Assessing the optimal time interval between growth measurements using a combined data set of weights and heights from 5948 infants

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ABSTRACT

Background

Current guidance on the optimum interval between measurements in infancy is not evidence-based. We used routine data to explore how measurement error and short-term variation ("noise") might affect interpretation of infant weight and length gain ("signal") over different time intervals.

Method

Using a database of weights and lengths from 5948 infants aged 0-12 months, all pairs of measurements per child two, four and eight weeks apart were extracted. Separately, 20 babies aged 2-10 months were weighed on six occasions over three days to estimate the standard deviation (SD) of the weight difference between adjacent measurements (=116g). Values of 116g and 0.5cm for "noise" were then used to model its impact on a) the estimated velocity centile and b) the chance of seeing no growth during the interval, in individuals.

Results

The average gain in weight and length was much larger than the corresponding SD over eight- and four-week time intervals, but not over two weeks. Noise tended to make apparent velocity less extreme; after age 6 months a two-week velocity that appeared to be on to the 9th centile, would truly on the 2nd-3rd centile if measured with no noise. For two-week intervals there was a 16% risk of no apparent growth by age 10 months.

Conclusions

Growth in infancy is so rapid that the change in measurements 4-8 weeks apart is unlikely ever to be obscured by noise, but after age 6 months, measurements two weeks or less apart should be treated with caution when assessing growth faltering.

What is known about this topic

When measurements are collected over short time intervals there is a risk that measurement error or natural variation (*noise)* may mask the true underlying growth increment (*signal)*.

Current recommendations on minimum measurement intervals are not evidence based.

What this study adds

The average gains in weight and length over 4 or more weeks in the first year are much larger than the corresponding standard deviation and are thus unlikely to be obscured by short term “noise”.

Two-week intervals up to age 6 months are similarly unlikely to be obscured by “noise”, but after 6 months, when growth is slower, they are of limited value.

BACKGROUND

Successive weights and lengths measured in childhood are important for monitoring growth in individual children. Assessing growth over short intervals may allow earlier identification of growth faltering, but if the interval is too short, uncertainty in the measurement, or *noise*, may obscure the *signal* which is the true underlying growth increment (1). In older children a substantial time interval is recommended between measurements (2) and it has been suggested that over-frequent weighing in infancy may mislead or cause unnecessary anxiety (3).

The guidance published with the UK-WHO chart stated that babies should be weighed no more than monthly before 6 months and two monthly aged 6-12 months (4). However, these recommendations, and more recent less restrictive guidance (3) were based only on expert opinion. There is thus a need for formal evidence.

The *noise* associated with measurement consists of both error and short-term variation. The WHO growth chart project team (5) estimated a technical error of measurement (TEM) for length of around 0.33cm, using proper equipment, trained staff and regular quality control; in less well-regulated settings the error will clearly be larger. The WHO growth chart project team did not assess measurement error for weight, presumably assuming it to be minimal with electronic scales. However, weight may vary in the short term, reflecting feeding and voiding patterns, which can be regarded as *noise.* Apart from one small study (6) there are no published data on its magnitude.

Growth charts describe the average expected growth increment, which in infancy decreases with age and with shorter time intervals, but less is known about how much this increment varies with age and interval duration. As age increases and the interval decreases there is an increasing chance that the increment will be zero or even negative.

To establish the impact of *noise* on the *signal* we used two separate data sets to estimate:

1. short-term variation in weight (*noise*) using survey data collected for the purpose;

2. the distribution of increments in weight and length (*signal*) at different ages and time intervals, using a database of routine growth data;
3. the impact of *noise*, over different ages and time intervals, on the *signal*, measured as the velocity centile or the chance of observing no growth during the interval.

METHODS

Weighing study – to measure *noise*

Mothers of Glasgow babies aged 1-12 months were recruited as part of a student project via social media and word of mouth. At baseline the student researcher (HS) obtained consent and taught the parents how to weigh using Seca electronic scales, to the nearest 10g. Both parents and researcher then separately weighed the baby, with both masked to the actual weight by adding to the scale numbered bags of unknown weight.

The families then collected weights at home twice daily over two days. The masking bags were not used at home, but to avoid weights being compared each weight was recorded on a paper slip and posted into a collecting box. On the third day the family returned and both parent and researcher again weighed the baby, masked as before. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Glasgow MVLS Ethics Committee (application number 200170123).

All weights were entered into Microsoft Excel, and at the end of data collection the numbered bags were weighed, and their weights subtracted from the gross weights. The parent and researcher weights were then compared to assess repeatability. Then, just the parent weights were used to assess variation over time.

Database study – to measure *signal*

Three existing longitudinal growth studies provided data, retrieved mainly from routine records. They had already been cleaned, checked and analysed for other publications.

Newcastle Growth and Development Study (GDS): a dataset of routine weights of a birth cohort of 3418 children born at term in Newcastle upon Tyne between June 1987 and May 1988. Up to 11 weights, measured with mechanical or electronic scales, were retrieved from clinic records, and 3060 babies (90%) had at least two weights (7).

Gateshead Millennium Study (GMS): a birth cohort of 1029 babies (923 term) born in Gateshead in 1999-2000, representing 81% of eligible births during the recruitment period. Routine weights collected using electronic scales were retrieved from baby clinic records, with a mean of 13 weights per child in the first year (8, 9).

Tampere Study: a dataset of routine heights and weights of 2809 children aged 0-4 years born between October 2003 and September 2004 attending child health clinics in Tampere, Finland. Children were weighed by clinical staff on electronic scales. Up to 16 scheduled events were recorded per child, with a mean of 12 per child (10).

Data handling

All database weights, plus the lengths in the Tampere Study, collected before age 12 months were combined in a single file. All pairs of measurements per child that were two, four or eight weeks apart were identified using the following definitions, chosen to maximise the number of intervals while minimising the relative variability:

- 2 weeks = 14-15 days apart
- 4 weeks = 26-31 days apart
- 8 weeks = 50-63 days apart

Intervening measures per child were skipped over to identify more widely spaced pairs. The measurement pairs were exported to per-interval datafiles along with the origin dataset, the child's ID and gender, the two ages of measurement and the two measurements. Each pair was allocated to three-month age groups in the first year based on the child's average age between the two measurements.

Statistical analysis

Noise was summarised as a standard deviation called SD_{noise}. For weight, SD_{noise} was obtained from the weighing study, where the 6 parental weights per child were analysed by analysis of variance to obtain the within-child residual SD, which was multiplied by $\sqrt{2}$ to give the SD of the weight difference, giving 116g (see Results). In addition, the analysis compared mean weight as measured in the morning, daytime and evening (2 each per child).

For length, noise comprised measurement error, based on the WHO TEM of 0.33 cm (5). For the difference between two length measurements, $SD_{noise} = 0.33 \times \sqrt{2} = 0.5$ cm.

For the database study, for both weight and length, the observed mean ($Mean_{obs}$) and standard deviation (SD_{obs}) of the increment were calculated for each interval and age group. In addition, $Mean_{obs}$ and SD_{obs} were summarised as smooth cubic spline curves plotted against age (see appendix).

The analysis then compared three versions of the SD:

i) SD_{obs} as observed (which included SD_{noise})

ii) SD_{obs} with the noise removed = SD_{signal}

iii) SD_{obs} with extra noise added = $SD_{obs+noise}$. Here SD_{noise} was doubled to 1.0 cm for length and 232 g for weight, to model a context of greater random variation (see appendix).

A child's growth increment is expressed as a velocity z-score:

$$z = (\text{increment} - Mean_{obs}) / SD_{obs}$$

and z is affected by noise via both $Mean_{obs}$ and SD_{obs}. If SD_{noise} rises, then SD_{obs} rises, and this shrinks z towards zero and the velocity centile moves closer to the average. We modelled the impact of adding and subtracting noise on the observed 9th velocity centile (z = -1.33) chosen to represent a child with slow, but normal weight gain at different ages.

As the growth rate slows with age, $Mean_{obs}$ decreases and the likelihood of there being no observed growth increases. A convenient milestone in this process is the age when $Mean_{obs} = SD_{obs}$, when a zero increment is 1 SD below the mean. By definition this corresponds to the 16th centile, so at this age the chance of a zero or negative observed increment is 16%.

RESULTS

Weighing study – to measure *noise*

Twenty babies (12 female) aged 1.8-9.8 months were recruited in May-June 2018; 12 were exclusively and 4 partially breastfed, and all completed the protocol. Of the 40 immediately repeated measures, 33 (83%) were within 10g, but seven differed by up to 40g. In contrast, only 12 of 100 successive weight pairs (excluding the researcher measurements) differed by less than 10 g. Using ANOVA, the residual within-child weight SD was 82g, corresponding to an increment SD of 116g for SD_{noise} (95% CI 102g to 135g). There was also a highly significant diurnal trend, with mean weight 42g higher in the morning and 49g lower in the daytime compared to the evening ($p < 0.001$) (Figure 1).

Database study – to measure *signal*

Of 5948 children with measurements in the first 12 months 2624 had at least one pair of weights two weeks apart, 5081 four weeks apart and 5663 eight weeks apart. The corresponding numbers for length, all from the Tampere study (N= 2809) were 1123, 2323 and 2426. The numbers of pairs available in different age groups for the different time intervals are shown in table 1. The mean increment ($Mean_{obs}$) and SD of the increment (SD_{obs}) were both smaller for shorter intervals and fell with increasing age (Table 1, Figure 2). The effect of noise on the observed SD (SD_{obs}) can be seen in Figure 2 as the separation at each age between it and SD_{signal} (i.e. SD_{obs} with the noise removed) and $SD_{obs+noise}$ (SD_{obs} with extra noise added); the separation was greatest for the shorter intervals.

Table 2 summarises the risk of an infant failing to gain weight or length for different ages, intervals and amount of noise. For all intervals the risk of seeing no gain with the observed SD was low throughout the first year and remained so for 4-8 week intervals, even with extra noise. For extra-noisy two-week measurements the risk of seeing no gain reached 16% as early as 5-6 months, and there was a one in four risk of seeing no gain at 12 months.

Figure 3 uses the curves in figure 2 to model the impact of adding and subtracting noise at different ages on a child with slow/normal growth, corresponding to an observed velocity on the 9th centile ($z = -1.33$). The effect was greater the shorter the interval and increased in the early weeks, peaking at around 6-9 months. By 6 months the modelled true velocity for weight and length over two-week intervals was one centile space lower than the observed velocity; with extra noise this observed centile could have been almost one centile space higher.

DISCUSSION

This study used routinely collected data to assess the age when short measurement intervals become less useful, and how this depends on the quality of the measurement. The first outcome, the risk of seeing no apparent growth, is obviously relevant, as a child failing to grow is concerning. The second outcome, the effect of varying the amount of noise on the growth velocity centile is more technical, but also has important implications for assessing faltering growth.

To estimate noise the study drew on published length data and newly collected weight data. Our weighing study was modest in scale, but still represents the largest formal study to date of short-term variation in weight during infancy. One previous study weighed seven children over two days with similar results (6). Our 20 participants supplied 120 successive weights and the protocol used minimised digit preference bias. It was thought unethical to study infants younger than 1 month, but given the rapid rate of early growth, including these would be unlikely to change our conclusions. Further, larger studies are needed at later ages and to examine other factors affecting weight variation.

The combined dataset also had some limitations. It was collated from cohorts studied in different eras, and there was some heterogeneity between them. The SD for two-week weight increments was slightly, but significantly, higher in the Tampere sample (240g) than the earlier UK samples (210g), but this difference is unlikely to be important. All the length measurements used were collected in Finland, where there is a culture of routine and widespread length measurement, producing a likely TEM close to the 0.33 cm used here. Where length is not measured frequently, or equipment is inappropriate, the TEM is likely to be larger, and this materially reduces the sensitivity of the assessment.

The database analysis revealed that infant growth is so rapid that even two-weekly measurements are unlikely to be materially affected by noise till after the age of 6 months. After that the rate of growth slows, so the mean increment is smaller, while the SD changes little, so that by around 10 months, for two-week intervals, the amount of variation in weight, the SD, is greater than the average increment. In these circumstances there is a risk that an apparent small gain may simply reflect short term weight increase, such as a large feed, or conversely that there might apparently be no gain simply because the child has just emptied their bladder and not yet fed. However, this is still not a high risk; at the point where the mean increment equals the SD there is, by definition, a 16% chance of no observed gain.

The diurnal trend in weight was striking, being higher in the morning and lower in the day compared to the evening. This suggests that to minimise noise, weight should be measured at the same time each day.

The potential impact on growth assessment is important. Figure 3 shows that at 6 months the observed 9th velocity centile, selected because it represents low but usually acceptable weight gain, corresponds to a true velocity on the 2nd-3rd centile for 2-week intervals. Thus, what appears to be a low normal level of gain is in fact at the very bottom of the normal range. More troublingly, if accuracy of measurement were lower, the observed weight gain would be closer to the 25th centile. Thus, both imprecise and over-frequent measurements may obscure detection of growth faltering and falsely reassure. For longer intervals the effect of noise is much smaller and thus less likely to be clinically significant.

Measuring length in infancy can be challenging, and assumptions about its likely inaccuracy led the UK-WHO growth charts team to recommend that length should only be measured when there was clinical concern (4). Our data suggest that successive length measurements are nearly as robust as weight measures, so long as the TEM is as low as 0.33 cm. Even with increased imprecision, lengths collected 4-8 weeks apart are unlikely to be masked by measurement error. Thus our results for both weight and length suggest that the guidance on current charts (4) may be too conservative.

CONCLUSIONS

For infants growing steadily, measurement intervals of two weeks or more are unlikely to result in true growth (“signal”) being obscured by measurement error and/ or short-term variation (“noise”), where this is of the order of 116 g or 0.5 cm. However, for detecting slow growth, and particularly when length is measured imprecisely, measurements collected only two weeks apart should be treated with caution and repeated before being used for any important clinical decision.

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CONTRIBUTORS

CW conceived the study, led the analysis and drafted the paper

CH extracted the data for the main analysis and undertook the basic analysis

UH collected the Finnish data, advised on its use and commented on the draft

HS ran the weighing study and undertook the literature review

TJC advised on the design, undertook the main analysis and shared the paper drafting

Table 1. Summary statistics on the mean and SD of weight and length increment over different time intervals, grouped by mean age. Data from the Newcastle Growth and Development Study (7), Gateshead Millennium Study (8, 9) and Tampere Study (10).

Mean age	Weight increment (kg)			Length increment (cm)		
	n	$Mean_{obs}$	SD_{obs}	n	$Mean_{obs}$	SD_{obs}
Two-week intervals						
0-3 months	3857	0.46	0.22	1442	1.93	0.88
4-6 months	1060	0.31	0.17	105	1.22	0.66
7-9 months	290	0.22	0.16	33	0.80	0.73
10-12 months	95	0.16	0.17	17	0.89	0.64
Four-week intervals						
0-3 months	8172	0.88	0.32	2984	3.44	1.14
4-6 months	5843	0.58	0.23	3183	2.16	0.89
7-9 months	1074	0.38	0.22	557	1.53	0.80
10-12 months	497	0.29	0.24	198	1.22	0.71
Eight-week intervals						
0-3 months	11735	1.73	0.49	4012	6.52	1.5
4-6 months	7766	1.22	0.39	3631	4.62	1.22
7-9 months	3249	0.73	0.33	2067	2.88	0.98
10-12 months	2768	0.54	0.31	1854	2.38	0.87
Total	46406			20083		

Table 2. Weight and length increment measured over 2, 4 or 8 weeks. The age when $Mean_{obs} = SD_{obs}$ and there is thus a 16% chance of seeing no growth, and the probability (%) of seeing no growth at age 12 months, depending on the amount of noise in the measurement.

		Age (months) when $Mean_{obs} = SD_{obs}$ *			**Chance of no growth at 12 months**		
	Interval size	2 weeks	4 weeks	8 weeks	2 weeks	4 weeks	8 weeks
Weight	SD as observed	10	12	>12	21%	15%	6%
	SD with extra noise	6	10	>12	30%	20%	10%
Length	SD as observed	>12	>12	>12	12%	6%	1%
	SD with extra noise	5	12	>12	24%	16%	3%

*****When chance of no growth reaches 16%

Figure 1. Histogram of observed weight changes in 20 infants: a) successive weight pairs collected over 48 hours (n=100), and b) weight pairs collected 24 hours apart (n=40). The authors can confirm that we have permission to reuse the image which was created by Professor Tim Cole

Figure 1

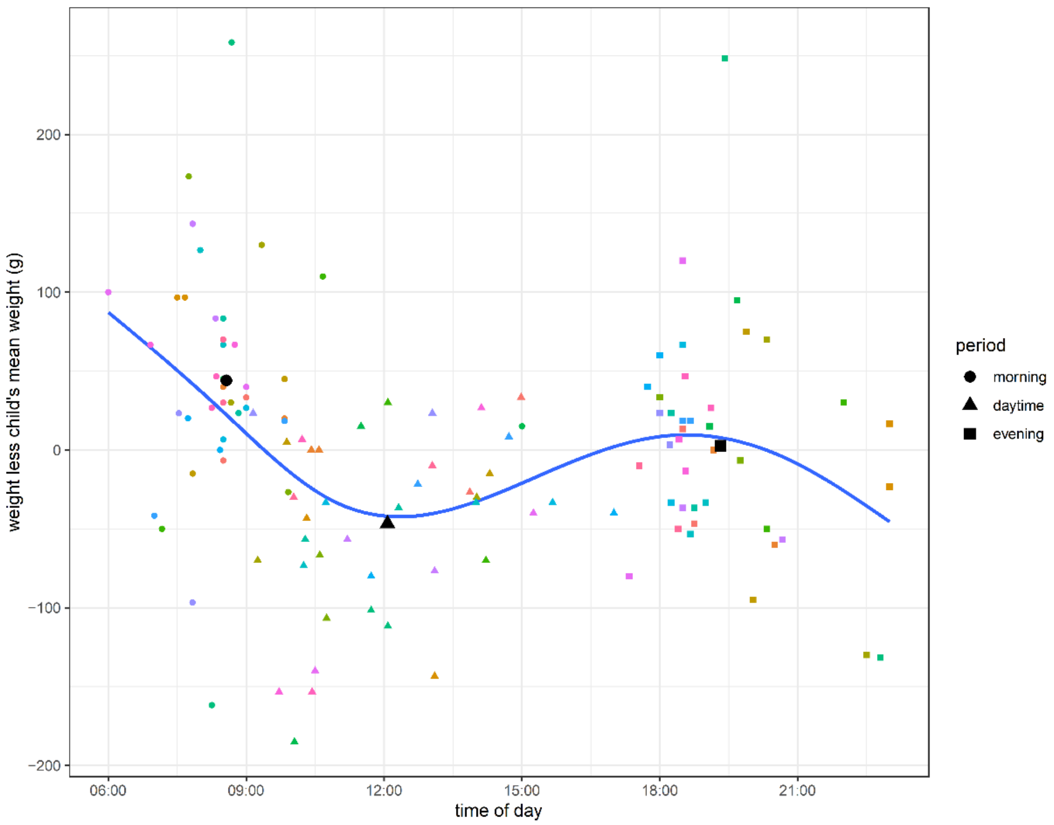


Figure 2. Spline smoothed curves plotted on a log2 scale of the mean growth increments in weight and length by age over two-, four- and eight-week intervals, along with the observed SD (SD_{obs}), the modelled true SD with noise removed (SD_{signal}) and the modelled SD with extra noise added ($SD_{obs+noise}$). The authors can confirm that we have permission to reuse the image which was created by Professor Tim Cole

Figure 2

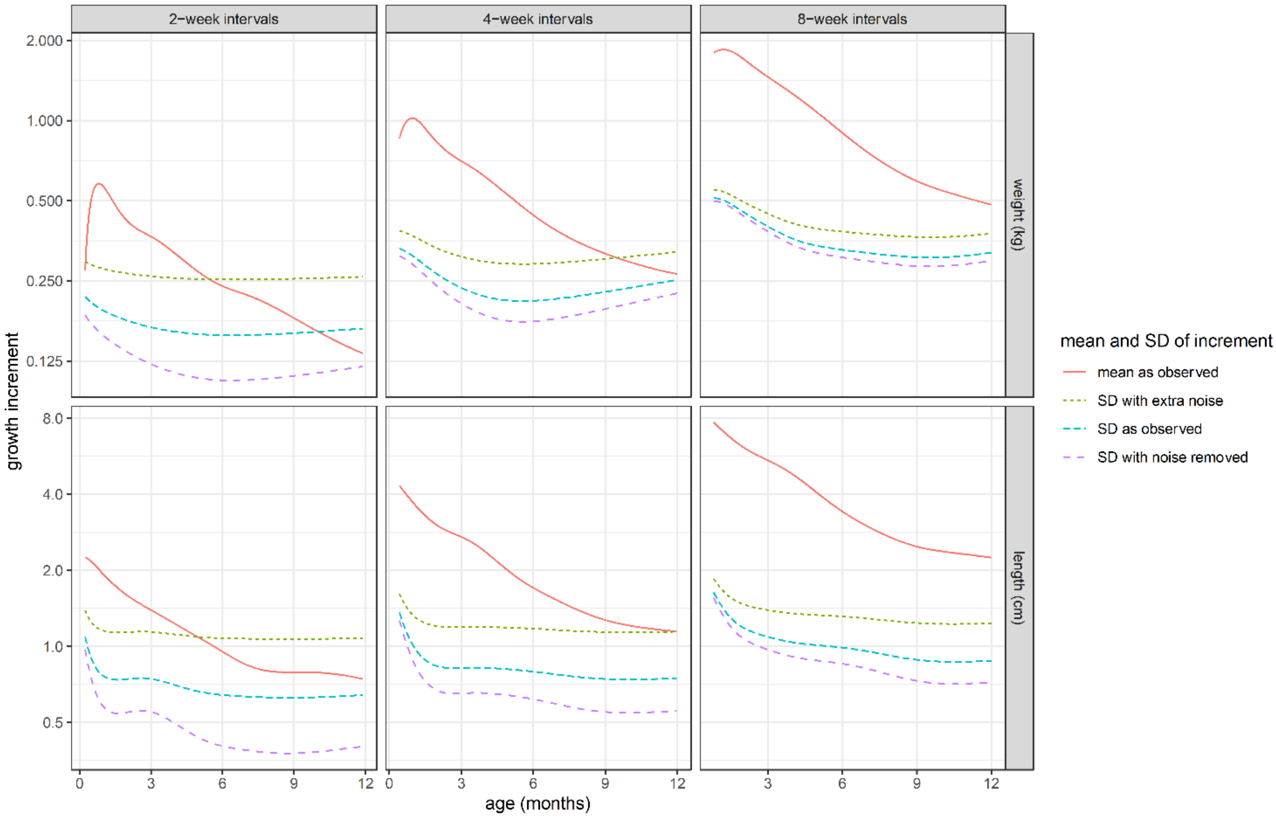
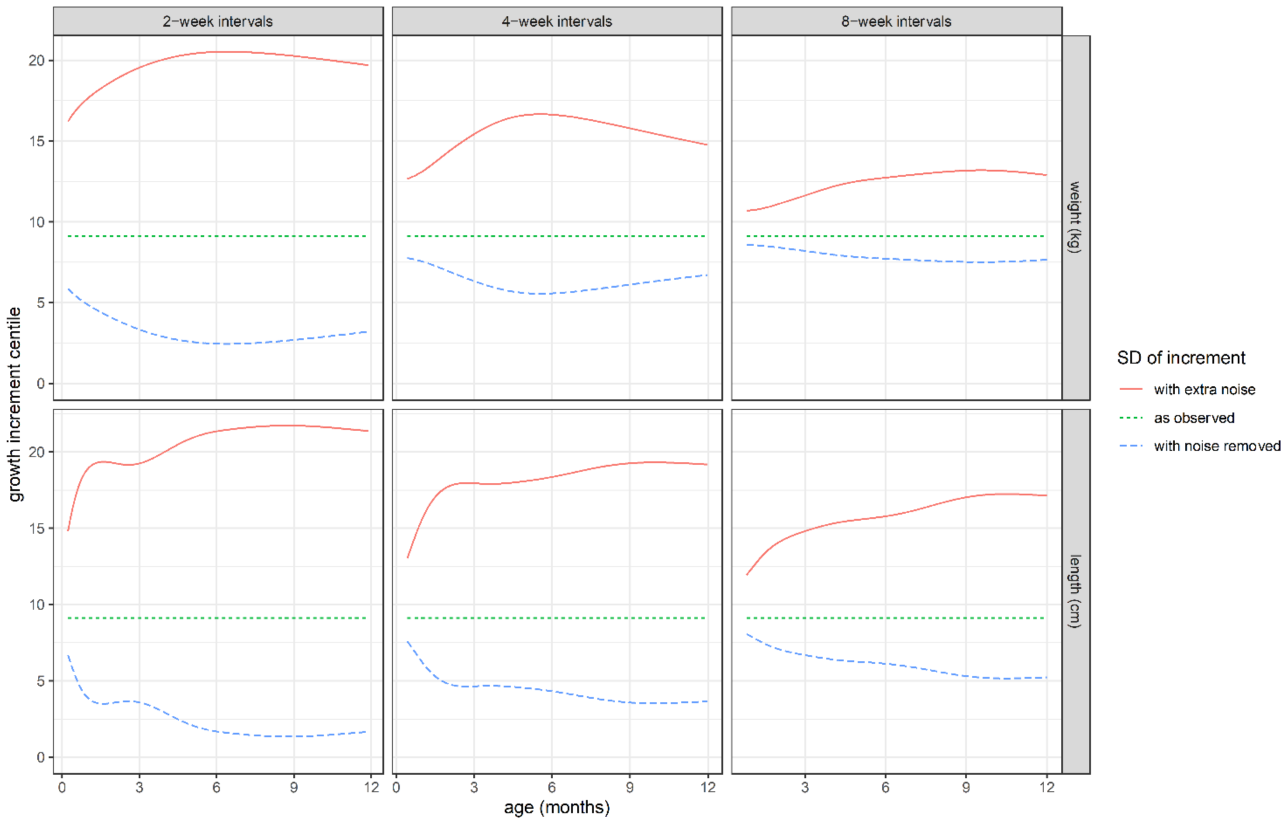


Figure 3. Modelled effect on the 9th velocity centile for weight and length by age, over two-, four- and eight-week intervals, with varying amounts of noise in the measurements. The authors can confirm that we have permission to reuse the image which was created by Professor Tim Cole

Figure 3



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TECHNICAL APPENDIX

SD_{noise} affects SD_{obs} in the following way:

$$SD_{obs}^2 = SD_{signal}^2 + SD_{noise}^2$$

where SD_{signal} is the underlying true but unmeasurable SD, as if based on measurements free of noise. Because the terms are squared, SD_{noise} needs to approach SD_{signal} in size before it has any important effect on SD_{obs}. Rearranging the formula as:

$$SD_{signal}^2 = SD_{obs}^2 – SD_{noise}^2$$

provides an estimate of SD_{signal}. An extra-noisy version of SD_{obs} is obtained by doubling SD_{noise} to give:

$$SD_{obs+noise}^2 = SD_{signal}^2 + (2\times SD_{noise})^2.$$

For Figure 2 the increment data were grouped by measure and time interval, and their mean and SD were modelled as P-spline curves in √age with 6 degrees of freedom using the NO family in GAMLSS (1). The choices of degrees of freedom and age transformation were guided by the BIC. Table 2 is based on Figure 2, with columns 2-4 corresponding to the ages where the Mean curve crosses each of the SD curves, while columns 5-7 are the % velocity centile corresponding to the z-score z = -Mean/SD at 12 months.

For Figure 3 the increment data were again grouped by measure and time interval, and expected age-specific increments corresponding to the 9th velocity centile were calculated as $Mean_{obs}$ - 4/3 SD_{obs} using the smoothed values in Figure 2. Then each increment was converted to a velocity z-score z = (increment – $Mean_{obs}$) / SD_x where SD_x was respectively SD_{signal} and $SD_{obs+noise}$, and the corresponding velocity centile curves were plotted against age.

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