



The First 1000 Days

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1 - Source: Blogspot (2014)

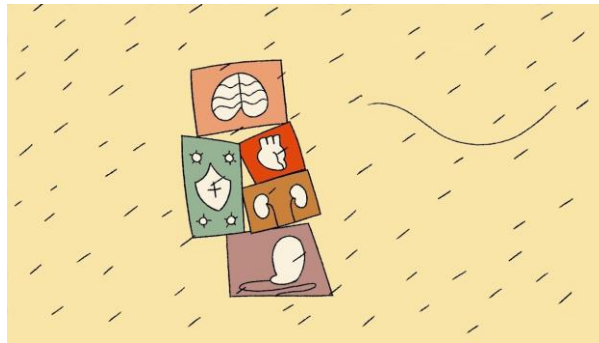
The First 1000 Days – An Introduction

This introduction aims to set the stage for understanding the pivotal role of the first thousand days in shaping a child's trajectory, emphasising the importance of appropriate targeted interventions and rich supportive environments during this foundational period.

The first thousand days of life, spanning from conception to the child's second birthday, represent a critical period of rapid and intricate development. This window encapsulates the foundation for a child's physical, cognitive, and social-emotional well-being, laying the groundwork for their future health and success. Numerous studies emphasise the profound impact of early experiences during

this period, shaping neural connections, influencing behaviour, and establishing the basis for lifelong learning and resilience (Shonkoff et al., 2015; Black et al., 2017)

During these initial two years, the developing brain undergoes remarkable changes, with neural circuits forming at an unparalleled pace. The quality of caregiving, nutrition, and environmental stimulation profoundly influences these processes, illustrating the significance of a supportive and enriching environment for optimal development (Centre on the Developing Child, 2024). Early interventions and responsive caregiving during this critical time frame can help to mitigate the adverse effects of potential stressors and hopefully enhance the child's inherent, natural adaptive capacities.



2 - How Early Childhood Experiences Affect Lifelong Health and Learning.

Source: You Tube: Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2022)

The Early Years Practitioner



The role of an early year's practitioner in supporting children and families in the first one thousand days is crucial. According to the Thirteenth Report of Session (2017–19) by the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, the first one thousand days of a child's life can improve children's health, development and life chances and make society fairer and more prosperous. Enhancing the ability of services to support and empower parents and families to take care of themselves and their children is vital, but not sufficient. Social stresses, poverty, poor housing, and lack of social support can undermine the ability of parents to provide the care that their children need

Early Years Practitioners are responsible for setting a good example of social behaviour for children. They can also help children to achieve something new, that they could not yet do independently. It may involve the practitioner in talking with the child to establish what he or she understands. The practitioner also needs to know what misconceptions the child holds about, for example, how letters represent the sounds in speech .

In addition, Early Years Practitioners play a vital role in supporting the whole family with a range of information, advice, and guidance. They provide so much more than education and childcare to children.

Enabling Adults:

Enabling adults in early years settings means creating an environment where practitioners feel supported, empowered, and equipped to provide the best care and education possible for young children. This goes beyond simply providing resources and training and encompasses fostering a culture of collaboration, reflection, and continuous professional development.

Key aspects that are helpful in enabling adults:

The ability to build strong positive relationships with colleagues, children, and parents. This involves active listening, empathy and open communication and are essential to the early year's practitioner. Providing opportunities for ongoing learning and growth is also crucial for practitioners to stay up to date on best practices and adapt to new challenges that occur within the setting. Formal training, continuing professional development, apprenticeship and mentoring in addition to peer-to-peer learning and access to useful professional bodies may all also be helpful. The adults should also feel confident in their abilities to make decisions about curriculum, activities, and daily routines for the children in their care. This requires trust, autonomy and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the setting.

Working with young children can be demanding, so it is vital to prioritize the wellbeing of the adults. This includes providing access to support systems, stress management strategies and opportunities for self-care.

In addition, it is helpful to create a collaborative and reflective culture within the setting, openly sharing ideas, experiences, and challenges, learning from each other to improve practice. Regular reflection also allows practitioners to identify areas for growth and to celebrate successes in an incredibly positive and helpful manner.

EYFS Framework (2023) What is an enabling environment (2022) Enabling environments (2003-2019) Enabling learning (2023)

By investing in the wellbeing and professional development of practitioners, we can create early years settings that are truly nurturing and supportive for both adults and children.



3 - Sensory Activities in Early Years Settings: Engaging Young Minds and Bodies

Source: Learning in Action - What is Sensory Play?(2018)

Enabling Children in Early Years settings: Fostering Development and Independence

Early years settings, nurseries, and preschools, play a crucial role in shaping children's development and learning. Creating an enabling environment, can empower children to explore, experiment and reach their full potential. Here are some key aspects of enabling children in early years settings:

Play-based learning:

Play is not just fun and games: it is a child's primary way of learning and making sense of the world. An enabling environment provides many opportunities for open ended, unstructured play, both indoors and outdoors. This could involve:

Creative Play Areas: Designed spaces with dressing up clothes, art materials, building blocks and loose parts like scarves and boxes, natural and everyday objects to encourage imagination and creativity.

Sensory play: Activities that engage children's senses, like waterplay, sandpits and messy play with paint or dough, support sensory development and exploration. In addition to an exploration of the natural world, grass, trees, leaves, and mud.

Physical play: Climbing age-appropriate structures, like the Pikler arch. Pikler(2024). Exploring outdoor play equipment in addition to the natural environment and encouraging the individual development of gross motor activities such as sitting, crawling, walking, running and jumping with the right equipment and generous and expressive positive encouragement will all help children develop physical skills and coordination.

Supportive relationships:

Strong positive relationships with care givers are essential for children's emotional and social development. Which means: Responsive interactions with adults attuned to the children's needs and interests, respond to their cues, and provide the appropriate encouragement and support. Individualized attention, taking the time to get to know each child's unique strengths, interests and learning styles and tailoring interactions accordingly. Positive communication, using respectful language, active listening and focusing on the child's strengths and achievements rather than their mistakes.

A safe and stimulating environment:

Children thrive in environments that are both safe and stimulating. This includes clear boundaries and routines. Having predictable routines and consistent expectations provides children with a sense of security and helps them learn self – regulation. It also includes providing accessible and engaging resources: a variety of age-appropriate materials and equipment that are easily accessible for the children to explore and manipulate. In addition, there needs to be a focus on inclusivity, creating an environment that celebrates cultural and individual diversity and respects individual differences, ensuring all children and indeed staff feel valued and included.

Opportunities for Choice and agency:

Enabling children to make choices and have a degree of control over their learning experiences helps foster independence and confidence. This can be achieved through, open ended activities, offering activities with multiple possibilities and solutions, allowing the children to explore and experiment in their own way. Child led activities, following the child's interests, and allowing them to lead their own play sometimes, giving them a sense of ownership and a degree of control. Providing choices, offering simple choices, like which activity to choose or what dressing up clothes to wear, empowers them to make decisions and take responsibility for themselves and their actions. Enabling learning (2023)

Sensory Play

Sensory play is an essential part of early childhood development, fostering exploration, learning and engagement in young minds and bodies. Early years settings can create a vibrant world of sensory experiences through various activities, promoting holistic development in all areas. The benefits of sensory play include the stimulation of brain development particularly in the areas responsible for processing sensory information, motor skills and emotional regulation. Sensory play also encourages communication and vocabulary development as children describe their experience and interact with others around them. Sensory activities again provide opportunities for collaboration, sharing and empathy, building strong social and emotional connections. Gross and fine motor skills are refined through activities involving movement, manipulation of materials and exploration of textures. Sensory play helps children understand their bodies and how they interact with the world around them, helping to build self-awareness and confidence. Zero to Three (2012), NAEYC (2023), The Sensory Processing Resource Centre(2023).

Sensory Activities for Early Years Settings:

Sight:

Light and shadow play: Create a darkened space with torches, projectors, and colourful objects to create mesmerising shadows and light patterns.

Sensory Bottles: Fill clear bottles with water, glitter, beads, and any other interesting and colourful objects for children to shake, tilt and play with.

Colour mixing: Provide paints or coloured water for children to mix and explore primary and secondary colours.

Sound:

Musical Instruments: Offer a variety of instruments like drums, shakers, bells and xylophones for children to experiment with different sounds and rhythms.

Nature Sounds: Play recordings of birdsong, ocean waves, or rainforests to immerse children in calming or exciting soundscapes.

Sound Scavenger Hunt: Take children on a walk outdoors or around the setting to listen for different sounds, like rustling leaves, chirping bird, running water or digger noises, fire engine sirens or traffic and people walking and talking.

Touch:

Play Dough and Sensory Dough: Provide different textures of dough, like fluffy, smooth, or bumpy for children to squish, mold and explore.

Tactile Sensory Bins: Fill bins with rice, beans, pasta, or other textured materials for children to dig, scoop and pour, stimulating tactile senses.

Nature Walks: Encourage children to touch and feel different textures, like bark, leaves, soft grass, and smooth pebbles during walks outdoors or indeed bring these natural materials in to the setting for the children to experience.

Smell:

Spice Jars: Fill small jars with different spices like cinnamon, cloves, or nutmeg for children to sniff, experience and identify familiar scents, that smell like cookies.

Scented Playdough: Make scented playdoh with natural extracts like vanilla, lavender, or citrus peel for a sensory experience.

Herb Gardens: Plant a small herb garden with fragrant herbs like basil, mint, or rosemary for children to explore and learn about different scents.



4 - A Herb Garden: Source: Herb Garden Blooms (2011)

Taste:

Taste Safe Sensory Play: Offer safe to eat materials (always being aware of allergy risk) like different fruits and vegetables with varying textures and flavours for children to taste and explore.

Cooking Activities: Involve children in simple cooking activities like mixing ingredients, tasting different foods, and starting to describe the flavours and talk about and observe the children's flavour preferences.

Taste Tests: Have children try and identify different foods or drink by taste, encouraging them to focus on their sense of taste.

By incorporating sensory activities into the early years setting a stimulating and creative environment that fosters holistic development, ignites curiosity, and provides a foundation for lifelong learning can be created. Zero to Three (2012), NAEYC(2023), The Sensory Processing Resource Centre (2023)

Treasure Baskets: Unlocking Curiosity and Exploration in Early Years Settings

Treasure baskets are a simple yet powerful tool in early years settings, offering infants and young children a rich sensory experience that sparks curiosity, exploration, and development. These baskets, overflowing with intriguing objects, invite children to reach in, touch, examine and play, fostering a natural love of learning in a safe and engaging environment. Treasure baskets are typically round, woven baskets or handmade draw string bags filled with a diverse collection of safe, natural, and everyday objects. These objects can range from smooth stones to shiny buttons to fluffy feathers, each carefully chosen to stimulate different senses and encourage exploration. The baskets are placed on a soft surface within easy reach of the young children, allowing them to freely explore and interact with the contents at their own level.

The Benefits of Treasure Baskets:

Sensory Development: the variety of textures, shapes, sizes and sounds in the basket stimulate children's senses, promoting development in areas such as touch, sight, hearing, and smell.

Fine Motor Skills: Grasping, manipulating, and exploring the objects in the basket helps refine fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination.

Cognitive development: Children learn about cause and effect, problem solving, and object permanence through their interaction with the basket and its contents.

Language Development: As children explore and interact with the objects, they may vocalize sounds and babble, or even say their first words, promoting language development.

Social and Emotional Development: Treasure baskets can be used for shared play and exploration, fostering social interacting and emotional development in young children.

To create a treasure basket, select a sturdy round basket preferably made from natural materials like wicker or wood. Ensure it is large enough to hold a variety of objects, but not so deep that children can not reach to the bottom. Collect a diverse range of safe, natural, and everyday objects, considering texture, shape, size, weights, and sounds. Include items such as smooth stones, wooden spoons, shiny objects, textured fabrics, feathers, bells and natural objects like pinecones and shells. Regularly refresh the contents of the bag or basket to keep the children engaged and curious. Introduce new object, remove ones in which they have lost interest and consider adding seasonal or themed items. Most importantly watch how children interact with the basket and offer gentle guidance when needed and model play by showing them how to shake an object, make sounds or stack objects.

Treasure baskets are not about structured activities or forced play. They are about creating a safe and inviting space for exploration, discovery, and independent learning by each unique child. By providing a rich sensory experience and observing children's interactions, their natural curiosity can be

unlocked, setting them onto a path of lifelong learning. Teaching Early Years (2023). Froebel Trust (2023). Early Education (2023). NAEYC (2023).



5 - *Treasure Basket*, Source: *The Basket of Treasures* (2010)



6 - *Denmark's Forest Kindergartens*.

Source: SBS Dateline, *Kids Gone Wild* (2017)

Reggio Emilia or Forest School

Both the Reggio Emilia and Forest School approaches are child centred philosophies that emphasise hands on learning and exploration in early years education. However, they differ in key aspects, including their core values, learning environment and approaches to curriculum and assessment.

Let us first look at the similarities:

Child-Centred Learning: Both approaches focus on following the child's lead and interests, allowing them to learn and explore at their own pace.

Play-Based Learning: Play is seen as a crucial tool for learning and development in both approaches.

Emergent Curriculum: Both philosophies embrace an emergent curriculum, which means the curriculum is not pre-planned but emerges from the child's interests and explorations.

Collaboration and Community: Both approaches value collaboration and building an intense sense of community within the learning environment.

The Differences:

In Reggio Emilia:

Core Values: Project-based learning with collaboration, documentation, and beauty, with the addition of encouragement of multiple creative languages of expression.

Learning Environment: Indoor spaces designed as “third teachers,” with carefully curated materials, open-ended questions and provocations, and documentation of children’s work displayed.

Activities: In depth projects, exploration with diverse materials. Documentation through photography, video, drawing, and writing and mark making.

Curriculum: Emergent curriculum, based on the children’s questions and interests. Often referred to as the “Hundred Languages” projects.

Assessment: Ongoing, through documentation and reflection on the children’s learning processes and progress.

In Forest School:

Core Values: Connection with nature, risk taking, self-directed learning and holistic development.

Learning Environment: Primarily outdoors in natural settings like forests, parks, and gardens, in all weather conditions. With the addition of specialist staff and appropriate clothing.

Activities: Free play, exploration, nature walks, storytelling, campfire cooking and shelter building.

Curriculum: Emergent and responsive, based on children’s discoveries in the natural world.

Assessment: Informal, through observations and documentation of children’s learning and play.

The best approach for a child depends on individual needs, learning styles, and preferences. Some children may thrive in the open-ended exploration of Forest School, while others may benefit from the more structured project-based learning of Reggio Emilia. Ultimately, both approaches offer valuable experiences that can nurture young minds and foster a lifelong love of learning. Forest School Association, Reggio Children, NAEYC (2023).

The phrase “lighting up young brains” perfectly captures the magic of the first 1000 days of life. This critical period is a firework display of neural development, with new connections forming at a dazzling pace, laying the foundation for everything from cognitive skills to emotional well-being. It can be thought of as an early synaptic symphony, thousands of neurons, tiny brain cells, reaching out with tendrils, seeking connections. In the first 1000 days, these connections explode, forming intricate circuits that process information, learn and remember. Every experience, every interaction, becomes a spark, lighting up a new pathway in this neurological wonderland. As synapses dance and connect, the cognitive fireworks build, and crucial cognitive skills take root. Language blossoms, fuelled by playful interactions and a rich exposure to words. Problem solving ignites, fuelled by exploration and experimentation. Memory finds its spark, fuelled by repeated experiences and secure attachments. Each new skill a vibrant firework in the brain’s grand pyrotechnics. The first 1000 days are also when emotional intelligence takes flight. Nurturing relationships become the fuel for secure attachment, Bowlby (1969) Ainsworth (1978) a cornerstone of emotional regulation and social skills. Positive interactions light up the spark of self confidence and resilience. Its Beyond the brain the environment plays a crucial role. Nutritious food provides the building blocks for healthy brain development, while a safe and stimulating environment keeps the firework show going. Responsive caregivers act as conductors, orchestrating the symphony of experiences that light up young brains.

Every child's brain is a unique firework display, with its own rhythm and brilliance. Our role as caregivers and educators, is to provide the sparks, the fuel, and the safe space for this magnificence show to unfold. By nurturing these young brains in the first 1000 days, we can help them to reach their full potential and illuminate the world around them.

So let us celebrate the first 1000 days, not just for the milestones achieved, but for the incredible firework display taking place within each young mind. It is a show worth cherishing, nurturing and protecting, because these early sparks truly light the way for a brighter future. Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University. (2017) World Health Organisation. (2020) Save the Children (2016)



7 - *Reggio Emilia*: Source: UW Student Science Videos (2019)



8 - *Forest School*: Source: 🌳 Forest School Singapore (2022)



9 - *What is Forest School*: Source: Forest School Association (2020)



10 - *The Reggio Emilia Approach*: Source:

Education Counts Michiana - The Reggio Emilia Approach

PBS Michiana – WNIT (2019)

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