Exceptional Care in The First 1,000 Days

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The First 1,000 Days

The first 1,000 days begin from conception until the child's second birthday. As proposed by Robertson *et al* (2019), this period of prenatal and early postnatal growth is accompanied by the rapid development of all bodily functions and structures including neurological, hormonal, and metabolic. As suggested by Nutbrown (2005), the cycle of learning takes place within the womb before a child is even born, entering the world with an innate desire and ability to learn, this period of a child's life is full of new and fun experiences.

However, as suggested by Karakochuk, *et al* (2017), exposure to environmental stressors, such as nutritional deficits, poor hygiene, unsafe living conditions, and social neglect can lead to negative

impacts on the child's overall development and can have lasting effects into their adulthood. **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory (1943)** suggests that an infant's individual needs must be met in order for them to proceed to become the best versions of themselves as adults. It highlights the basic needs that must be reached for an infant to survive, such as a nutritional (age-suitable) diet, a warm stable environment, love, and efficient care and rest.

Complications during pregnancy or birth may cause problems with a child's physical and emotional development. Marchi *et al* (2015) believes that the possible deleterious condition of the mother's health, such as maternal obesity, may have an adverse effect on the child's health during and after pregnancy. Another example of this is drug consumption. As suggested by Doherty and Hughes (2014), it is commonly known that prescription and illegal substances taken by the mother throughout pregnancy, can be harmful to any child. Consuming these substances can cause many complications for an unborn child's future, such as, foetal alcohol syndrome, severe physical defects, premature births, and heart defects.

Exceptional Care

For many people exceptional care can be described in many different ways, for example, being inclusive, putting the best interests of the child as the first priority, safeguarding children, having positive and healthy relationships with the children and families, and encouraging child-led enriching learning experiences, assisting them to develop their understanding of the world around them (Welsh Government, 2021).

As suggested by Save The Children (2016), it has been established that childcare of good quality has long-lasting benefits for children's overall holistic development. As supported by Hyson (2014), early years educators require attributes in order to be successful. These include: self-reflection, motivation, being respectful towards children and families regarding their culture and language, and obtaining the belief that every child is unique and all have the ability to learn. As explained by McMahon and Dyer (2018), practitioners should maintain professionalism and understand that their role is fundamental to all children's progression. According to the UK Government (2014), it is

compulsory for practitioners to undertake the appropriate procedures to become educated on how to provide exceptional care for children and support and advise families who require any help.

Maria Montessori's method (1912), explains the importance of observations in order to better understand a child's personality and way of learning. Daily Montessori (2021) suggested she believed that with enough time spent observing the children, they themselves would tell us what skills they want to develop. This can be helpful for practitioners as it allows them to discover and understand their children's likes and dislikes, allowing them to adapt or alter anything in the child's environment that may make them feel uncomfortable. She also supported the idea of not being too overprotective of children, as this can hinder their learning experiences.

Challenges Early Years Practitioners Face

There can be many obstacles or challenges for early years settings and educators, for example, funding, the effects of COVID-19, and time management.

As supported by Lawler (2021), due to the early years of life being so important to a child's holistic development, many organizations such as, LGA, have pleaded with their governments to supply extra funding. Lawler (2021) also suggests that adequate funding is required in order for early years settings and educators to be able to provide the best quality care, education, and support that children and families rightfully deserve. Without efficient funding obtaining the appropriate supplies for early years settings such as, age-appropriate toys, formula/food, medical supplies, nappies, and wet wipes can be very difficult. LGA (2021) implies low funding can also result in lower pay rates for early years workers, which can then lead to a staffing and maintenance shortage throughout this sector, specifically for highly qualified staff. According to UK Parliament (2021), the drastic change in accessibility to ECEC has impacted young children in various different ways such as mental health, school readiness, and their overall holistic development. Lawler (2021), suggests that a common reason for the shortage of staff in early years settings is due to the staff feeling undervalued by their government. An insufficient amount of caregivers in a setting can present challenges to those who are working there. As found by Purdon (2016), ratio-group sizes and understaffing can lead to time management challenges such as, finding time to complete all presented tasks throughout the day and being able to give an efficient amount of attention to each child.

Covid-19 had substantial impacts on young children and unborn babies. Due to the implemented restrictions, all maintained and non-maintained early years settings were instructed to close for a substantial amount of time. According to Brooks *et al* (2020), this caused an increase in anxiety and stress in young children. Parent-Infant Foundation (2020), found that almost 7 in 10 mothers noticed the effects covid-19 had on their young or unborn children, with them reporting an increase in

tantrums, emotional outbursts, and clinginess. A quantity of children who experienced isolation during lockdown with only parents in their company later suffered from attachment issues.

From conception to adulthood a child is consistently dependent on their primary caregivers. Bowlby's theory of attachment (1979), discusses how a baby is born with the pre-established need to form attachments with adults, as this will ensure their survival. As discussed by Rajkumar (2020), although it is important for the child to bond with their parents, post covid-19 lockdown presented practitioners with children who were reluctant to leave their primary caregivers due to a lack of socialisation and feeling of independence, which in turn, made the transition from home to educational care setting challenging for not only the child but also for the family and the setting.

Enabling Adults

MB photography

As stated by Burnham (2016), being passionate and enthusiastic are great stepping stones to becoming an enabling adult, however, that is not all that is required. As stated within the Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales (2022), we as adults must strive to nurture the children in our care to become well-informed, creative, healthy, and ambitious contributors to our society. In order to do this we need to ensure that we provide a safe and secure learning environment. As stated by UNCRC (2021) article 12, all children have the right to be listened to and acknowledged, doing this allows the children in our care to feel valued and understood. As stated by the Welsh government (2021), the main aim of the early years foundation stage framework (EYFS) is to support children to achieve the five 'every child matters' outcomes, these are:

- Being healthy
- Being safe
- Attaining and enjoying milestones
- Positively contributing
- Accomplishing economic well-being

Also instructed by the UNCRC (2021), all practitioners and settings must strive to keep the children in their care safe and always put their best interests as a top priority. This can be accomplished by communicating with the children and families, supporting them if they are struggling, and ensuring that the child is receiving the love and care required for them to strive.

Activity Ideas

*1 - **Sensory Play***

Gascoyne (2016) suggests that sensory play is fundamental to children's development, alongside this Maria Montessori's method (1912) pursues to explain the importance of play alongside education, emphasising how babies and young children best learn through child-led learning and sensory stimulation (this is called kinaesthesia). Alongside Montessori, according to the Pestalozzi Society (no date), Johann Pestalozzi's method highlights the importance of sensory learning in the early years of life and believed that children best learn when taking part in activities and handling different textures and materials rather than just using words.

The five senses

- *Smell*
- *Sight*
- *Hearing*
- *Touch*
- *Taste*

*2 - **Messy play***

Messy play can provide an endless amount of opportunities for enriching, fun, and exciting meaningful play experiences. As promoted by Gascoyne (2018), from dry to wet and slimy textures, each material has its own individual uses and qualities, however, as it is well known, babies and children are inquisitive and more often than not end up putting whatever they can get their hands on, in their mouths, furthermore, all messy play materials must be age-appropriate and safe for babies and children.

*3 - **Treasure Baskets***

As supported by Hughes (2015), the treasure basket and heuristic play approach is based on offering numerous varied household natural objects to babies and young children to interact and play with. Although this is a minimal method, it encourages copious amounts of concentration, fine and gross motor skills, and sensory enrichment.

*4 - **Singing and Music Making***

According to Niland (2019), the practice of singing and music making in early years settings, reinforced by shared linguacultural bonds, enables children to create and strengthen their social development, language development, sense of identity, and belonging.

*5 - **Reading***

As Brown (2017) suggested, reading to babies and toddlers is a great way to promote their language and literacy development whilst also providing a bonding learning experience between practitioner and child.

Enabling Environments

When we encounter the outdoors we use all of our senses, making it a more enriching experience than if we were indoors. As suggested by Ryder Richardson (2017), an outdoor environment offers a different variety of characteristics that an indoor environment does not. Friedrich Froebel's theory

discusses the importance of learning through and from nature as it improves all aspects of development.

An 'enabling' environment, as said by Early Years alliance (no date), is a space that is big enough for children to play and explore, and should also meet criteria such as being warm and welcoming, providing a variety of different age-appropriate activities, nurturing, and not too overwhelming. All of these factors contribute to an enabling environment. As proposed by Pacey (no date), an enabling environment plays an important role in a child's development. Pacey (no date), also suggests that children learn best when they are situated in a relaxed, nurturing environment.

Piaget's theory (1953), discusses the importance of the environment surrounding children and how it is impactful to their holistic development. In addition to this, Piaget believed that social interactions between children are also significant to their social and emotional development.

A curriculum for funded non-maintained settings in Wales (2022), states that there should be a variety of activities within the enriching environment that creates opportunities for children to develop their gross and fine motor skills, and their confidence and independence. Although an environment should present risks and challenges for children to solve, it is a necessity for practitioners to assess any risk before allowing a child to venture into an area.

Inclusivity in Early Years

Pestalozzi's method accentuates that every child has the right and ability to learn regardless of race, income, and background (Sellars and Imig, 2021). The equality act (2010) safeguards children by law from prejudice based on, age, gender, disability, ethnicity, religion, and beliefs. However, as established by Allen et al (2019), promoting inclusivity is important in providing exceptional care in the early years. Children are very impressionable during these early stages of life, whether you are a family member, practitioner, or a general member of the community it is our job to promote equality and inclusion. As stated by Welsh Government (2019), it has been discovered that the UK is one of the worst countries for children's and young people's life satisfaction, with bullying being mentioned as a main cause of this. As supported by UNCRC (2021) article 14, children have the right to have faith in and practice what they like, such as religion, so long as they are not disrupting other people from having their own beliefs. In order to be inclusive Early Years Alliance (no date) encourages practitioners and primary caregivers to be proactive in addressing any barriers to inclusion, such as stereotyping and conscious and unconscious bias.

Professional Partnerships/Relationships

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales (2022) supports the idea that practitioners are responsible for creating and strengthening connections with a child's home and the surrounding community. Burnham (2016), explains that creating strong bonds with multi-agencies and organisations alongside children and parents, management and colleagues is useful for finding a better variety of resources or support for families in difficult situations.

Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the importance of the child being at the center of everything. His model of connected ecological systems demonstrates to us how communication plays a key role throughout a child's life. An extreme change to the system can impact the child's social, emotional, and physical development. As believed by Claire (2015), practitioners and primary caregivers influence how a child communicates throughout their development, observing and gaining skills as they go along in life. This is only achievable when there are strengthened bonds between home and educational settings. Furthermore, this can be accomplished by talking to the parents when they collect their children at the end of every day, sending update text messages throughout the day, and visiting the home before the child starts at a setting.

Cumming (2017) suggests that working in a childcare workplace can become strenuous at times, so having positive leadership in a setting can influence how practitioners feel on a day-to-day basis. If staff is feeling underappreciated it can affect morale, induce unwanted stress, and encumber practitioners with an overwhelming feeling. Misunderstanding and confusion can be avoided by encouraging positive quality communication between colleagues, this ensures that quality care is given at all times.

Respectful Care and Meaningful Learning

Pikler's approach (1940), discusses meaningful learning experiences and how they have big influences on the way a child develops. It also suggests that a child's motor development is nurtured through their own capability. Kayir (2022), implies that practitioners should not interrupt the developmental stages of a child's movements, such as making them stand, walk, or sitting them in unnatural positions. Vamos (2015), states that allowing children to reach these developmental steps without interference promotes their self-knowledge along with confidence and security.

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (1978), refers to what a child can do without help or what they can accomplish with guidance from others, he believed that not respecting the zone either by helping when not necessary or when not providing enough help with challenging tasks can hinder a child's cognitive development.

As suggested by Page (2018), in early years settings, a term called 'professional love' is used. This refers to reciprocal loving relationships that are built within the setting between the practitioner and child, this is often known to be very different from parental love. A strong relationship with both parents and practitioners provides children with the confidence to explore their surroundings. If young children do not have a positive relationship with those who take care of them they will find it difficult to settle into any new environment, may refuse to eat anything that is provided by the practitioner, and may find learning an unenjoyable experience.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning theory (1971) seeks to explain the impact of observation and modelling on why and how people learn (Bandura and Walters, 1963). Babies are able to mimic their observations from a young age. The serve-and-return method is a good way for caregivers to provide

children with stimulating meaningful learning experiences. This is where the child “serves” by reaching out for interactions with their caregivers, for example with facial expressions, eye contact, cooing, crying, or touch. A caregiver will then “return” appropriately by speaking back, rocking, smiling, laughing, or playing with a favourite toy. Center on the Developing Child (2016), States that all of these interactions support brain and language development, the creation of trust, and enable a bond to be built between the caregiver and the infant (BabySparks, 2020).

According to Claire (2015), attending to the needs and desires of a baby is happening continuously within a setting and this is the best time to put positive learning experiences into motion. For example, communicating with babies whilst changing their nappies assists their language development, or, when feeding a child, whether it is from a bottle or a spoon, this is an opportunity to develop social skills, reinforcing to the child that these are all fun daily tasks to be excited and confident about.

International Approaches

*6 - **Te Whariki Approach***

The Te Whariki curriculum declares that each and every child is unique and on their own journey. It is a play-based curriculum along with community highlighted throughout. He Kupu (2019) proposes oppositely to teacher-instructed play often found in the UK, child-led play offers a plethora of benefits such as a feeling of independence and empowerment. The majority of New Zealand children attend an 'early learning service' for a long period of time. A lot of these children start their education journey from the first year of life. From birth, it is highlighted in New Zealand how important cultural, social learning and strengthening relationships are for children. According to Veazey (2020), British bonds and relationships are spoken about regarding bonds between human beings, however contrary to this, Te Whariki or 'Woven mat' curriculum equally emphasises the importance of children's relationships with the places and things surrounding them. For example, planting a flower or tree is more than just an outdoor activity, it is about creating a bond with the earth for generations.

*7 - **Reggio Emilia Approach***

As stated by Senet et al (2021) numerous UK early years practitioners are pressured to enforce a restricted, skill-based curricula approach. Conversely, the Reggio Emilia Approach encourages independent, explorative learning. Following Lev Vygotsky's theory (1962) Reggio Emilia highlights the importance of social interactions between peers, educators, and the environment, enhancing a child's curiosity and creativity.

*8 - **Forest School Approach***

Proposed by Massey (no date), originating in Scandinavia forest schools have become increasingly popular throughout England and Wales over the last 4 years. This approach encourages a child-led initiative, basing children's education on their personal interests and allowing them to develop their skills at their own pace. Oppositely to the UK forest schools teaching takes place centrally outdoors, allowing children to develop their gross, motor, and independence skills (Massey, no date).

Reference List