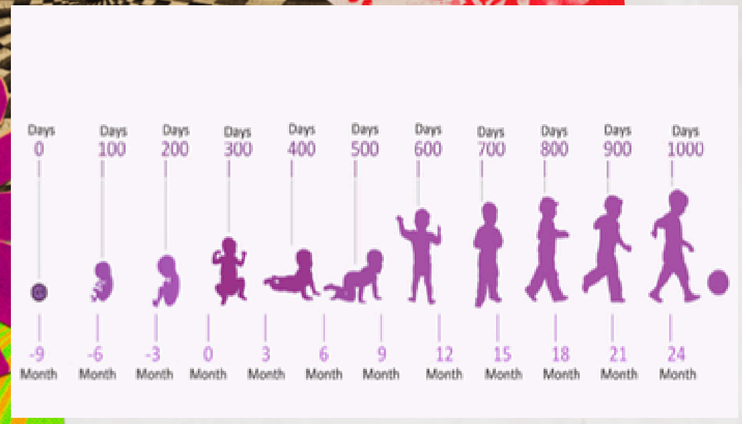
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Part 1

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FIRST 1000 DAYS

2513721



INTRODUCTION

(IDSmed, 2019)

The first 1000 days of life, from conception to a child's second birthday, lay the foundation for a lifetime. During this short but critical period, a child's brain and body grow at an astonishing rate, shaping their future health, learning, and wellbeing. Recent advances in neuroscience have significantly enhanced understanding of early brain development. Research from Harvard University's Centre on the Developing Child indicates that in the first years of life, more than one million neural connections are formed every second (Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). This period of rapid neurological growth is widely recognised as critical, as it establishes the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health outcomes (Community Playthings, n.d.).



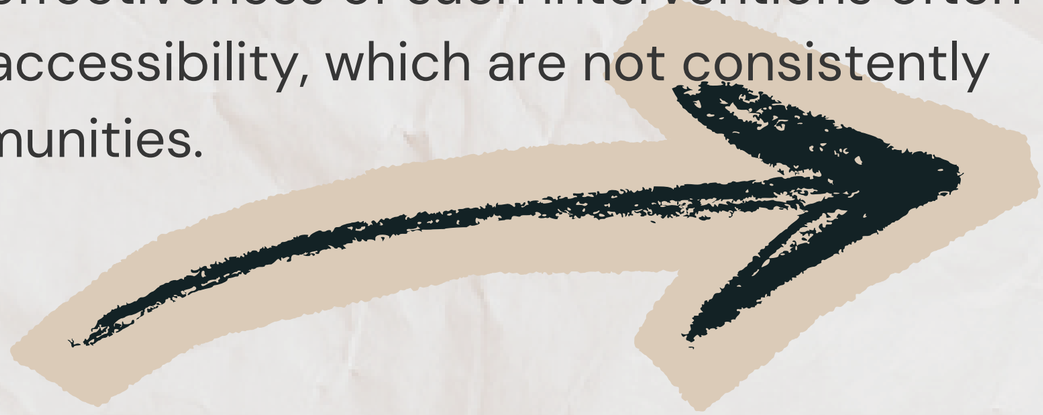
(Parsons, 2025)

Every child deserves a safe, healthy, and nurturing start in life. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) highlights that meeting a child's basic physiological and safety needs is essential for them to thrive. When babies and toddlers feel secure and cared for, they are more likely to grow into confident and resilient individuals. However, Maslow's model has been criticised for its linear structure, which may not fully reflect the complex and overlapping needs of infants and families, particularly those living in poverty. Wahba and Bridwell's (1976) review of empirical studies found only partial support for the hierarchy, with little evidence that needs are satisfied in a strict order. This suggests that while Maslow's framework remains useful as a conceptual guide, it may oversimplify the realities of early development within diverse social and cultural contexts.

Brodie (2018) emphasises that getting early care right is vital and is increasingly recognized within the early years sector. However, Brodie also notes that each child develops differently depending on individual circumstances, such as sibling position, biology, and living conditions at birth (Brodie, 2018). This suggests that while general principles of care are important, tailored approaches are necessary to support every child effectively.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Research highlights just how powerful early experiences are. Positive environments support strong development, while exposure to stress, adversity, or neglect can have long-lasting effects. According to the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee (2019), the first 1000 days lay critical foundations for children's life chances. Early adversity, such as abuse or parental conflict, can increase the risk of poor outcomes. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that early adversity does not inevitably determine negative outcomes, as resilience, protective relationships, and later supportive interventions can significantly mitigate early risks. Their report emphasizes that early supportive interventions not only improve children's development but also help create a healthier and fairer society. Synthesizing these findings with Brodie's work shows that policy, caregiving, and early years practice must work together to optimize outcomes for all children. This highlights the need for coordinated systems of support; however, the effectiveness of such interventions often depends on adequate funding, workforce training, and accessibility, which are not consistently available across all communities.



These challenges are not only local but global, affecting millions of children worldwide. According to CIMA (2025) Around 250 million children under five in low, and middle-income countries risk not reaching their potential due to poverty, poor nutrition, and limited nurturing care. Risks are highest in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where up to 92% of children face delays in literacy and numeracy. High-quality early programs that support health, nutrition, and learning improve education, boost future earnings, and strengthen national economies.

Public Health Wales (2019) further reinforces that the earliest stages of life lay the foundations of everything that follows. They highlight that positive beginnings influence how children see themselves, how they connect with others, and how they may parent in the future. Public Health Wales also stress that babies need love, consistent care, and attention from the important adults in their lives, and that nurturing interactions—such as nutritional feeding, play, talking, and responsive caregiving—support healthy brain and body development. Together, these insights demonstrate that early life is not just a stage to survive, but a window of opportunity to thrive.

The first 1000 days are a period of extraordinary opportunity, as the experiences a child has during this time shape their lifelong potential. A well-nourished body and a stimulating environment support optimal brain development. Rapid brain growth occurs, with thousands of new neural connections forming every second, laying the foundations for future physical and mental wellbeing. Poor nutrition and stress during pregnancy and early childhood can cause lasting damage, affecting growth, metabolism, and the immune system. Early interventions and support are essential, as some deficiencies become harder to correct later in life, although partial recovery may still be possible (Likhar & Patil, 2022).



Likhar and Patil (2022) emphasize that proper nutrition, responsive caregiving, and nurturing environments in the first 1000 days are essential for physical, cognitive, and emotional development. Key nutrients such as protein, folate, zinc, iodine, and iron support brain growth, while adequate care increases the likelihood of healthy birth weight, better learning outcomes, fewer behavioural issues, and long-term health. Integrating this evidence with policy and early years practice underscores the importance of supporting families, addressing inequalities, and providing environments where all children can thrive.



WATCH



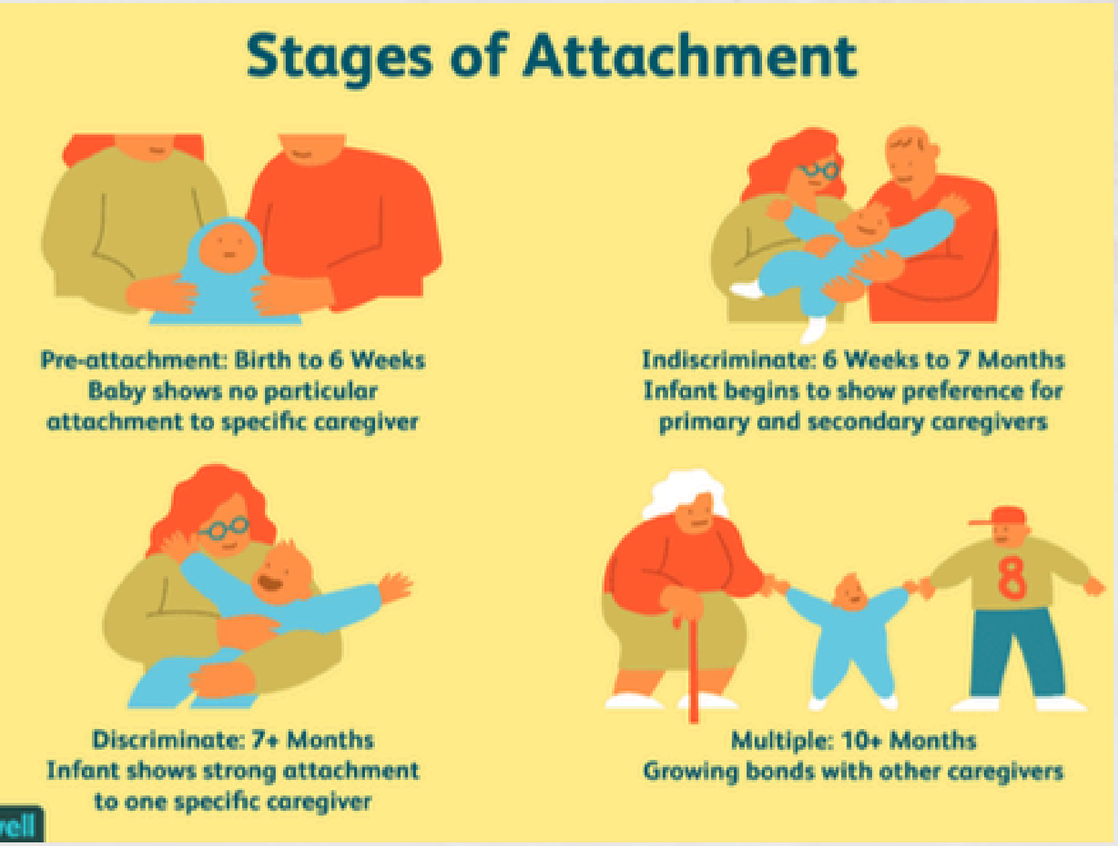
NOW LET'S TALK ABOUT EXCEPTIONAL CARE







Exceptional care goes beyond meeting a child's basic needs of food, shelter, and safety. During the first 1,000 days, infants also require emotional support, nurturing, and cognitive stimulation to develop optimally (Bust & Pedro, 2020). This period represents a critical window of brain development, during which early experiences shape neural connections and influence long-term health and developmental outcomes. Community Health Workers in South Africa highlight the **importance of practices such as bonding through play, talking, singing, reading, and exclusive breastfeeding, which support emotional, social, and cognitive development.** These early experiences not only foster immediate growth but also establish the foundation for lifelong learning, resilience, and secure attachments.



These foundational experiences are further explained through attachment theory. Celinska (2025) notes that Bowlby's work emphasizes how a child's first attachment influences how they view themselves, interact with others, and form relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1973). Responsive and consistent caregiving during this period supports emotional regulation and social competence, which are essential for positive relationships and mental wellbeing. Bowlby (1951) also highlighted the risks of disruptions to early attachment, noting that prolonged separation from a primary caregiver can lead to emotional and behavioural difficulties. Together, these findings underscore the critical role of exceptional care in protecting infants from stress and promoting healthy emotional development during the first 1,000 days.

In practice, these principles of exceptional care are reflected in engaging activities that stimulate development and strengthen caregiver–child bonds. Activities such as singing and reading not only create enjoyable interactions but also support language and communication development, strengthen listening skills, enhance memory, and promote early literacy. Providing children with simple choices during these activities encourages autonomy and strengthens their sense of self. Play-based interactions, including sensory exploration and interactive games, further stimulate neural connections, promote problem-solving skills, and foster curiosity. These experiences reflect key elements of the nurturing care framework, particularly responsive caregiving and early learning opportunities, which work together to promote holistic development across physical, cognitive, social, and emotional domains (WHO, 2018)

WATCH

Responsive caregiving, the ability to notice, understand, and respond appropriately to a child's signals's a cornerstone of nurturing care, supporting safety, health, nutrition, learning, and social-emotional development (WHO & UNICEF, 2018). It involves following the child's lead, responding to distress signals promptly, and adjusting interactions to the child's pace, such as allowing them to finish a movement before assisting. Enabling adults through training, emotional support, and access to resources is essential, as caregiver well-being directly influences their ability to respond consistently and sensitively.



(Pikler UK Association, n.d.)

Emmi Pikler highlighted the importance of healthy attachments for infants' physical and emotional development, viewing everyday caregiving, feeding, changing, and bathing—not as routine tasks but as key opportunities to build secure, trusting relationships. Through attentive, respectful, and gentle care, caregivers help infants feel recognised as individuals and valued partners, fostering confidence, independence, and secure attachments (Pikler, n.d.). This responsive approach also supports early brain development, reduces stress, and strengthens social-emotional skills, laying the foundation for future learning, resilience, and healthy relationships.

ACTIVITIES

Activities

Play is essential in the first 1,000 days of life as it supports infants' cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. From birth, babies engage in play through sensory exploration, using their bodies, sounds, and interactions with caregivers to understand themselves and their environment. Early play experiences, particularly those involving responsive adults who talk, sing, laugh, and tell stories, stimulate brain development and strengthen neural connections during this critical period. Through play with caregivers, infants develop secure attachments, language skills, and emotional regulation, while also learning about cause and effect and social relationships. Play is therefore not separate from learning but is the primary way young children experience, process, and make sense of the world in their earliest years (WHO & UNICEF, 2018; Center on the Developing Child, 2021).

SONG BAGS

SONG BAGS ARE A FUN AND ENGAGING WAY TO SUPPORT BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN DURING THE FIRST 1000 DAYS, A PERIOD WHEN THEIR BRAINS ARE GROWING RAPIDLY. THEY COMBINE MUSIC, MOVEMENT, AND PLAY, GIVING CHILDREN OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPLORE, LEARN, AND BOND.

- **Language development** – Hearing and joining in with songs helps children learn new words and rhythms.
- **Brain development** – Repetition and interaction strengthen memory and neural connections.
- **Emotional security** – Singing together creates comfort and strengthens attachment.
- **Sensory exploration** – Props encourage touching, looking, and experimenting.
- **Physical development** – Actions and movements support coordination and motor skills.

SENSORY PLAY

SENSORY PLAY GIVES BABIES AND YOUNG CHILDREN OPPORTUNITIES TO TOUCH, SEE, HEAR, SMELL, AND SOMETIMES TASTE, HELPING THEM EXPLORE THE WORLD SAFELY AND JOYFULLY. SIMPLE ACTIVITIES LIKE WATER PLAY, SAND, PLAYDOUGH, OR TEXTURED FABRICS, ENCOURAGE CURIOSITY, IMAGINATION, AND EARLY LEARNING.

- **Brain development** – Hands-on exploration strengthens neural pathways and supports cognitive growth.
- **Language skills** – Talking about what they see, feel, and hear introduces new words.
- **Emotional regulation** – Engaging senses can calm, focus, and support self-expression.
- **Motor skills** – Handling objects develops hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills.
- **Creativity and problem-solving** – Experimenting with materials encourages curiosity and confidence.



(Johnson, n.d.)

Both song bags and sensory play connect to **Vygotsky's theory**, which shows that children learn best through **social interaction and guided support**. Adults singing, playing, and exploring alongside children help them reach new skills, develop language, and discover the world around them. These activities also link to **Bowlby's attachment theory**, as shared, responsive moments build **trust, confidence, and a sense of security**, helping children feel safe, valued, and supported during the first 1000 days.

Play Adulteration

The Play Cycle explains how children's play develops through a series of stages and highlights how adult involvement can influence or disrupt this process (Smartkidz Play and Learn, 2022). Play may end through *Play Annihilation*, when a child chooses to stop playing, or through *Play Adulteration*, which occurs when an adult intervenes and ends the play (Smartkidz Play and Learn, 2022). This is particularly relevant within **Welsh early years policy**, as both the *Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC)* approach and the *Curriculum for Wales* place child-led play, autonomy, and well-being at the centre of learning. From a critical perspective, unnecessary adult interruption can conflict with these principles by limiting sustained play, problem-solving, and children's agency, reinforcing the importance of reflective practice in early years settings.

Early Years Wales
Blynyddoedd Cynnar Cymru

(Cwlwm, n.d.)

ENABLING ENVIRONMENTS AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICE



(LEARNING JOURNALS, N.D.)



(OPEN A NURSERY, N.D.)

Exceptional care is most effective when combined with enabling environments that support exploration, interaction, and overall development. Such environments are safe, nurturing, and responsive, allowing children to feel secure enough to explore and learn. Research indicates that calm, predictable, and emotionally supportive settings promote secure attachment and healthy brain development, particularly when adults respond sensitively to children's cues. Donald Woods Winnicott emphasised that early development cannot be understood without considering the caregiving environment. His assertion that "there is no such thing as an infant" highlights the infant's complete dependency on parents or caregivers and their profound emotional influence on the developing self. This perspective underpins the concept of an enabling environment, where emotional responsiveness and secure relationships support healthy psychological development (British Psychoanalytical Society, n.d.).



(Reggio Children, n.d.)

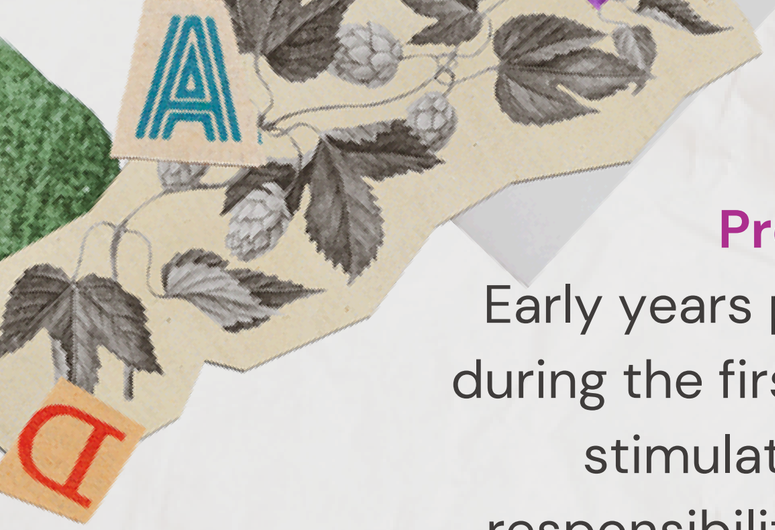
This view closely aligns with the Reggio Emilia approach, which regards the environment as the “third teacher.” Thoughtfully designed spaces, meaningful relationships, and responsive adults work together to support children’s curiosity, communication, and holistic development (Progressive Education, n.d.). The approach also aligns with the four purposes of the Curriculum for Wales, particularly in supporting children within the first 1000 days to become healthy, confident individuals and ambitious, capable learners (Welsh Government, n.d.). By fostering secure attachment, wellbeing, and exploratory learning, these environments support foundational development that underpins long-term growth and learning.

This principle extends across the Early Years, defined as the first seven years of life, with the first three years being especially sensitive to physical, social, and emotional environments. As the Welsh Parliament's 1000 Days Consultation notes, this is "a time of tremendous potential and enormous vulnerability." Support throughout the Early Years not only benefits individual children but also contributes to societal health and wellbeing, highlighting the importance of inclusive and accessible environments.



(Redbridge Safeguarding Children Partnership, n.d.)

Inclusive practice means designing environments and experiences that meet the needs of all children. Every child's childhood is unique, bringing a diverse range of experiences to the learning environment. Therefore, practitioners, parents, and carers must consider factors such as cultural background, language, abilities, and family circumstances to create an inclusive space *(Knowles, 2018, pp. 29, 30)*. Examples include adapting learning spaces for children with physical or sensory needs, providing culturally diverse resources, supporting multilingual development, and involving families in care and learning. These approaches help reduce barriers to participation, promote equity, and strengthen resilience, particularly for children exposed to early adversity. **This commitment is supported by Article 3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children (UN, 1989). This is further reinforced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979; 1994), which highlights that children's development is shaped by the dynamic interactions between their family, community, and early education environments.** Together, responsive care, enabling environments, and inclusive practice create the conditions for every child to thrive.



Professional Practice in the First 1000 Days

Early years practitioners play a crucial role in supporting children during the first 1000 days, ensuring infants receive responsive care, stimulation, and nurturing for optimal development. Their responsibilities go beyond basic caregiving to include promoting secure attachments, supporting health and nutrition, and creating environments that foster exploration, learning, and emotional wellbeing (WHO & UNICEF, 2018; Pikler, n.d.).

An early years practitioner understands child development, plans appropriate learning experiences, and follows policies to ensure each child's safety and well-being. In Wales, the **Curriculum for Wales**helps settings design curricula that meet learners' needs and promote the **Four Purposes:** developing children as ambitious, capable learners; enterprising, creative contributors; ethical, informed citizens; and healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2020).

Supporting Play and Learning

Play is central to early years practice. Practitioners facilitate child-led play and avoid unnecessary interruption, which can disrupt the Play Cycle and limit autonomy (Smartkidz Play and Learn, 2022). By providing safe, stimulating environments with resources for sensory, imaginative, and musical play, they support problem-solving, language, and social-emotional skills.

Collaboration with Families and Communities

Professional practice involves working closely with families to provide consistent care, identify developmental concerns, and ensure inclusive opportunities. Adaptations might include bilingual resources, sensory-friendly spaces, or involving families in decision-making (Knowles, 2018; UN, 1989). Such collaboration strengthens resilience, equity, and positive long-term outcomes.

Reflective and Ethical Practice

Practitioners engage in reflective practice to evaluate whether interventions support holistic development and adhere to ethical standards. This includes assessing adult involvement in play, adapting environments, and ensuring equitable access to stimulating, nurturing experiences. Frameworks such as the **Curriculum for Wales** and **ECPLC Quality Framework** guide best practice in early childhood settings (Welsh Government, 2022).

The first 1000 days of life, from conception to a child’s second birthday, represent a critical developmental period during which exposure to adverse conditions may pose significant challenges to optimalgrowth and development. Challenges such as poor maternal and child nutrition, inadequate healthcare, substance use during pregnancy, exposure to toxic stress, limited caregiver support, insecure attachment, and insufficient stimulation and responsive caregiving can negatively affect brain development and long-term physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional outcomes. Experiences during this period lay the foundation for later learning, behaviour, and health, and disruptions in early development may increase vulnerability to difficulties in childhood and beyond (Black et al., 2017).



Socioeconomic factors, particularly poverty, further exacerbate these challenges. Poverty can limit access to nutritious food, quality healthcare, stable housing, and early learning opportunities. Families experiencing financial stress may struggle to provide consistent and responsive caregiving, which can negatively affect attachment and developmental outcomes. CIMA Care (2025) highlights that millions of children worldwide fail to reach their developmental potential due to poverty and a lack of nurturing care. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model emphasizes that children's development is influenced not only by immediate caregivers but also by broader social, economic, and policy environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994).

Parental Mental Health

Parental wellbeing is another critical factor influencing the quality of care provided during the first 1000 days. Postnatal depression, anxiety, and unresolved trauma may impair a caregiver's capacity to respond sensitively to an infant's needs, potentially disrupting early attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1951). Access to mental health services, social support, and professional guidance is therefore essential in supporting caregivers to engage in responsive and nurturing interactions that promote positive early developmental outcomes (WHO & UNICEF, 2018).



Workforce and Practice Pressures

In early caregiving and early childhood settings, workforce challenges such as high staff-to-child ratios, heavy workloads, and emotional demands may further compromise the quality of nurturing care available to young children. These pressures can limit practitioners' ability to provide consistent, responsive interactions, even when they possess adequate knowledge of child development (Welsh Government, 2022). Furthermore, practitioners must balance appropriate adult involvement with opportunities for child-led exploration and play, as excessive intervention may hinder autonomy, problem-solving, and developmental learning during early childhood (Smartkidz Play and Learn, 2022).

CONCLUSION

The first 1000 days of life represent a unique window of opportunity to support children’s lifelong health, learning, and wellbeing. This period is shaped by responsive caregiving, secure attachment, play, and nurturing, inclusive environments, all of which work together to support healthy brain development and emotional security. While challenges such as poverty, parental mental health difficulties, and workforce pressures can negatively affect early experiences, protective relationships and high-quality early years practice can significantly mitigate these risks. For practitioners, this highlights the importance of reflective, child-centred approaches that prioritise responsive interactions, meaningful play, and partnership with families. By creating environments where infants feel safe, valued, and supported, early years professionals play a crucial role in giving every child the best possible start in life.

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