I did come in with a bandage around my wrist, I recall those young toddlers running up to me and touching my hand re- so gently and just saying, "What happened? What happened?" You know, and that sh- that expression of care, uh, really reminded me of how much they can learn [00:24:08] from the, the people caring for them.

[00:24:10] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. And Anna-Maria, I suppose the Froebelian approach gives everyone a standard, a benchmark, doesn't it? It, it gives you something to aim for, even if it's not always possible or you don't always reach it the way you'd like to, it gives you something to come back to. Does what Maria's saying here resonate with you?

[00:24:32] **Annamaria Bevan:** Yeah. Definitely. It does, and it, it's that constant valuing the babies for [00:24:38] who they are, um- Slowing down the practice, slowing down the pedagogy, slowing down the routine. I mean, we had a similar example where, um, a baby was sat on an educator's lap and he was having a cold compress put on his finger where he'd hurt his finger.

[00:24:56] **Annamaria Bevan:** Um, and a, a walking baby, a toddler under the age of two, had noticed this and come and toddled up to have a look, and looked at the baby's finger, then looked at the educator, then [00:25:08] looked at the finger again. And so the educator said, "Look," he'd named the baby, "has hurt, hurt his finger." Um, and she was really interested.

[00:25:18] **Annamaria Bevan:** And s- and instead of the educator getting a bit stressed because more babies were coming over and she was trying to, like, give a bit of first aid and a bit of tender loving care, she involved the babies in that

and talked to them about it, showed them. And then that one little one that had just, the first one to toddle over, went to the play kitchen and went and got, um, [00:25:38] a cloth from the play kitchen and brought it over.

[00:25:40] **Annamaria Bevan:** Now she was non-verbal. She hadn't started using language yet, um, babbling, but not using any words yet. But because the key worker had involved her in that situation, we

[00:25:52] **Annamaria Bevan:** were able to see, gosh, she understood what was going, she understands what's going on. She offered this cloth to the educator as if it was gonna help, and then she offered her own snuggly, her snuggly rabbit that she has to comfort herself, she offered to the little boy. [00:26:08] So that was a really lovely moment, um, for us, and for me as, as a, a leader and an observer at the time to see, gosh, this little one really understands empathy here.

[00:26:19] **Annamaria Bevan:** Mm-hmm. And that's a real skill.

[00:26:21] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. And thinking just finally for now, Maria, about how a setting can promote an, a caring environment and promoting care. That example you gave where you sprained your wrist and you came in the next day and they came up to you and they wanted to just make sure you were all right.

[00:26:36] **Colin Kelly:** If that had been me, [00:26:38] my inclination would've been to say to them, "It's fine. I'm fine. Don't worry. You know, just get on with it." But I'm assuming that's not the best thing to do, that you want to sort of value their interest and be slower and softer and not just, not diminish it or downplay it.

[00:26:55] **Maria Cooper:** Yeah, that's a good point, Colin.

[00:26:56] **Maria Cooper:** And because of my lens of pedagogy and curriculum, I see those as moments of learning. And they can be seen as everyday mundane moments to others, but [00:27:08] to us they're really important moments of insight about being human. And so yes, we would take that opportunity to talk about what they're touching, you know, and validating the importance of gentle touch on others, or when someone's feeling hurt or, uh, has some pain.

[00:27:27] **Maria Cooper:** Those are really important everyday moments. With more of those experiences, children learn to develop empathy for others, and a sense of compassion when others are feeling pain. [00:27:38] And so we can't

underestimate those everyday moments to... Uh, I see them as, as curriculum opportunities. Yeah.

[00:27:45] **Colin Kelly:** So it's having a setting that's open to those moments, that's able to involve them and adapt when these spontaneous things occur, and see them as opportunities.

[00:27:55] **Maria Cooper:** Absolutely. And I, I think one of the issues in many countries now, uh, is this downward pressure of academic learning and narrowing, a [00:28:08] narrowing of learning outcomes. You know, what is valued learning? And the issue with that is that learning is only valued when it looks a certain way, when it's an academic form of knowledge.

[00:28:19] **Maria Cooper:** But I, I think that we risk overlooking the richness in our everyday interactions as really valuable opportunities to learn about what it means to be human and to coexist.

[00:28:33] **Colin Kelly:** Well, Polly, let's come to you. I know you've been researching outdoor [00:28:38] provision in baby rooms. I know there have been case studies and visits taking place.

[00:28:42] **Colin Kelly:** Can you summarize what you and your team discovered?

[00:28:46] **Polly Bolshaw:** What they found was that, um, babies' experiences outdoors and their engagement with nature wasn't really featured in research or in policy or in practice. Um, and that's because often the outdoors, and nature in particular, is seen as being really b- risky for babies, and the outdoors is seen as a space for being [00:29:08] physically active in ways that perhaps babies are yet to become.

[00:29:12] **Polly Bolshaw:** In their kind of survey of what outdoor space looks like in baby room gardens, they found that it was of- often kind of artificial, so artificial grass and things like that, often very flat, um, and very bounded, so kind of boundaries around it. And yet in the, um, case studies that they conducted to, to settings that they'd identified had particularly good practice, they found how owners [00:29:38] and managers who offer critical leadership can really challenge, I suppose, perceptions of what babies can do outside and challenge this idea that the outdoors is too risky for babies or challenge the idea that the outdoors is a spla- space, you know, predominantly to be physically active.

[00:29:57] **Polly Bolshaw:** And then these findings led on to the second project, and this second project is called A Froebelian Inspired Nature Pedagogy in Urban Baby Rooms. And what we were [00:30:08] interested in exploring in this project is how can we work with baby room educators to support them to develop practices in their settings and in their baby room outdoor spaces and gardens that encourage babies to engage with nature, but at the same time support enhancing nature itself.

[00:30:29] **Polly Bolshaw:** Um, and we set ourselves quite a challenge with this because we did it in five settings located in, in London, in England so a very urban area, [00:30:38] very limited outdoor space. And we knew from conducting a survey of parents who use baby rooms how important parents recognize it is that their babies spend time outdoors at the setting because, for instance, when they're working very long days, when they p- drop their babies off in the morning, it might still be dark, and when they pick their babies up in the evening, it might be dark and so their daylight hours are with the setting.

[00:31:04] **Polly Bolshaw:** So, parents really value that time where baby [00:31:08] room educators can take, um, their children outside. And so we worked with these five settings. Um, we offered each setting two half day visits from an environmental kind of consultant from an organization called Derbyshire Wildlife Trust. And they worked with the settings to identify in what areas they, they wanted to make changes to their outdoor space in ways that would support babies to engage with nature and to enhance nature itself, and what the opportunities [00:31:38] were in those particular settings and how any challenges could be overcome.

[00:31:42] **Colin Kelly:** Oh, thanks for that, Polly. Now, what we'll do in the podcast description is we've included a link, so if anybody wants to find out more about that research project and all the details and insights that you discovered, then you'll be able to do so. So Polly, how does the sector build on this work from the Froebel Trust, and what would you like to see next?

[00:32:03] **Polly Bolshaw:** Um, I suppose from, from my perspective and, um, what I would like to see in the [00:32:08] sector is more babies outdoors. Um, I spoke earlier about how often babies aren't seen to belong outdoors because it's a space that's seen to be risky for them or a space kind of predominantly to be physically active. And I think if the sector could have more of an awareness of the benefits of being outdoors for babies and of the benefits to the environment and to nature to kind of support babies and to facilitate that connection that they can have with nature, I think that would have brilliant [00:32:38] outcomes for

babies, for, um, educators because it's beneficial to their wellbeing as well to, to spend time outdoors and to the natural environment.

[00:32:46] **Colin Kelly:** A- and, and so more babies outdoors, but not necessarily waiting until there are better outdoor spaces, just making the best of what they have.

[00:32:56] **Polly Bolshaw:** Yeah, 100% making the best of, of what they have. Um, yeah, and I think that what we found from, from our research, if you are able to make a change, it's not about making kind of a, a, a huge [00:33:08] change, it's about making small, manageable changes to your outdoor space which might inspire you as an educator to want to spend more time outdoors.

[00:33:17] **Polly Bolshaw:** It's also about being outdoors, not thinking that you need to do something outdoors. And one challenge that, um, educators have, have told me is that it's, it can be physically challenging to, to get all of the babies outdoors because often in, in settings, particularly in England, baby rooms might be located on the upper floor, so [00:33:38] educators have got to physically carry down babies to the outdoor space.

[00:33:42] **Polly Bolshaw:** And what we found, often educators are also carrying down are lots of indoor resources to supplement the outdoor area. And so maybe one message for educators is you don't need to do that. You can just experience the outdoor space as it is. You can look for glimmers of nature that might be moss growing on walls or, uh, weeds growing up through AstroTurf.

[00:34:05] **Polly Bolshaw:** You can lie down and look at the clouds and the, [00:34:08] the sky and maybe there'll be a bird or an insect flying past. So kind of, yeah, appreciate what you've got. Um, and if you are to make changes, you know, just aim for small, manageable ones because you're doing so much already.

[00:34:20] **Maria Cooper:** Yeah. So ju- just go out and trust that something good'll happen-

[00:34:24] **Polly Bolshaw:** Oh, yeah

[00:34:24] **Maria Cooper:** while you, while you're out there. Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

[00:34:25] **Polly Bolshaw:** Yeah.

[00:34:27] **Colin Kelly:** So, Anna Maria, it's, it's as if there's a, we're asking educators to embrace the spontaneity and, and not to see this division between indoors and outdoors, 'cause babies won't [00:34:38] see that division, and I suppose just, just follow their interests and give educators permission to go between outdoors and indoors without feeling that everything needs to be prepared

[00:34:51] **Annamaria Bevan:** That, that's really important actually.

[00:34:53] **Annamaria Bevan:** We, we have loose ideas of things that we want to do with our babies, and it's always come from what we've observed them enjoying, or almost always come from what we've observed them enjoying. Sometimes we bring in new things for them to experiment and explore with. [00:35:08] Um But there's a lot of freedom there, so that that freedom with guidance comes into play.

[00:35:14] **Annamaria Bevan:** So we wouldn't not follow that child's interest in the other baby just because there was something else planned. Um, the, the babies are given the freedom to move around the room. Um, and our non-movers, we watch them very carefully to see if they're happy where they are, if they wanna be taken elsewhere.

[00:35:35] **Annamaria Bevan:** We haven't had, um, [00:35:38] non-mobile babies for about a year now. I think mums and dads are staying off for longer. Um, so a lot of my observations are with babies that are on the move. But yes, that freedom to explore and to move from one part of the room to the other, we don't, we don't set activities and move our babies to them and move them around.

[00:35:59] **Annamaria Bevan:** They- they're kind of given offers of things to explore. I

[00:36:04] **Colin Kelly:** mean, that's quite... I, I suppose if somebody's listening to this and they're interested [00:36:08] in bringing a Froebelian approach into the baby room, would, would that be a fundamental that you would say, like, don't, don't set up, like, stations in different places?

[00:36:19] **Colin Kelly:** Like, how, how would they-

[00:36:20] **Annamaria Bevan:** Yeah, so we

[00:36:20] **Colin Kelly:** might- Do you want, you want the baby to be able to move?

[00:36:22] **Annamaria Bevan:** Yeah. We might, we might have things set up for practical reasons. So for example, you know, if they've been given the opportunity to explore paint that day or water play, it'll obviously be in the space that's most appropriate to have paint or water play, but the [00:36:38] babies can freely choose whether they want to go and access that activity or that experience or not.

[00:36:45] **Annamaria Bevan:** Um, I guess a good example of that is, um, I was observing a baby playing with some animals on the open shelving. So he'd been walking for a few, a good few months, was quite steady on his feet. Again, under the age of two, under 18 months, actually. And he was taking the animals off the open shelf and then playing with them by kind of tapping them on the [00:37:08] top of the shelf.

[00:37:09] **Annamaria Bevan:** And then he was trying to balance one on top of the other, and then he'd put it, put one back on the shelf, and then he'd pick it back up again, and was just enjoying exploring that way. And then as he was playing, another child walked past with a, a pushchair, like a toy pushchair, doll's pushchair, and just left it there, and then wandered off somewhere else.

[00:37:30] **Annamaria Bevan:** So he clocked this pushchair and he put his animals in there and then took his animals for a walk. Um, and if they were [00:37:38] having to stay in one place until they finished something, or if they were having to make sure that we ticked off that they'd accessed certain things, then that opportunity wouldn't be there.

[00:37:48] **Annamaria Bevan:** But interestingly, he took that pushchair out, straight out to the garden, which makes sense. That's where we usually have pushchairs. But he took it over to the outdoor sandpit, and straight away the educator said, "Oh, what are you going to build?" And he went kind of ... He looked, suddenly looked [00:38:08] less relaxed, his body stiffened, and he looked at the practitioner and then turned his head away And so she, she didn't really know how to react to that.

[00:38:17] **Annamaria Bevan:** She didn't say anything. But I think he was trying to tell us, "I'm not gonna build anything, thank you very much." And because we know relationships matter, and we know that those babies are respected within their own right, and that they have a voice in our setting, she just waited to see what he was going to do.

[00:38:34] **Annamaria Bevan:** And he took one of the animals out of the pushchair [00:38:38] and sort of stomped it in the sand as though it was, like, running along, along the sand. And then he looked at the educator again, took the animal away, and took it for another walk again. So that was a lovely learning curve- Yeah ... for us as well, really.

[00:38:52] **Annamaria Bevan:** She said, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't have asked him what he was gonna build." And I said, "Well, it doesn't matter. You- Okay, if you didn't, he may have gone in the sand with his animal straight away, but you still stopped and waited and watched, and that is something that's really-" Yeah ... key, is [00:39:08] that wait, watch, listen, then respond, not to jump in with things straight away.

[00:39:14] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. I, I love that. Uh, okay, Maria, let's get your thoughts on this. So, so how do we build on these research insights from birth to three? What do you want to see next?

[00:39:24] **Maria Cooper:** Mm. I love the, uh, responses so far, and I, to, to add to that, I would say to really appreciate children for who they are and how they come to you in your relationships.

[00:39:37] **Maria Cooper:** And [00:39:38] think about what you can learn from children. They really teach us to be present and in the here and now. And as adults, we often lose that, uh, ability to stay present and engaged. And I think avoid assuming you know everything about the young child. Is it even your right to know everything about a child?

[00:39:59] **Maria Cooper:** In terms of thinking about care and care practices, I would say or encourage educators to be gentle in your [00:40:08] touch, to be slow in your pace, and to be kind in your tone, because through those interactions and those ways of interacting, children are learning the same. And finally, I think these resources that the Froebel Trust provide are so invaluable, uh, and I would encourage all educators around the world to access all of these resources, tools, sift through them, uh, use them to initiate discussions with one [00:40:38] another, and to reflect on how they might inform changes to practice.

[00:40:43] **Maria Cooper:** But also to enable you to think about how you are spending time with children, and what are the things that get in the way and compromise the quality of those relationships. Maybe we're putting a lot of time into things that aren't as important- Mm ... but maybe we assume they are. And so just to think about that balance between the things we must do and how we prioritize relationships, [00:41:08] because they're everything to children.

[00:41:10] **Colin Kelly:** And what about you then, Annamaria? If educators take these research insights and use them, six months from now, how do you hope the baby rooms changed?

[00:41:22] **Annamaria Bevan:** That's a lovely question. I would hope that both babies and practitioners feel even more comfortable in their environment, that educators are feeling like they know their babies even better, and they feel more [00:41:38] informed about how they can present the room, the environment, the indoor and outdoor space for their babies, but also how they can respond to them positively and help the parents to respond to them positively.

[00:41:53] **Colin Kelly:** Yeah. And Zeny, what's a key takeaway for you here?

[00:41:57] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** One key takeaway for me, for educators, is this idea of, A, being interested, so acknowledging that there is something there to see [00:42:08] when they look at babies in terms of communication. And by that I don't just mean that they respond to communication, but also that they can be active agents and initiate.

[00:42:19] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** And again, some of the research projects really touch on that. And with that comes the imperative to really slow down so that we can see what's there to be seen, because one finding in the research was that sometimes those subtle ways of communicating gets missed [00:42:38] because of just the pace that necessary settings often have, and the, the idea of slowing down in nature.

[00:42:45] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** We don't have to do something necessarily. We just have to be, and we have to be with, which brings in the relational component.

[00:42:56] **Colin Kelly:** Mm. Thank you. So I- I've got, I've got one quite big question left. I don't know who, who wants it, or maybe you can all have a, have a go at it. We can, we can see. But I'd like to ask you if you [00:43:08] think that babies or the atmosphere in the baby room is changing.

[00:43:14] **Colin Kelly:** And the reason that I ask that is because I keep hearing how babies are exposed to technology earlier than they might have been before, um, that they might be more likely to have maybe both parents working, uh, or spending more time with grandparents, and they might also be spending longer in the setting, right?

[00:43:35] **Colin Kelly:** So the day might be longer as well if, if there are [00:43:38] parents out working. And, uh, is, is all of that adding up to changing babies, or is a baby now the same as a baby in 1990?

[00:43:48] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** I think it's an, it's an interesting question, and I'm not sure I have the, the right answer, if you like. But I think there is something about increased recognition of a baby's needs, a baby's abilities, and maybe infant mental health, to speak from a, from a psychology position, as even a concept.

[00:44:06] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** I do think there are [00:44:08] changes, and there's also changes, I suppose, I've been thinking also about the demands on parents and how- The parenting task is performed kind of now in certain parts of the world and how it used to be in terms of access to other adults at home looking after babies a task can be shared with, or access to things like Stay and Play.

[00:44:31] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** So yeah, I think there, there are important changes.

[00:44:34] **Colin Kelly:** Oh, thanks for that Zeny. I think that will be very helpful [00:44:38] for people, and I think what we hope, if you're listening to this right now and you work in the sector and you're working in a baby room, and you're making use of these research insights, I know that the Froebel Trust would be really keen to hear from you if you find these discussions helpful.

[00:44:53] **Colin Kelly:** If you've got questions or your own experiences to share, I know the Froebel Trust would love to hear from you. Uh, and, and maybe we can feature that in, in some further work. Um, Polly, I know that you're interested in coming in on this as well.

[00:45:07] **Polly Bolshaw:** Over the [00:45:08] last week, I've spent time in five different baby rooms across England, actually.

[00:45:12] **Polly Bolshaw:** Um, and the first time I worked in a baby room was about 20 years ago. So when you asked that question, I was thinking, "How could I describe the differences between that practice 20 years ago and what I saw in baby rooms last week?" I suppose it's really difficult to pinpoint because what babies need fundamentally is the same.

[00:45:33] **Polly Bolshaw:** And then that made me reflect on, I suppose, the relevance of Froebel's principles, [00:45:38] that just like they were relevant

when he was alive and he was writing, just like they were relevant 20 years ago, they're still relevant today in terms of what babies need and very young children need can be underpinned by those principles of, for instance, that kind of unity and connectedness, that importance of play, that knowledgeable and nurturing educator and obviously, you know, what I would promote that idea of engaging with nature.

[00:46:02] **Polly Bolshaw:** So yes, undoubtedly, the babies in the baby rooms might be different, however, the [00:46:08] fundamentals of what is gonna support them, I would argue, remain the same.

[00:46:12] **Colin Kelly:** Okay. Lovely, thank you. Maria, anything you'd like to add to that?

[00:46:16] **Maria Cooper:** Uh, just that I agree with Polly about the fundamental needs of everyone, all babies and human beings.

[00:46:25] **Maria Cooper:** Uh, and that th- the shifting landscape means that children's experiences are going to be different today than they were five years ago, uh, 10 years ago, 20 years ago. I, I think [00:46:38] then it's really important for educators to be aware of the nature of those experiences, what children are spending a lot of time doing in our early chil- early years settings, and just really working closely with parents, with families, to ensure that there is that awareness of what's happening in both contexts and a smooth transition between them.

[00:47:02] **Maria Cooper:** I think with, you know, those close reciprocal relationships, we can [00:47:08] do a much better job for children and ourselves.

[00:47:12] **Colin Kelly:** Well, Annamaria, um, if you could take the work that you've done and everything that your colleagues, you and your colleagues have learned from this work, and maybe structure it in three golden rules for baby room educators to listen to babies, what would your three top rules for them be?

[00:47:28] **Annamaria Bevan:** Number one, I'm gonna cheat 'cause I'm gonna put two things together here. Number one would be watch and wait So watch your babies and take [00:47:38] some time every single day to really watch and wait with each baby, and that's really challenging because busy r- they're busy rooms. But if you could take some time to watch and wait, so you're waiting before you speak, you're waiting before you help or question or rede- redirect.

[00:47:56] **Annamaria Bevan:** Number two is wonder. Be curious. What could this baby's possible intention be here? What might they be feeling? And while you're waiting and wondering, [00:48:08] you're looking at their eyes and their mouth and their f- hands and feet. Um, so you're wondering, you're watching, waiting, you're wondering, and then you respond in a way that acknowledges the baby, but without taking over from what they're doing.

[00:48:23] **Annamaria Bevan:** Um, I think that would be, I think that's going to be a reflective tool that comes out of the project.

[00:48:32] **Colin Kelly:** So final question from me, Zeny, why should people listening to this, people [00:48:38] working in baby rooms, why should they use this series of research insights? Why should they look at these cards and think about what they're saying?

[00:48:46] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** I think our hope is that it will provide useful insights, and that means for some people perhaps new information or new ways to think about things. For other people, maybe confirmation in what they already know by being with babies and spending time with babies, and support educators in their role as, in advocating [00:49:08] for babies.

[00:49:08] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** And at the, at the end of the research insights, the cards, we have implications for educators, but we also have implications for, for policymakers and, and researchers. And it, going back to this idea of advocating, I think we're also hoping to reach spaces where power around decision-making lies because I think there's something about what educators can do on a, on a day-to-day, but also what the systems around them enable them to do.

[00:49:37] **Dr. Zeny Mellissourgaki:** So we're [00:49:38] hoping to get these messages and the, these key insights at different levels of the system for, for change to be possible and holding for, for all of us to hold this idea of relational practice in mind.

[00:49:51] **Maria Cooper:** I, I do want to say, Colin, that I think the research insights and any research-based resource is so important for teachers to think about in relation to their practice with ch- other people's children.

[00:50:06] **Maria Cooper:** Conditions change. Y- y- [00:50:08] you know, around the world, quality of provision for young children is so variable, and we need- To advocate for better conditions. We need to advocate for, you know, new and, um, meaningful experiences for babies and toddlers and young

children. And the evidence from research really helps us to advocate for more and better.

[00:50:31] **Maria Cooper:** We just need policy makers to listen more and to remember that they were once a baby themselves. I think [00:50:38] people forget that.

[00:50:40] **Colin Kelly:** Well, that seems like an interesting note to leave it on from Maria Cooper, associate professor of early childhood education at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. And thanks also to Polly Balshaw, senior lecturer in early years at Canterbury Christchurch University, Annamaria Bevan, Froebel Trust traveling tutor and head of center at the Ely and Caro Integrated Children's Center in Cardiff, and Dr.

[00:51:03] **Colin Kelly:** Zeny Melissourgaki clinical psychologist working with parents and [00:51:08] children in an early years service in the NHS, and the author of the first Froebel Trust Research Insight series on birth to three. Well, please do visit the podcast description where you'll find full details on each of our guests and links to their research and other relevant reading and resources.

[00:51:26] **Colin Kelly:** And on the podcast page at froebel.org.uk, there's a full transcript for this episode and our full archive. Big thanks to all our guests as ever, and wherever and however [00:51:38] you listen, thank you. If you subscribe or follow this podcast, remember you'll receive new episodes as soon as they're released