

# Best Beginnings – working to reduce inequalities in child health

**B**est Beginnings is a child health charity which aims to help create a society where all babies, irrespective of their socioeconomic group, have the best possible health outcomes, focusing on the period from preconception to a child's second birthday when the foundations for a healthy life are laid. This article charts the progress of the charity from its inception to the present day and describes the development of two DVDs – 'From Bump to Breastfeeding' and 'Small Wonders'. The charity creates resources, projects and interventions to help families and the health professionals who care for them make good choices and enable children to have the best possible start in life. Three guiding principles underpin all that Best Beginnings does; innovation, collaboration and working from the evidence base.

Alison Baum, CEO of Best Beginnings, was motivated to start the charity by a series of life events including the death of her uncle, Professor David Baum, President of the Royal College of Pediatrics and Child Health, and the birth of her two sons, who both had cleft palates and were not able to breastfeed. Alison expressed milk for her first son David for ten and a half months (FIGURE 1). Her second son Joshua developed viral meningitis in his first week of life (FIGURE 2), so once again Alison started expressing milk for him. When he recovered she started to breast-feed him but due to his submucous cleft, which was not apparent at birth, Joshua failed to breastfeed successfully and Alison lost her milk. With support from the staff at Great Ormond Street Hospital, Liz Jones Senior Breastfeeding and Neonatal Research Practitioner at North Staffordshire Hospital and Gillian Weaver the Chair of UKAMB, Alison was able to re-lactate and provide milk for her son, who turned out to be extremely dairy intolerant (FIGURE 3). After Joshua's cleft-palate repair operation, when he was seven and a half months old, he became fully breastfed.

During these challenging few years



**FIGURE 1** David as a newborn with nasogastric tube.



**FIGURE 2** Joshua when he had viral meningitis.



**FIGURE 3** Alison expressing with Joshua on her knee.

Alison learned at first hand all about the beneficial effects of breastfeeding in fighting infection and improving outcomes and also became aware of the unacceptable inequalities that exist in child health in the UK, inequalities that largely map onto socio-economic group. Breastfeeding is one example of how a child's health can be buffered against the impact of poverty.

However, it is well documented that nine out of ten mothers in the UK stop breastfeeding before they want to and that mothers who would benefit most do not breastfeed. With her background as a film maker in the science department at the BBC and experience in communicating a

change management programme to BBC staff, Alison felt she was ideally equipped to try and drive change and tackle the inequalities in child health which exist across the UK and so made the life-changing decision to set up Best Beginnings in 2006.

The first project tackled by Best Beginnings was to produce a DVD entitled 'From Bump to Breastfeeding' (FIGURE 4). This was designed to give parents the information they needed to care for their newborn child in a medium that all parents would find easy to access and in particular to engage hard-to-reach groups. The content was informed by independent market research to determine what parents really wanted and the result of a series of discussions and meetings with a large expert panel.

The DVD covers topics such as preparing for birth, labour, skin-to-skin and early feeds and follows families on their journeys. There is a useful graphic of a baby attaching on the breast on the main film and also short films about breastfeeding a sick or preterm baby, breastfeeding twins, the first few days and weeks, overcoming challenges and expressing and returning to work. For two years after its launch in November 2008 the DVD was given out free in the four nations of the UK to pregnant women antenatally, with the aim that they would watch it antenatally and then again postnatally as and when they needed to. To date, more than 1.5 million DVDs have been distributed.

Independent evaluation by Bournemouth University in 12 Trusts across the country has shown that 99% of women who watched it antenatally found the DVD useful and 84% of women who had watched it by late pregnancy said it provided all they wanted to know. Overall across the women surveyed, 71% watched the DVD and those that left school with no qualifications were most likely to watch the DVD, with 88% of this group watching the DVD. Breastfeeding rates across the country were very variable, but watching the DVD was associated with a significant increase in breastfeeding at six weeks. The full evaluation of the DVD is available on

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**FIGURE 4** Cover of the DVD.

the Best Beginnings website to help disseminate the findings and ensure most effective usage of the DVD moving forward.

Funding for the free distribution of the DVD in England has now stopped, but the DVD is still available free in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales for healthcare professionals to order and give to the women they support. Best Beginnings is committed to doing all it can to ensure that every pregnant woman in the UK receives a free DVD from their healthcare professional. In England this is being achieved by acute and community NHS trusts buying the DVD directly from Best Beginnings at the lowest sustainable cost. 'From Bump to Breastfeeding' can be ordered via the Best Beginnings website ([www.bestbeginnings.org.uk](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk)) or by emailing [dvd@bestbeginnings.org.uk](mailto:dvd@bestbeginnings.org.uk) for £1 per copy for boxes of 240. The 'From Bump to Breastfeeding' DVD has been incorporated into the new best practice guidance outlined in the Breastfeeding Care Pathways for mothers and health professionals launched by the Department of Health in November 2010.

The next big project for Best Beginnings is 'Small Wonders', a change management programme focusing around a new DVD to enhance non-clinical care and improve outcomes for sick and premature babies is already well underway.

The 'Small Wonders' DVD, due to be launched in February 2012, will encourage parents of premature and sick babies to play a pivotal role in their babies' care. The DVD is designed to facilitate empowered parenting within the neonatal unit, concentrating on promoting bonding of parents with their baby by giving them the confidence to hold their baby and carry out their baby's cares as well as enabling mothers to express breastmilk and transition successfully to the breast. Best



**FIGURE 5** Olivia at 25 weeks.

Beginnings has been filming with 20 families over the last twelve months in a number of centres of excellence across the UK. The parents filmed have a good mix of age, ethnicity and background and their babies were born at a range of gestational ages from 24 weeks' gestation to term. What unites them is their willingness to be filmed to enable other families to learn from their experiences and their ability to talk openly about their journey as it unfolds.

The challenging process of editing all this footage into powerful evidence-based but parent-led films is now underway. The main film will follow the experiences of nine of the families from neonatal unit to the transition home. In addition there will be three extra films on the DVD; one on expressing and breastmilk, one on twins and multiples and one on bereavement.

This June a large stakeholder meeting is being organised with experts in the field, including representatives of BAPM, RCPCH, RCM, NNA, BLISS, SANDS and UNICEF to comment on rough cuts of the films and help shape the DVD's content. In addition in-depth focus group work will be undertaken with families of premature and sick babies who will watch the rough cuts and give their feedback to ensure that the final resource meets the needs of parents of premature and sick babies as well as the healthcare professionals who support them. It is anticipated that, for example, seeing how staff in the film help parents perform skin-to-skin contact will give neonatal nurses more confidence about supporting parents on their own unit.

Best Beginnings is working to secure funding to ensure that there will be enough free DVDs for staff training in all neonatal units and for the parents of every premature and sick baby born in the UK for a year. To help support the effective uptake and use of the DVD as part of a national change programme, Best Beginnings is looking to recruit a

'champion' in each neonatal unit – either a clinical or neonatal nurse lead – who will oversee the ordering of the free DVDs, co-ordinate staff-training with the DVD and ensure the effective use of the DVD within their unit. Champions will also be invited to join the expert stakeholder group and therefore will have the opportunity to help shape the content of the DVD. If you think you are champion material, please send me an email at: [liz@bestbeginnings.org.uk](mailto:liz@bestbeginnings.org.uk) or call Best Beginnings on 0207 443 7895 for more information. I would also be delighted to hear from you to discuss the possibility of your unit undertaking a robust evaluation of the efficacy of the DVD as part of a change programme on your unit with increased breastfeeding rates being the primary outcome measure.

In advance of the launch of the DVD some footage has already been included in the new three-day Breastfeeding Management Course UNICEF runs for neonatal nurses. You can see these clips at: [www.bestbeginnings.org.uk](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk). All feedback is welcome. Best Beginnings is committed to working towards maximising the physical and psychological health of all mothers and babies. You can find out more about 'From Bump to Breastfeeding', 'Small Wonders' and a new project focused on baby communication, by visiting the website. For details on the evidence base underpinning the 'Small Wonders' project and to see a short film with Olivia, one of the inspirations for the project (**FIGURE 5**), go to: [www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/the-need-for-small-wonders](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/the-need-for-small-wonders)

#### Supporting Best Beginnings

Best Beginnings is a very small charity with only four staff members and relies very much on fundraising to support its work. During 2011 Best Beginnings is running a series of events to raise vital funds. Whether it is running 10K through the streets of London or trekking the Great Wall of China you can reduce healthcare inequalities by taking on the challenge of:

- Running the ASICS London 10K, 10 July
- Cycling from London to Paris, 9-12 September
- Trekking the Great Wall of China, 8-16 October
- Climbing Mt Kilimanjaro, 15-25 October

**More information is available at**  
[www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/events](http://www.bestbeginnings.org.uk/events) or on  
**0207 443 7895**