



Dr Ian Robson with Sally Noden and Val Hobson of Action for Children

Mar 19, 2023 09:00 GMT

Researcher honoured for pioneering work to improve the mental health of babies

An Associate Professor at Northumbria University has won a prestigious award from the UK's leading membership group for experts on infant mental health, in recognition of his outstanding research.

[Dr Ian Robson](#), who is a qualitative researcher and teacher in the Department of [Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing](#), has been awarded the [Association of Infant Mental Health](#) (AIMH) UK Louise Emanuel Award.

Named in honour of the pioneering child psychotherapist that passed away in 2017, this accolade recognises Ian's contribution to practice, research and policy, and his commitment to the [1001 Critical Days](#) agenda, which recognises the period from conception to the age of two. These critical days set the foundations for lifelong emotional and physical wellbeing, and the agenda is designed to give babies the best start in life.

Ian explained: "Finding out I'd been put forward for this award was a surprise because I don't do any of my work without an incredible amount of input and support from other people and organisations. It's very much part of our DNA in the many things I'm involved with to work together in partnership, and it doesn't feel like I'm doing something that's all that amazing when myself and so many others are so passionate about it.

"The people who are amazing are those doing the work, but I love getting behind those people and amplifying their voices."

For Ian, the 'people doing the work' are the frontline practitioners working directly with children and families, particularly in Newcastle, where there is disproportionate disadvantage that makes some of our babies more vulnerable than those in other areas.

He said: "Partners on the 1001 Critical Days agenda, such as Action for Children, are working really meaningfully with families and can advocate on their behalf, not in a bureaucratic way but in a way that uses consultation, which is really important.

"What we do in Newcastle, which is highly multi-cultural with lots of different family structures and identities, has a national context in terms of developing safe, consistent responsiveness to issues affecting the health outcomes of children, such as noisy rental placements for example, which are connected to inequality and poverty.

"These are issues of social justice, and I'm proud that at Northumbria it is recognised that you can't work on issues of health and wellbeing without looking at the social issues that go with them. You simply can't look at one without the other."

Although he is not an infant mental health practitioner, Ian knows how

crucial high-quality nurturing and interactions are to early development, and is passionate about applying learning to life. With first-hand experience of both fostering and adoption, Ian is a father of four that has worked with children and families across various sectors and locations since the early 1990s.

Before joining the University almost 15 years ago, Ian managed both local authority children's services and Sure Start provision, offering integrated family support that focused on early intervention and prevention.

Much of Ian's recent collaborative work has been with Newcastle City Council, and he is Chair of its 1001 Critical Days Think Tank. He also holds additional positions including Engagement and Impact Lead for the KERNEL Early Life Research Consortium.

He continued: "I have a team of really valued colleagues who keep babies in mind in everything they're doing because they don't have a voice in the system. We know from research that interventions at this time of life are incredibly important, yet very young children are often excluded from the design of public services, such as play and regeneration schemes."

One method Ian applies to his work is an experimental storytelling approach to help make the topic of infant mental health and wellbeing more visible.

He said: "I like to use visual and material methods to get people talking. These are principles that are often employed in the way we work with very young children because they're pre-verbal, and I find they are very transferable.

"It helps to be a bit more playful about our own curiosity and the way in which we question things, and we know the value of interacting with young children, and even pre-birth, so I'm often a bit experimental in my approach – not to preach at people but to capture their imagination, through film and through publications.

"We don't need to be therapists or clinicians to understand about babies' mental health and wellbeing, and what parents and practitioners can best do to support them at this early stage; one thing Northumbria does really well is to put insights into practice."

Ian was nominated for the award by fellow lecturer Donna Carlyle and endorsed by his University colleague, Professor of Education Elizabeth Hoult, as well as paediatric clinician Sunil Bhopal from Newcastle University among others.

In announcing the win, AIMH said: “Since 2017, Dr Robson has been actively key to building collaboration between agencies and partnerships across Newcastle City Council.

“Throughout his career Dr Robson has championed infant mental health and community wellbeing has been at the heart of his research. His unwavering dedication, enthusiasm, commitment and support for organisational and systemic change and progress is commendable. He has undertaken various projects which demonstrate his desire for partnership, collaboration and working together across the city.”

Sally Noden, Children Service Manager and Inner West Locality Lead at [Action for Children in Newcastle](#) said: “I am delighted that Ian has been recognised for his work. He really helps to inspire us and to keep ensuring that our youngest citizens have a voice and are kept in mind.

“He is right in saying this is a collaborative approach and we’re very proud that in Newcastle we truly have a partnership approach to this from University, local authority, health and the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector.”

[Dr Joanne Atkinson](#), Head of the Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing added: “This award represents brilliant recognition, not only for Ian’s incredible work, but for the contribution such research makes to wider society, as we continue to strive for early intervention with children and families in addressing health inequalities. This is key to our aims and objectives for both the department and our Centre for Health and Social Equity.”

Plans to develop the [Centre for Health and Social Equity](#) were recently announced by Northumbria University, bringing together academics working on health, social care, education, wellbeing and equity issues onto one central base in the heart of Newcastle on the University’s city campus.

UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR 2022 (Times Higher Education Awards)

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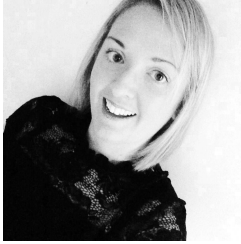


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