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Margie Polden Memorial Lecture: Best Beginnings – working to give every child in the UK the best start in life

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Abstract

The Best Beginnings charity works collaboratively, innovatively and from the evidence base to help parents make positive healthcare choices, and to enable professionals to support those decisions. This paper explores the development and impact of the Baby Buddy mobile phone application (app), and the role of pelvic, obstetric and gynaecological physiotherapists. The Baby Buddy app is a free personal information source that offers content, advice, encouragement and support on a daily basis throughout the perinatal period. The aim of Baby Buddy is to support women to look after their own physical and mental health, and to help them maximize their child's physical, social, emotional and language development. By being a definitive, evidence-based source of information that is easily accessed, understandable and relatable, Baby Buddy serves as an influential source of ante- and postnatal information for parents.

Keywords: app, Baby Buddy, Best Beginnings, perinatal period, support.

Introduction

I feel incredibly honoured to have been invited to speak to you today in memory of Margie Polden.

In preparation for this talk, I spoke to Margie's son, Daniel, and her daughter, Ruth. Daniel told me how their childhood dinner conversations often revolved around birth stories and pelvic floor muscle exercises (PFMEs). He said that his mum used to say the wonderful thing about PFMEs is that no one knows you are doing them – you could even do them when meeting the Queen, and she wouldn't know! Ruth is very involved in and passionate about active and empowered births. She is a yoga instructor who teaches pregnant women and new mothers. Ruth kindly shared a photo of Margie (Fig. 1), and gave me the following quote: "Her passion was always supporting and empowering mothers and women. She is still very much alive in all I do."



Figure 1. Margie Polden.

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I set up the Best Beginnings charity for a variety of reasons. These included my own children, both of whom were born with significant health problems, and the challenging journey I was on as a middle-class mum, surrounded by doctors (my husband is a Professor of Paediatrics and I come from a family of doctors). Reflecting on this, I knew how much harder it would have been if I hadn't been fortunate enough to benefit from the support network that I enjoyed.

Another motivator was the memory of my uncle, Professor David Baum, who died in the same year as Margie. He was the first president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH). David was an extraordinary man who fought for the rights of children both in the UK and internationally. Best Beginnings was set up in his memory.

In my time with you this afternoon, I am going to talk mainly about the Baby Buddy mobile phone application (app), and would like to invite you all to get involved with this. I believe that the work of Best Beginnings and the development of Baby Buddy is really a development of Margie's legacy. The more I have learned about her approach and her contributions, the more I feel that this is so. Margie was passionate about empowering, informing and believing in women. She also was an advocate of working with midwives. When I spoke with Professor Lesley Page, the president of the Royal College of Midwives (RCM), she talked about the phenomenal work that Margie did with women and midwives by promoting active birth, and getting mothers-to-be off their backs and out of their beds during labour.

Best Beginnings are proud to have worked with the RCM for a number of years, and now to collaborate with Pelvic, Obstetric and Gynaecological Physiotherapy, and the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists (CSP) in order to deliver key messages to a large number of families from all backgrounds.

Best Beginnings

Before I discuss Baby Buddy, I am going to tell you a little about Best Beginnings and the work that we do. Our remit is to give children the best start in life. We do this by focusing on the wonderful "window of opportunity" from pre-conception to the child's third birthday, the time when the foundations of a healthy life are laid. The charity works to support the physical and

mental health of parents and their children by exploiting, in a positive way, the receptivity of mothers and fathers to health information during this key life transition.

We create innovative, evidence-based resources with a great deal of input from both parents and professionals. However, as powerful as these are, such materials are not "magic wands". The magic is in how these resources are exploited, be it directly by parents, or when parents sit down with healthcare professionals or peer supporters. Best Beginnings resources are never to be used instead of anything or anyone; these materials are meant to augment and amplify the great work of healthcare professionals, such as physiotherapists.

Best Beginnings' first piece of work was focused on breast-feeding, since this is such a powerful safety net that reduces the impact that poverty has on health. Our *From Bump to Breastfeeding* DVD (Best Beginnings 2008) uses real mothers' stories to show new parents how to begin breast-feeding, and provides practical answers to commonly encountered challenges.

Since its launch in 2008, over 2 million copies of the DVD have been distributed throughout the UK (Best Beginnings 2015a). *From Bump to Breastfeeding* can be viewed with or without subtitles in seven languages, including Urdu, Bengali, Polish, Somali and Arabic, a facility that is intended to support and engage families from these communities. All films from the DVD can also be viewed in English on the Baby Buddy app. To watch *From Bump to Breastfeeding* and find out how it can be used in your area, please go to the relevant page on the Best Beginnings website (Best Beginnings 2015b).

Another huge project that is very close to my heart is the Small Wonders National Change Programme. The *Small Wonders* DVD is at the heart of this plan (Best Beginnings 2012). It is designed to support the families of sick and premature babies so that they can be at the centre of their child's care in ways that are known to improve health outcomes (Best Beginnings 2015c). Currently, over 90 000 copies of this DVD have been distributed, and 150 of the 171 hospitals with a neonatal unit in England have received a copy. To watch *Small Wonders*, please go to the relevant page on the Best Beginnings website (Best Beginnings 2015d).

However, today is really about our newest resource, the Baby Buddy app (Fig. 2). This was designed to be a means to deliver public health messages to huge numbers of families. It is piece



Figure 2. Screenshot of the homepage of the Baby Buddy app.

of software that looks and feels like a fun and funky app, but is actually a purposeful public health intervention.

Baby Buddy already contains the content and videos from our *From Bump to Breastfeeding* and *Small Wonders* DVDs. We are now in the process of creating a series of films on maternal mental health, as well as all aspects of the transition to parenthood. These include videos about PFMEs and perinatal exercise, which I am delighted to be able to preview for you all today.

To gain the best insight into how Baby Buddy works, please download it from the iTunes (<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/baby-buddy/>

id903080388?mt=8) or Google Play (<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/baby-buddy/id903080388?mt=8>) app stores. Once you have downloaded the app, please register to use Baby Buddy as a professional (Best Beginnings 2015e).

Baby Buddy

Baby Buddy includes a suite of interactive features that are designed to:

- increase the knowledge and confidence of mothers-to-be and new mothers about pregnancy and parenthood;
- strengthen the relationship between young mothers and their babies, while also enhancing their social support;
- improve young mothers' access to and engagement with health services; and
- have a positive impact on mothers' health-related behaviour.

This free interactive app is endorsed by the Department of Health, the RCPCH, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the RCM, the Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association, the Institute of Health Visiting, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and the Faculty of Public Health. It delivers pregnancy and parenting information, and prompts reflection and action in the voice of a chatty, knowledgeable friend.

Once she has download the Baby Buddy app, the user creates a digital friend or “buddy”. The buddy then invites the user to input her name, her baby’s name, and if she has one, her partner’s name. This personal information is integrated throughout the app, including the daily messages, which are age- and stage-appropriate “nuggets of information”.

There is a focus on resilience, mental health and reducing stigma in the daily information and throughout Baby Buddy’s other interactive features:

- “You can do it” – This feature allows the user to set her own targets, or adopt pre-set goals like “Taking time for me”, “Talk to my baby” and “Do my pelvic floor exercise”.
- “What does it mean?” – This part of the app gives the user access to a glossary of terms. Thanks to input from parents and from professionals, including psychiatrists and psychologists, this feature defines words related to both mental and physical health.
- “Ask me” – Baby Buddy has a growing database of questions that parents ask that are

answered with quality-assured information. Users can search for facts quickly at any time of the day or night. The app covers mental and physical health, and also practical matters such as maternity rights and housing options.

- “Videos” – Best Beginnings has a strong track record of using films to inform and empower parents. During 2015, following the editorial board signing off on the content, more than 100 new videos will be added to Baby Buddy. Many of these are about mental health. The films can be found in the in-app video library, as well as in the daily information, answers to “Ask me” questions and in descriptions of terms in the glossary. Among the films that are about to be added to the app are approximately 20 physiotherapist-led clips.
- “Remember to ask” – This feature allows the user to add questions about her pregnancy or baby as these occur to her, rather than being “put on the spot” during appointments. Information found in the app (e.g. in “Ask me”) can automatically be added to this list, and parents can also create their own questions.
- “Appointments” – Traditionally, the younger a mother is, the more likely she is to miss an appointment. This part of the app puts appointments directly into the diary on the user’s smartphone.
- “Bump Book and Baby Book” – This feature encourages the user to record her thoughts and feelings, and take photographs in order to support self-reflection. It also acts as a record of her transition to parenthood and her baby’s first months. She can choose to share individual entries via social media and e-mail.
- “Bump Booth and Baby Booth” – This part of the app allows the user to take a weekly picture of herself antenatally (and of her baby postnatally), and to create a video of her growing bump (or growing baby). She can share her videos if she chooses to increase her support network. This feature has been designed to support *in utero* and post-birth bonding and attachment, and to increase the uptake of Baby Buddy.
- “Bump Around and Baby Around” – This feature has the potential to reduce isolation and build social capital by enabling the user to find local services and groups easily, and to give feedback on these (see below).
- “Edit me” – The customizable avatar is important for increasing the user’s sense of

control of and engagement in the app. This feature allows her to change the appearance of her avatar, and if she chooses, her avatar’s avatar baby (e.g. by adopting new hairstyles and handbags). Furthermore, the user can “unlock” new outfits on the completion of goals and feedback questionnaires.

- “Tell us what you think” – In addition to the independent evaluation being conducted in three parts of England, Best Beginnings is capturing detailed feedback from Baby Buddy users. This is being done through in-app pop-up questionnaires that ask about usability, likeability and also its impact on what parents know, and how they feel about themselves and their baby. Along with app usage data analysed by types of user (e.g. age, ethnicity and locality), these insights will inform future developments of Baby Buddy.

People-driven digital health and well-being

The Baby Buddy app has been a labour of love, and I often say that it has had the gestation period of a couple of elephants! Figure 3 highlights some key milestones in the project.

Baby Buddy was revolutionized when it gained Big Lottery funding in late 2013 (BLF 2013), and since its launch in November 2014, it has been downloaded over 40 000 times. The number of downloads is growing steadily, and at the time of writing, there were approximately 1000 new users a week. This is thanks to healthcare professionals spreading the word, and ordering leaflets and posters promoting Baby Buddy.

Input from parents and professionals has been integral to the development of this app. Prior to the production of Baby Buddy, and as an on-going process, Best Beginnings has involved these groups in decisions about the look, feel, functionality and content of the app. This has involved significant feedback from parents through a series of focus groups and closed online bulletin boards. It is this parental and professional involvement that has led to Baby Buddy being endorsed by so many organizations. Best Beginnings is currently in the process of gaining formal endorsement from POGP.

The endorsement of so many key organizations is integral to the success of Baby Buddy. This is because such validation shows that healthcare professionals know that the content and functionality of the app are robust, evidence-based and reliable. It is a challenging but rewarding process since each piece of content and every film needs to be reviewed by the

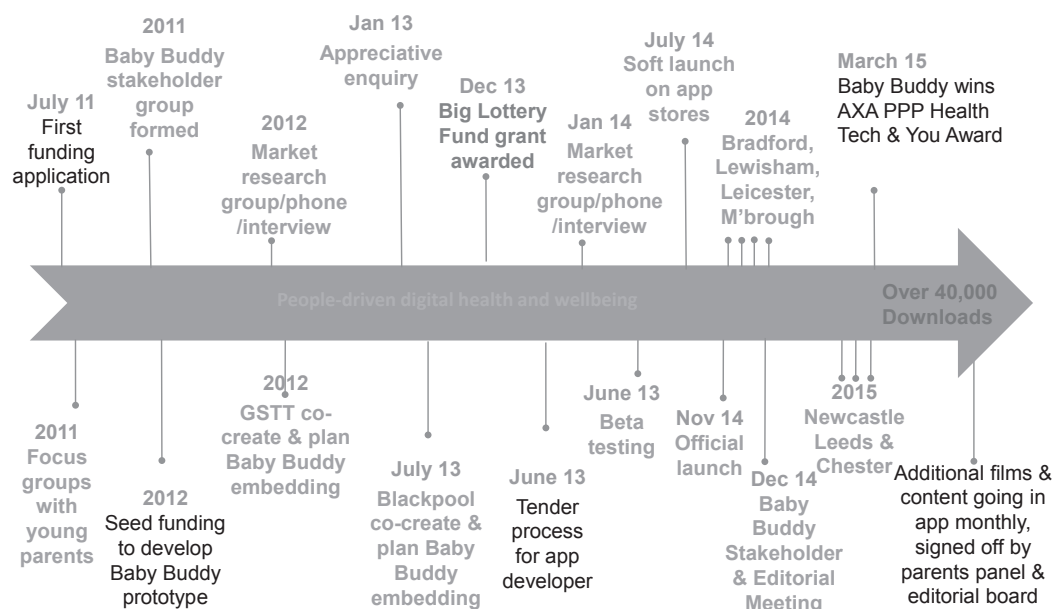


Figure 3. Key milestones in the Baby Buddy project.

editorial group before it appears in the app. Currently, the films on pelvic and prenatal exercises that were previewed in this conference presentation are being evaluated (Fig. 4).

Best Beginnings has a track record of working with multidisciplinary professionals in order to

embed their resources in care pathways so as to augment and enhance the work of frontline workers, and help “make every contact count” (NHS 2012).

The charity has mobilized its growing network of stakeholders and supporters to promote Baby

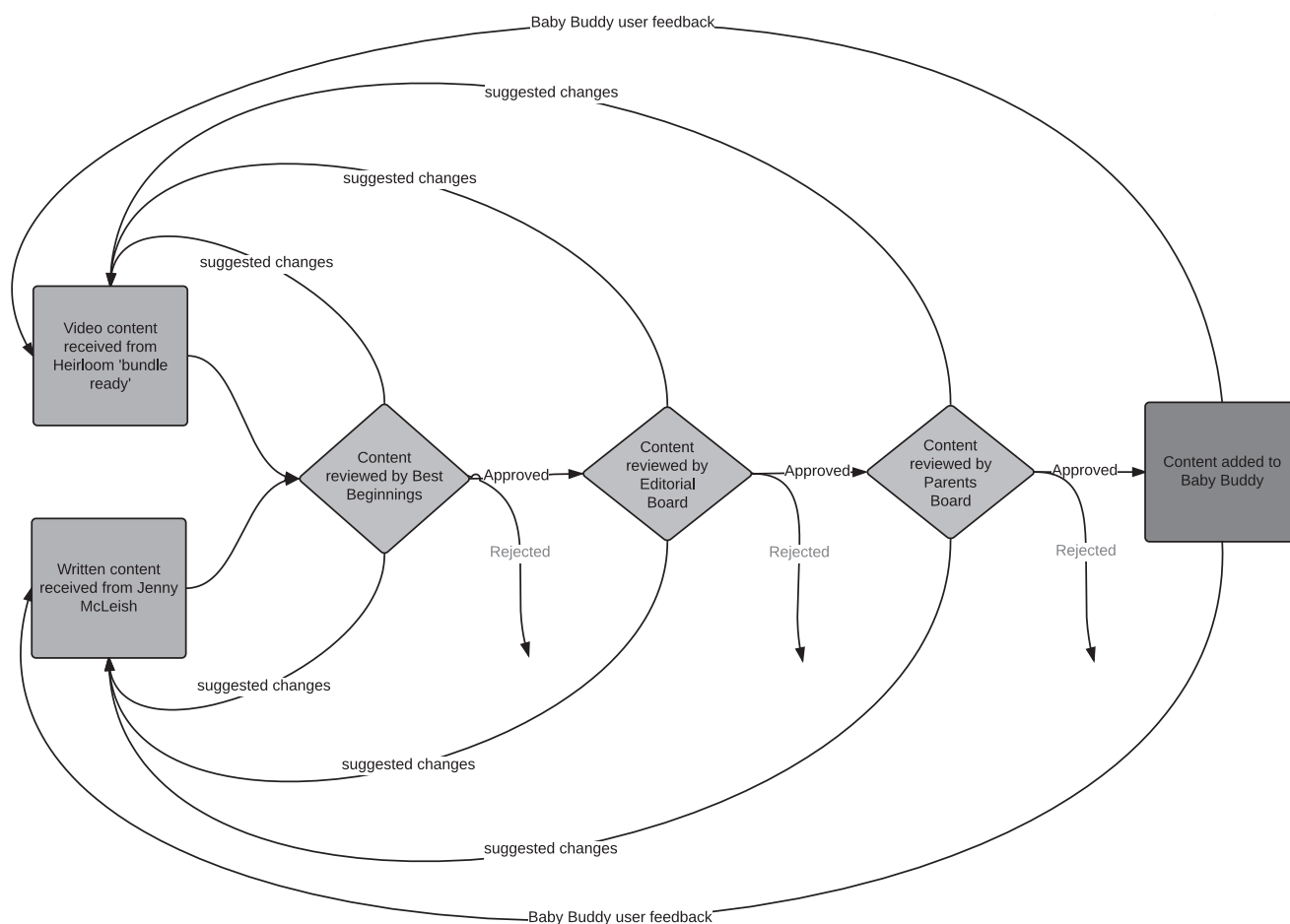


Figure 4. Baby Buddy content pipeline.

Buddy across the UK. As mentioned above, Best Beginnings has also produced leaflets and posters promoting the app. This engaging literature is available to teams working with parents throughout the UK. Senior management sign-off is needed before the promotional material is sent out to promote a systematic approach; for example, if Baby Buddy leaflets are to be put into letters about booking appointments. To date, materials have been distributed to over 140 localities across the country.

Furthermore, local areas and other charities can have their services featured for free in the “Bump Around and Baby Around” feature of the app. Parents using Baby Buddy can find these services easily using its geolocation functionality, and then give feedback about their experiences, not least by completing the Friends and Family Test (NHS 2015). These services can include local antenatal classes, statutory perinatal mental health services, and local support groups and social networks.

In addition, Best Beginnings has been commissioned to deliver its structured embedding programme in many areas of the country. This involves working with multi-agency senior management teams, parents and multidisciplinary frontline workers to co-create and then deliver plans to actively embed Baby Buddy in the care pathway. As part of this service, the charity can provide reports on the uptake of the app, usage and feedback, including opinions on local services ranging from those provided by the clinical commissioning group or local authority to the granularity of individual wards.

To order leaflets and posters, or get your local services featured in Baby Buddy, go to our website (Best Beginnings 2015f). You can also see some of the Baby Buddy videos online.

Best Beginnings is committed to engaging women’s health physiotherapists in this work. It is vital to ensure that this key group of professionals are familiar with and are recommending the app in their practice, as well as using it to maintain contact points and support women between appointments.

Why should physiotherapists get involved?

From the outset of the development of Baby Buddy, a conscious decision was made to ensure that it was a public health intervention. The app encompasses positive messages from across a

number of areas, such as safe weaning, destigmatizing mental health and addressing urinary incontinence. These relevant messages are delivered in a timely manner to users in a supportive and empowering way.

Best Beginnings is passionate about collaboration, and following the RCM/CSP Joint Statement on Pelvic Floor Muscle Exercise (Gerrard & ten Hove 2013), the charity is working to get messages out to families, and improve health outcomes for women following pregnancy and birth. Baby Buddy incorporates public health messages on antenatal and postnatal exercise, PFMEs, and urinary incontinence. It also includes signposts to relevant bodies. The aim is

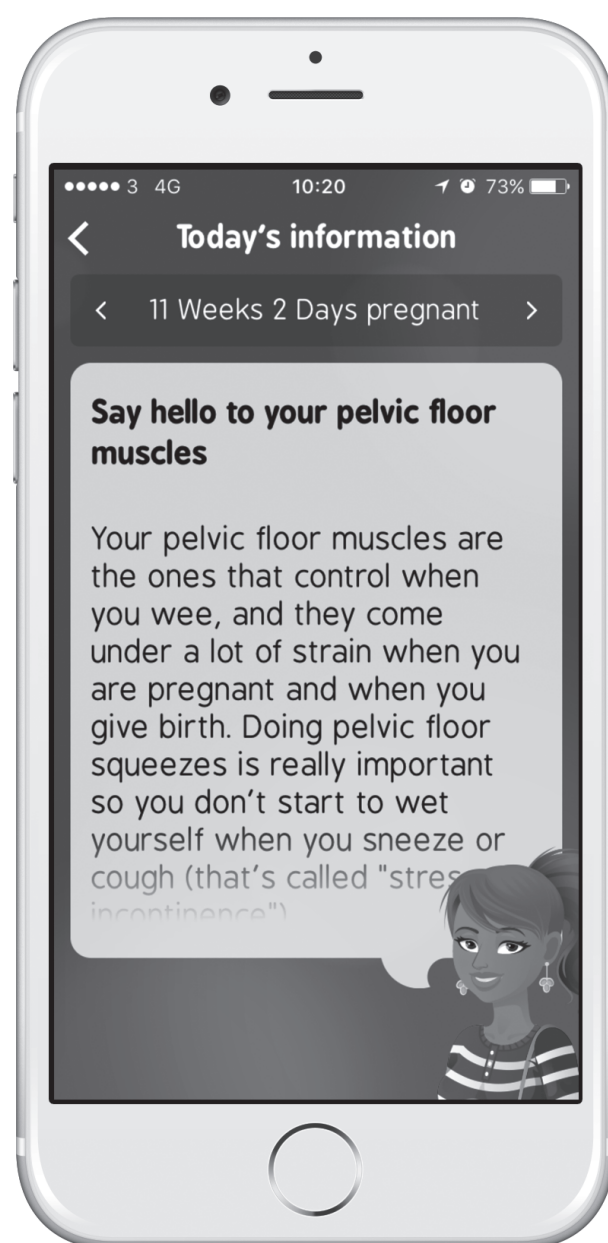


Figure 5. Screenshot of a page of the Baby Buddy app.



Figure 6. Women's health physiotherapist Claire Bamping (left) and three mothers-to-be.

to encourage women to understand the importance of PFMEs and a preventative approach, as well as to destigmatize the topic.

Currently, Baby Buddy contains content on the pelvic floor and PFMEs, urinary incontinence, and other physiotherapy-related topics (Fig. 5). Pelvic floor exercises are also a pre-set goal in the “You can do it” feature.

The power of film

Best Beginnings is deeply committed to using the power of film as a tool to drive changes in public health, and narrow the gap created by health inequalities. This has been reiterated in Baby Buddy, with over 250 video clips already in or going into the app. The categories include:

- “How you feel in pregnancy”;
- “Your growing baby”;
- “Your health in pregnancy”;
- “Eating well”;
- “Exercise in pregnancy”;
- “Preparing for Birth”;
- “Birth”;
- “Caring for your baby”;
- “Feeding your baby”;
- “How you feel after birth”;
- “Your health as a new mum”;
- “Your baby's health”;
- “Exercise after birth”;
- “Introducing solids”;

- “Having twins or more”;
- “If your baby is born early or poorly”.

We have been working closely with the CSP, and in particular, Claire Bamping, a women's health physiotherapist, to produce a series of films on antenatal and postnatal exercises (Fig. 6). These videos are currently being reviewed by the editorial board, and will be available in Baby Buddy in the coming weeks.

Who is using Baby Buddy?

The analytical capacity of Baby Buddy was developed to ensure that the app can provide an anonymized data set of those using it. Best Beginnings is now able to share early findings on Baby Buddy usage and feedback (Figs 7–9).

The data were drawn from in-app questions that are presented to users upon their registration. These took the form of optional pop-up surveys that first appear after five logins by the user, and then at 7 and again at 9 weeks after she begins to use Baby Buddy.

Currently, 80% of users are mothers, 12% are professionals supporting parents, 5% are fathers and 8% are “others”. The user data also show that:

- 99% find Baby Buddy easy to use;
- 88% find it interesting to use;
- 22% live in London, 26% live in the Midlands and the East of England, 31% live in the

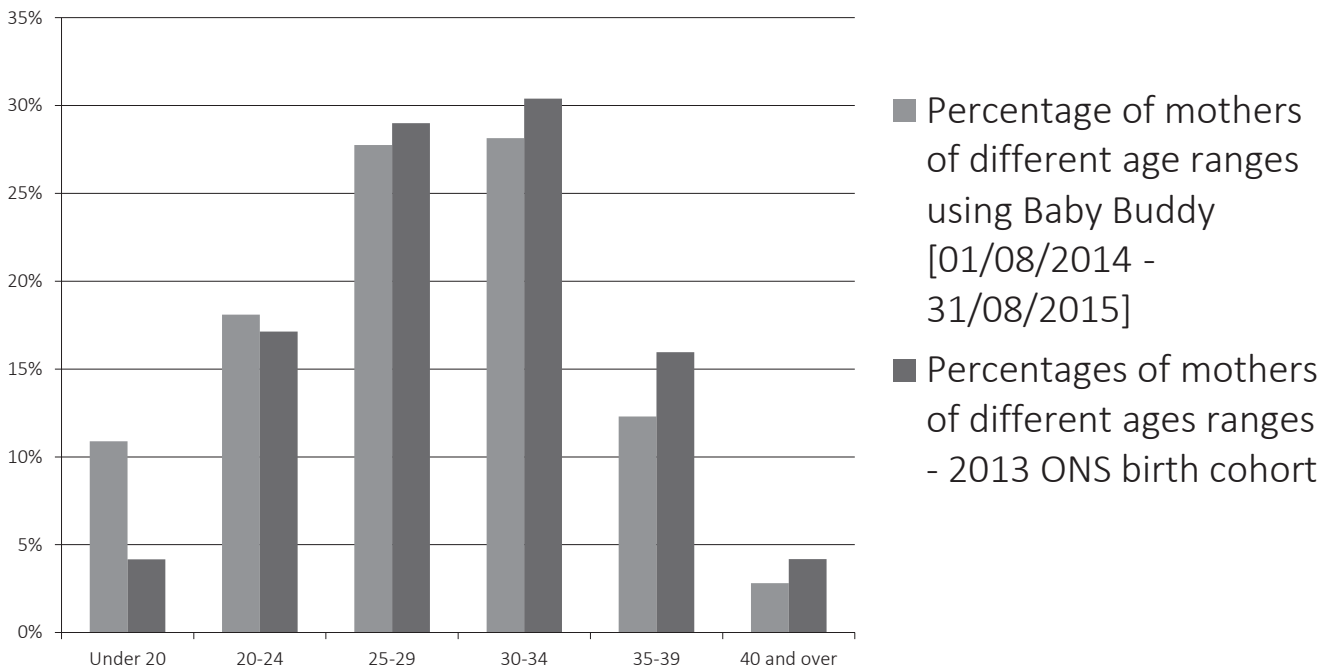


Figure 7. Age distribution of users of the Baby Buddy app compared to the age distribution of new mothers in the UK.

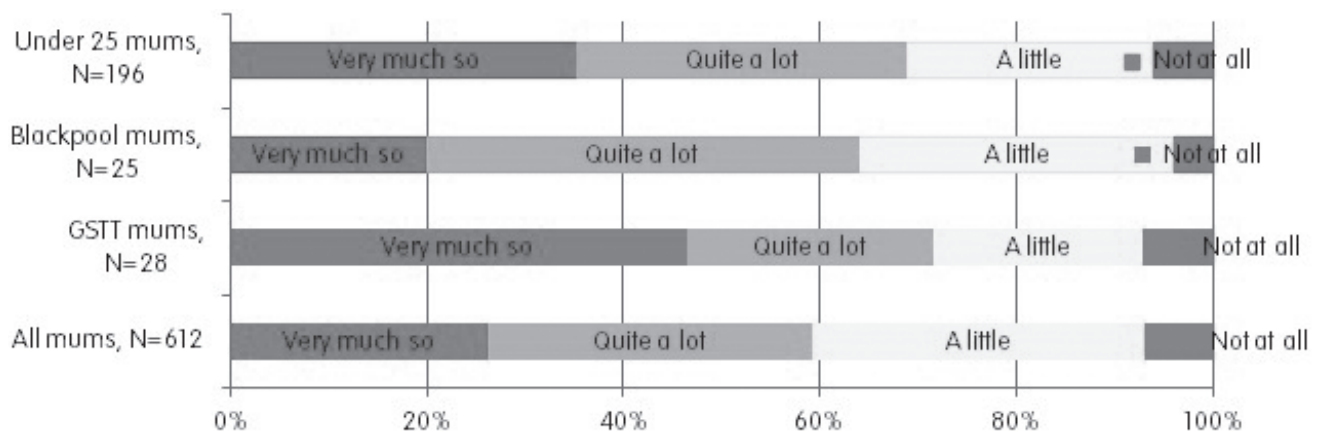


Figure 8. Is Baby Buddy helping you feel more prepared for parenthood?

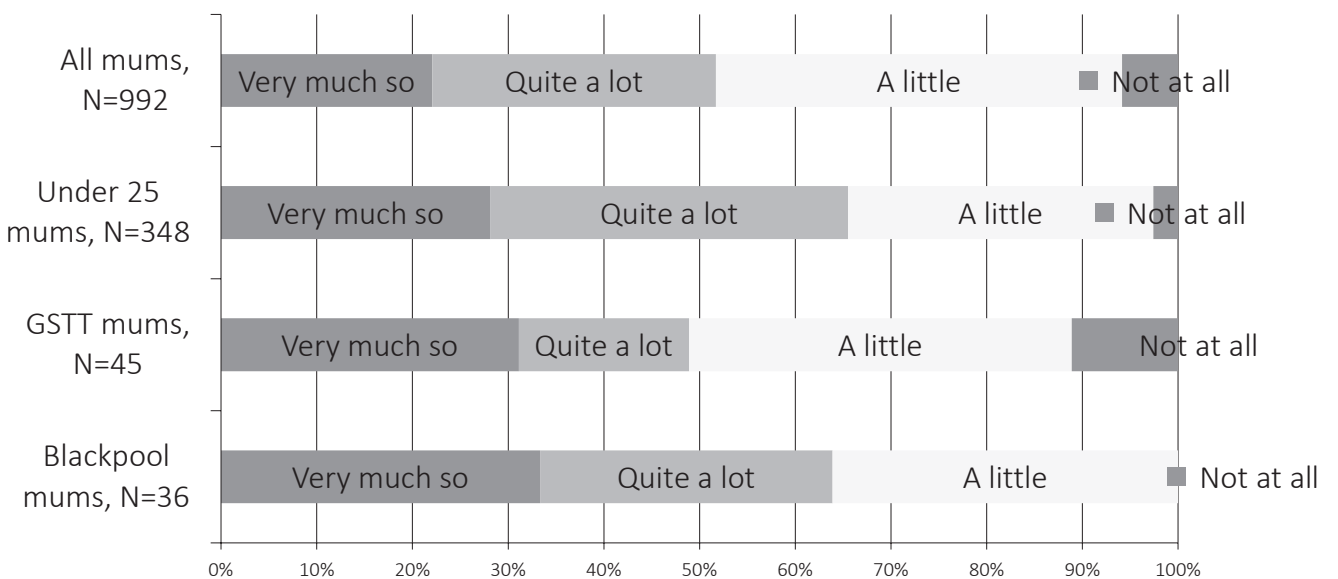


Figure 9. Is Baby Buddy helping you look after your health?

North of England and 21% live in the South of England;

- local authorities that have formally embedded Baby Buddy into practice have higher rates of app registrations;
- 29% are mothers under 25 years of age; and
- 20% of mothers under 25 years of age are not in employment, education or training.

Following a tendering process, Best Beginnings chose a consortium of five universities, led by Dr Toity Deave at the University of the West of England, Bristol, UK, as the independent evaluators of Baby Buddy. The consortium's assessment will be completed in late 2016.

What next?

We are still in the early days of Baby Buddy, and we are keen to grow and develop the app, and its content and functionality. Please join us on this journey and use Baby Buddy in your practice. Further to this, you can:

- download and experience Baby Buddy as a mother;
- suggest "Ask me" questions and answers for inclusion;
- suggest films for inclusion (if we secure more funding);
- order leaflets and posters for your area;
- get your local services featured in Baby Buddy for free;
- become an embedding site;
- give us your feedback; and
- join the Best Beginnings family.

Please go to the appropriate page on our website (Best Beginnings 2015f), or get in touch with me directly (e-mail: alison@bestbeginnings.org.uk) or via Twitter (@alisonbaum).

Together we can make a difference for future generations.

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Alison Baum is the founder and chief executive officer of Best Beginnings, which she set up in 2006 in order to give every child born in the UK the best start in life. She was invited to give the Margie Polden Memorial Lecture at this year's POGP Annual Conference because of the work of the charity. By a delightful coincidence, Alison's mother, Glenda Baum, is a chartered physiotherapist who was friends with Margie.