

FAMILIES

How to help your child develop

Babies progress in different ways but, as Helen Connealy writes, a structured course can help them to get the best out of babyhood

Six naked bouncing babies aged between seven and 11 months wriggle, lie and roll on a large orange rubber mat. Mothers are at the ready with rolls of kitchen towel in anticipation of the natural sprinkler system which is inevitable with such nude freedom. This is not an advertisement for nappy liberation but the limbering-up process for a unique activity course for babies, called PEKiP.

A French-Canadian mother of two and PEKiP instructor Anne Knecht-Boyer explains: "The programme [was] originated in Prague in 1978 by Dr Jaroslav Koch, whose goal was to stimulate children in their first year of life. This is done through games and interactive activities".

She heard of PEKiP (*Prager Eltern Kin Programm*) seven years ago in Switzerland when her first child was a baby. When she moved to Hong Kong and realised PEKiP did not exist here, she travelled to Germany to train as an instructor.

Last September she began classes from her home, off Stubbs Road. "PEKiP is the only course in Hong Kong for babies as young as six weeks old," she says. She holds three levels of courses for babies: from six weeks to three months, four to six months, and seven to 11 months. "I never have more than six babies in each class," she adds.

The group is particularly reassuring for first-time mothers. They find the games and tips very helpful.

Mrs Knecht-Boyer begins the classes by checking on each baby's development. "This is the time to observe the baby's progress and ask the question: 'What is he doing that is new?'"

Sam is eight months old and proudly sitting upright. But he is not yet crawling, and Mrs Knecht-Boyer explains: "We don't encourage sitting before crawling. Crawling is an important part of the child's development and the movement builds up the spine in

preparation for sitting." Anna is 11 months old and started PEKiP classes at six months. She is a lively, free-spirited baby who has skipped the crawling stage and is rapidly heading towards walking. Instead of crawling, she wriggles on her tummy and shuffles on her bottom to get where she wants to be. Her mother, Jo Nolan, explains: "She has numerous ways of getting around. She even does a commando slither."

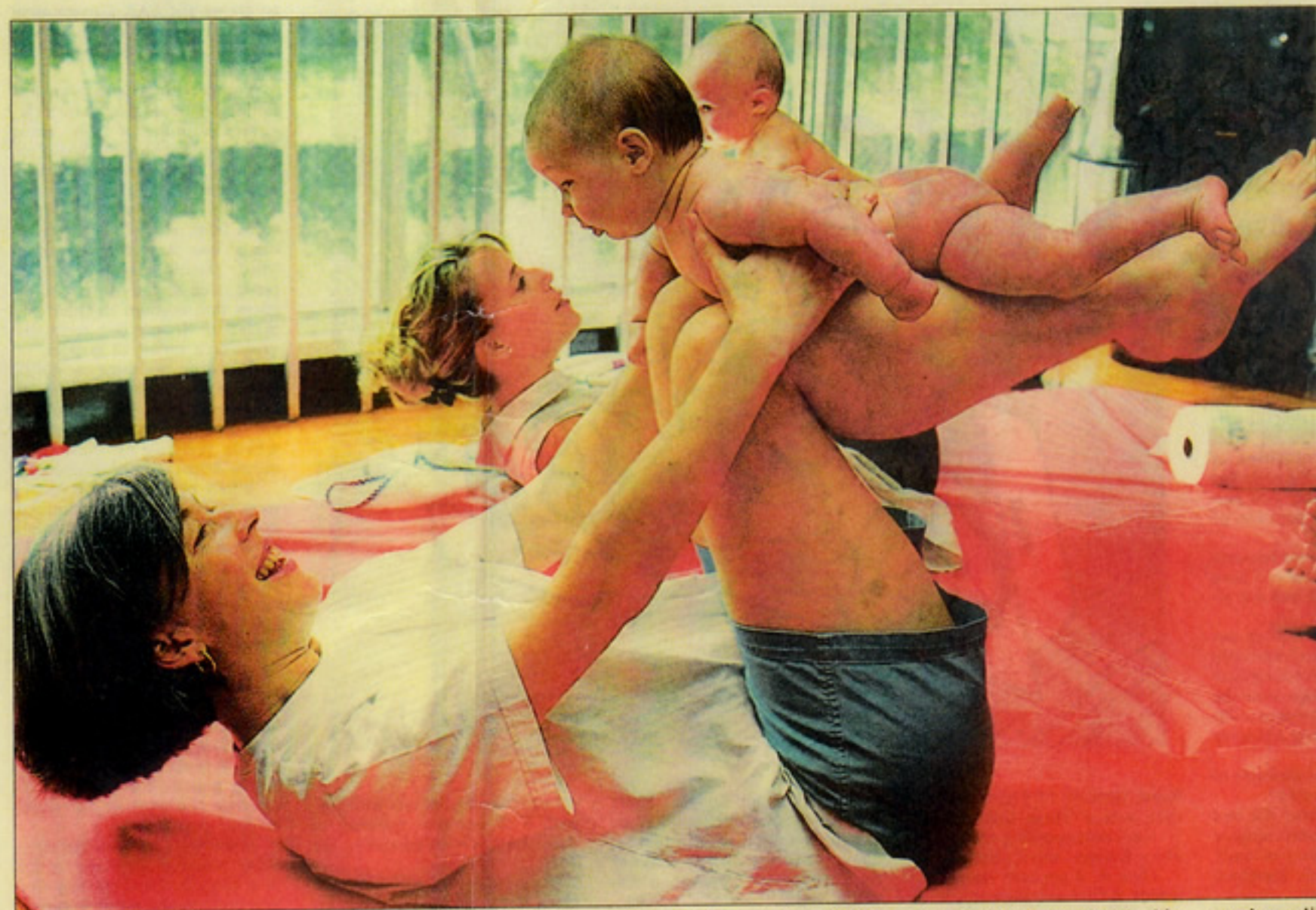
Anna is a sociable baby and really enjoys the games. Despite not crawling, she is quite determined and manages to get where she wants to go. "Her first word was 'no'," Mrs Nolan laughs.

Although many babies never crawl, Mrs Knecht-Boyer likes to encourage them. To help the learning process along, she wraps a scarf around the baby's ribcage and hoists the body upwards, like a stork. This encourages babies to use their knees and legs instead of swimming forward on their tummies.

June Trevison is a physical education teacher with two children - Daniellam aged 21 months and Francesca, six months. "My first child didn't ever crawl," Mrs Trevison says. "So when she learned to walk she had a pretty rough time. When she fell she hurt herself." She enrolled Francesca in the PEKiP class to encourage her to go through all the stages. "Of course you're never sure how she'd develop without the course. But it's not just about development, it's about entertainment and keeping her busy."

After checking each baby's progress, Mrs Knecht-Boyer introduces various games. "The main purpose of the class is to give the baby time to explore, play and learn. By exploring, the babies are willing to do a lot more," she explains.

She places a large wicker basket in the middle of the mat and lets the babies' curiosity do the rest. The basket is filled with safe household objects, such as bowls



Fun in the air... mothers at Anne Knecht-Boyer's PEKiP class are encouraged to help their babies develop through a series of games and interactive activities. Photo: Ricky Chung

and spoons (both plastic and metal), sponges, bags of cold coloured jelly, oranges and lemons. "This is to teach the baby to recognise different feels and different smells," she says.

She teaches the mothers of younger babies how to encourage mobility in their still relatively inactive infants. "Lying the baby on his back, let him grasp your fingers. Then gently pull him up, first to sitting, then to standing position. It's important to have a second adult with you to catch the baby if he lets go. When he is more confident, you can use two plastic rings and let the baby grasp them and pull himself up."

Midwife Tricia Ruffer went to a PEKiP class for professional reasons and was impressed. "PEKiP

is well known within midwifery," she says, praising Mrs Knecht-Boyer's capacity as a qualified psychomotor skills therapist.

"Some babies need more help than others [in developing psychomotor skills], just as some children are better at sports than others," she says.

Another game entails spreading a large silver cellophane sheet on the mat. All the babies grasp at it. The younger ones tend to shake it to hear the rustling sound, the older ones tug at it competitively, fascinated by the brightness.

The course teaches the babies social interaction while entertaining them. Mothers are totally involved and taught Chinese child massage techniques.

By the end of all this stimula-

tion, the babies are tired. While feeding them, the mothers exchange experiences and problems over a cool drink.

Mrs Trevison says: "With two children it's important to do something special for the second child."

It has also helped her with her other child: "I'm more aware of the stages now; I know what I'm aiming at and how to help her. She's becoming more adventurous and I'm trying to help her improve."

A problem of universal concern to mothers is how to stop a baby when it is tugging the mother's hair.

Mrs Knecht-Boyer recommends stroking the baby's forearm and, magically, every mother

to whom she recommends this finds it works.

Before having Anna, Mrs Nolan worked as a lawyer and had had no contact with babies in the past.

"The first one really is the guinea pig. No matter how much you read, it is not until you get to know the baby's individual response that you can judge what is best. You've got to go with the flow, and rely on friends for advice," she says.

First-time mothers are vulnerable and often don't know what to expect.

Mrs Nolan says: "Coming to the PEKiP course taught me a good lesson. There's an element of competition between mothers which is inevitable. When Anna

wasn't crawling, and the other babies were, I felt worried at first." Then she realised Anna just had her own way of doing things: "It was a useful lesson not to compare her with other children, and just let her be herself: that was a tough lesson."

The PEKiP course not only stimulates babies' development but also helps the mother develop her skills. Mrs Nolan says: "It's a very primitive gut instinct to want your child to survive, which means her putting on weight, walking and talking. The course helps you build up confidence to cope yourself."

For more information on PEKiP courses call Anne Knecht-Boyer on 2573-6623