

# Baby-nurturing group can send mums and kids on best path

Every week across seven playgroup sites in WA, groups of mothers gather with their babies.

This isn't just any mother's group catch-up. Yes, there are toys, snacks, breastfeeding babies and women sipping on coffee as they chat.

But there are also two group facilitators who are experts in perinatal mental health and the parent-infant relationship.

Many women first arrive at the 10-week Mother-Baby Nurture sessions feeling alone, anxious and utterly overwhelmed by the enormous transition into motherhood.

Some haven't slept due to an unsettled baby, or out of fear that something might happen to

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their baby if they dare shut their eyes. For others, it's the first time they have left the house in weeks due to anxiety.

What happens over the next 10 weeks and beyond is incredible. These mums experience support, understanding, and perhaps for the first time, they realise they are not alone.

Therapeutic techniques help them to bond with their baby, including a beautiful process called Watch, Wait and Wonder, which supports the women to

slow down and observe their baby. This profound transformation is detailed in a new documentary which was released this week. "I had such a low opinion of myself, I thought my son would be better off without me," one of them says in the film. "But at the end of the last session of Mother-Baby Nurture, not only did I not feel like I was a terrible mother, I thought, 'You know what, I'm a damn good mother'."

The free program fills the gap between acute mental health services and community child health nurse programs. It was started by Community Midwifery WA in 2009 but Playgroup WA has been

delivering it since 2017 through State and Federal funding.

Four of the centres are funded through an annual grant of about \$170,000 through the North Metropolitan Health Service. But each financial year the money is delivered anywhere from four to six months late, creating huge uncertainty for the 12 staff and the long queue of mothers desperate to take part.

We are now a month into the new financial year, and the Mother-Baby Nurture program is continuing to run, yet there has still been no word as to when this year's funding will arrive. In the meantime, Playgroup WA is funding the shortfall.

Such an important program deserves better. Playgroup WA has submitted a four-year business plan to the State Government in the hope of securing funding as an ongoing Budget item rather than short-term grants. Playgroup WA also wants to expand into regional WA and to offer groups for dads.

Consistent, long-term funding — and more of it, to expand the program — would save money in the long run by diverting vulnerable families on to a more positive path.

As the mothers begin to thrive, so will their babies, during a critical window of time when lifelong development and wellbeing is shaped.