



The First 1000 days

What are the first 1000 days?

The first 1000 days is the period from conception, infancy and toddlerhood to age 2, this is an extremely important period while the body undergoes significant brain, physical and immunity development as well as neuro development. (Onsouma and Ng'eno, 2025).

Widely recognised as a critical period for development which fundamentally shapes long-term health, well-being, and life outcomes, but at the same time this is also a period of great vulnerability, the care that is offered during this period will have a profound impact on an individual's ability to shape how life will look for them. (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2019).

This period is a critical time for protective and positive influences, enabling children and babies to have a happy healthy childhood, these influences have a lasting impact into adolescence and there is strong evidence that early intervention in the first 1000 days can limit health inequalities. This is because early exposure to development builds the foundations for physical, cognitive, social and physical development for future years. 'Children's early development is influenced by a broad range of factors including family circumstances, parental health and well being and the wider social and economic environment in which the child grows up' (public health Wales, 2016).

Heckman (2021) says when early experiences are optimised children are able to acquire a secure early skill base and are, in turn better enabled to go forward in life, gaining further skills and becoming more successful at managing and undertaking the core activities of daily life.

Why is it important.

The first 1000 days of a child's life is a fundamental period, it is a 'critical window of opportunity' where parents are more susceptible to support and advice, and a child's brain is particularly receptive to environmental influences, this includes harm from adverse environments (Darling et al, 2020).

The consequences of failing to provide adequate support during this period is severe, lack of nutrition can lead to malnutrition which can affect growth and cognitive capacity and decreased ability into adulthood, inadequate healthcare and caregiving can hinder development and stunt emotional wellbeing while also resulting in untreated illnesses.(Wilson, 2024)

This is the period in a child's life where rapid brain development occurs, and synapses are formed at a great rate shaping how a child will see the world as they grow. 'In this formative stage of life, a baby's brain can form more than 1 million new brain connections every single second – a pace never repeated again.'(UNICEF, 2017) It is key to make an environment as enabling as possible with the right conditions that encourage the rapid brain development. Healthy nutrition is key to help promote growth and development, children that don't get the right nutrition are at greater risk of slower development and this puts them at a disadvantage to other children their age.



Caregiving



What is exceptional care giving?

Exceptional caregiving extends beyond just simply meeting essential needs, it involves deliberate practice's and nurturing interactions that form the building blocks for a child's healthy development. (World Health Organization, 2020)

Care Giving Includes:

Good Health:

- mental and physical health of the child and caregiver
- family planning
- quality antenatal care
- maternal and child immunisations
- essential newborn care
- disease prevention

(World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018)



Early learning opportunities:

- Play
- Sensory exploration
- Language use
- Story telling
- Movement

(World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018)

(Nurturing Care Framework.)

Responsive Caregiving:

- Skin- to – skin contact immediately after birth
- Responsive feeding
- Interventions that encourage play and communication
- Sensitivity and responsiveness to child's cues

(World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018)

Adequate Nutrition:

- Nutrition is essential for optimal growth and brain development
- Promoting exclusive breast feeding for first 6 months
- Timely and responsive complementary feeding
- Micronutrient supplementation for mothers and children

(World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018)

Care giving also includes

Security and safety:

- Safe, Stable, Secure
- Emotional stress
- Protects against physical harm
- Environmental risks
- Clean water
- Food safety
- Protection against physical harm and abuse
- Safe play spaces
- Social support for vulnerable families
- Mitigate social stresses like low income or poor housing

(World Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018)

What does exceptional care look like?

Young children's health and wellbeing is dependant on the caregivers, so it is vital that the care givers are also in good health and wellbeing this will enable them to be responsive to the child, will help them be able to monitor the child's health and well being, help them be affectionate and provide the right responses at the right time, and help them create a safe environment for the child. (Department for Education(DfE),2024)

The first 1000 days are extremely important to an individual's cognitive, emotional and physical development, they shape how an individual will develop into late childhood and even into adulthood, a strong, healthy start to life leaves a lasting imprint on an individual's ability to manage later in life, 'it can mean the difference between a thriving future and one characterized by struggle' (thousanddays.org) Exeptional caregiving extends beyond just simply meeting essential needs, it involves deliberate practices and nurturing interactions that form the building blocks for a child's healthy development. (World Health Organization, 2020)

Exceptional care giving starts before birth, it starts when the foetus is forming, a mother can start by singing and talking to the growing foetus, as the foetus develops it starts to hear and can recognise the mothers voice, by implementing this at an early stage when the baby is born it is already able to recognise its mothers voice. after birth nurturing contact can be promoted immediately with skin to skin contact and breast feeding which will start the foundations for optimal nutrition, care and quality interactions. As a bay progresses through the first few weeks of life they develop the ability to recognise faces and respond to holding and gentle touch, and the soothing sound of the mothers voice which provides the mother/caregiver with the essential skills on how to respond to the baby which is essential for the rapid brain development that a baby is undergoing. From the very beginning quality time with the baby is highly beneficial smiling, talking, singing and story telling builds neural connections that strengthen the child's brain and have long lasting effects. (world Health Organization, UNICEF and World Bank, 2018,p.6).

Challenges of Exceptional care.

There are a lot of factors that can influence a parent/carers ability to provide nurturing care, they range from emotional wellbeing and mental health, financial implications, extreme stress and burnout, substance misuse and lack of understanding. All these factors have a lasting impact on the child's development if they are not identified and early intervention can not be given.

Problem: Financial hardship.

Families with young children can find it hard when times are tough, childcare, nutrition, housing costs and maternity leave are some of the factors that can impact paternal stress and have a direct impact on the parents' ability to provide nurturing care and quality child interactions to the child which then has a negative influence on the child's development. Shay, Shavit and Sasson (2025) states that low-income families face significant challenges in affording early childhood expenses, including healthcare, housing, nutrition, and childcare.

Solution: Direct parents/carers to the correct resources to help them achieve financial stability, offer budgeting ideas, and encourage them to reach out to appropriate services such as government websites or citizens advice where they can get clear information on what is available to help them reach financial stability.



Challenges.

Stress, burn out and lack of understanding.

Parental burnout occurs when a parent reaches overwhelming exhaustion due to the loss of pleasure in the parenting role which further causes emotional distancing from the child. Because there is no option to step away from the role of being a parent it makes the whole situation worse and leads to personal damage of the parent which leaves them in a vulnerable position and open to the risks of depression, suicide, substance use and child maltreatment. The societal trends of perfectionism has new parents perceiving parenting as an individual role, which can be very isolating for parents, and can hinder the parents ability to reach out for help with a lot of parents feeling ashamed to ask for help, there is a pressure surrounding parenting to get it right and this can cause a huge amount of stress to new parents as they will often feel like they are failing and it undermines their confidence in the new role, Intensive parenting, that devotes a huge proportion of time and energy to the child has become one of the mainstream focus through societal trends this is very impacting to new parents and can become overwhelming and again cause stress and feeling of failure, while there is a lot of good correct positive information available for new parents due to societal trends there is also a lot of misinformation available at the tap of a finger that new parents can easily access and they can get easily overwhelmed and are often left feeling conflicted by what they are seeing and reading, the overwhelm of information can make parents feel like they are missing key elements that are required to raise a child again undermining their confidence within this role leading to stress and anxiety that they are failing (Luijk and Roseboom, 2025).



Professional Partnerships

What is the role of an early year's practitioner in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days?

The role of an early years practitioner in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days is to work in partnership with parents/carers to provide a safe, secure and enabling environment that enables learning and development which promotes the broad range of skills, attitudes and knowledge children need for the foundation of life now and into their future, the guidance that is given in this period will help ensure that the child reaches maximum capacity and benefit from future opportunities. (EYF Framework)



The importance

It is extremely important for early years practitioners to build a strong supportive relationship that promotes trust and understanding with both the parent/carer and the child so they can feel at ease when leaving their child in an unknown environment, it needs to feel inviting and safe as this will make the transition easier for all parties. Being able to show empathy and understanding when talking with parents/carers will increase the trust and help the relationship to grow, it will break down barriers which in turn will help the flow of information be more freely between the practitioner and parent/carer.(Wilson,2024)

- Providing nurturing and supporting care: Building trusting secure relationships with both the child and the parent/carer.
- Facilitate learning through play: Simulate children's development through child-initiated play encouraging social skills, creativity and problem solving.
- Support health and physical development: attending to the day-to-day needs of a child, promoting good nutrition, hygiene and physical activity.
- Observing and monitoring: making sure the child's wellbeing and safety is paramount in the setting and being alert to any signs of abuse outside the setting.
- Partnership with parents/carers: working closely with families, having a good flow of 2-way information, being respectful of the parents/carers role as a primary educator.
- Diversity and inclusivity: creating an environment that is welcoming respecting parents/carers beliefs and background and making sure every child feels welcome.

Maternal factors that influence positive partnership working.

Problem: Health issues.

A parent's health issues can have an adverse effect on the parent practitioner relationship; the parent may not be able to attend the setting due to disability or poor health. This will impede the ability to create a meaningful connection and could hinder the opportunity to build a trusting relationship and could limit the flow of two-way information (Norman, 2021).

Solution: offer a home school diary, incorporate messages or phone calls to keep them updated and feel included, be empathetic to the fact that it is out of the parent's control, try to make the parent feel included and not judged for having poor health or a disability.

Problem: Cultural Bias.

Cultural bias can play a significant role in the parent practitioner relationship, parents can feel that their beliefs and cultural difference can leave them feeling misunderstood or judged, they can be left with the fear that their children's beliefs will not be taken into account within the setting. Additionally, there may be a language barrier that makes them feel isolated and not included in the flow of information (Norman, 2021)

Solution: emphasis that the setting is inclusive, take time to understand their cultural beliefs of the family to avoid misunderstanding, take the time to work on any language barriers that are present.

Problem: Mental health

Mental health of a parent can impact the parent practitioner relationship, when a parent suffers from mental health conditions that can limit their interactions with the practitioner and they can feel isolated and misunderstood, parents may not be able to communicate their child's needs and may feel uneasy leaving their child in the setting (Norman, 2021)

Solution: open up forms of alternative contact to keep the parent informed and keeps the flow of two way information flowing, reinforce the safety and security of the setting, be empathetic to the struggles and how they can fluctuate on a daily basis, direct them to appropriate services for assistance with their mental health.

Activities

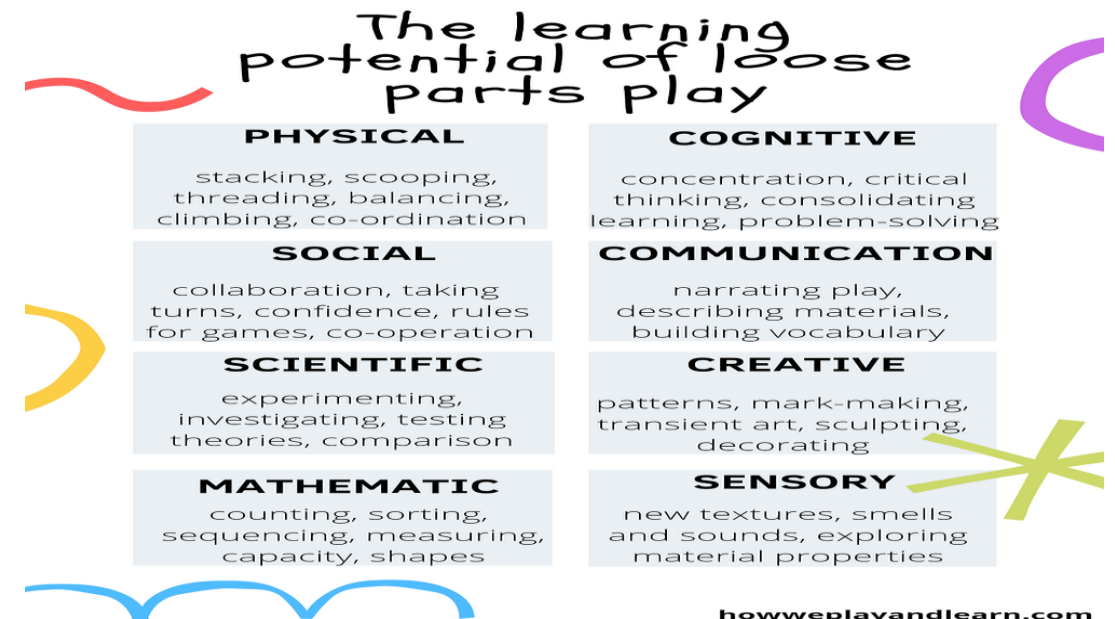


Activities to support the first 1000 days.

Loose parts are materials that are found naturally, can be upcycled from other sources or can be purchased. They have the ability to produce countless opportunities for play and learning, they can be easily controlled, moved freely and can become anything the mind can imagine, making them the perfect learning opportunity for young minds, 'we have often marvelled at the long hours children can spend playing with simple materials' (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2014).

Children often prefer play activities that stimulate curiosity and support free expression of imagination. The opportunities of loose parts can teach children to reimagine what they can create on multiple occasions, this not only creates a fun learning experience, it also supports the development of a diverse range of abilities and strengthens foundational skills essential for lifelong learning. 'Children's play can involve various behaviours and activities, resulting in varied developmental and learning outcomes' (Cankaya, Martin and Haugen, 2025).

According to Nasution et al. (2024) the use of loose part play significantly improved cognitive development in early years, while language development often comes from storytelling, and listening, cognitive development in early childhood requires mathematical logic intelligence which comes from utilizing concrete objects hence the importance of loose parts play, children who show an early interest in mathematical logic intelligence will be more forthcoming with counting, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, they are able to understand numerological patterns more easily giving them a better chance of understanding financial situations.





Loose parts creates ample opportunities to facilitate multisensory interaction by supporting inquiry-based learning in children.

Colour is one way that children distinguish between things they see within their environment, they will match colours to feelings and emotions. 'Children use colour as a means for defining and organizing their world' (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2014).

Touch is another way that children learn about the world around them, they are forever touching objects and exploring environments, loose parts play gives opportunities for textures to be changed right in front of their eyes opening a world of endless creativity and imagination. 'offers children multiple possibilities to use their sense of touch and engage in spontaneous exploration' (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2014).

Sound is a way of exploring a child's environment, it encourages movement and exploration of objects around them, children love to create different sounds from intentional to accidental, every new sound opens a channel for creativity for music making abilities, it also lets children develop listening skills and begin to understand the concept of sound. 'they support the whole child and children's desire to use language and body movement to express their ideas' (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2014).

Daly and Beloglovsky (2014) states that children's ability to explore through senses is a fundamental part of learning, seeing, hearing, touching are just a few ways that children can benefit from loose play parts, children will want to explore their environment with creativity and imagination, they will develop critical thinking skills and refine motor skills.

International approaches.

Both Reggio Emilia and forest school champion child led play-based learning but do have differences between the environment and emphasis on different parts of development which make them to separate approaches to learning.

While the Reggio Emilia approach puts focus on expressive arts, community and a rich indoor environment, viewing nature as part of the learning process.

Forest school is entirely outdoors in natural settings, focusing on resilience, risk taking and deep environmental connection through unstructured play (Harris, 2025).

Reggio Emilia

- Environment: Rich indoor spaces
- Play focus: projects emerge from children's interests, using diverse materials for expression and problem solving
- Teacher Role: observer, co-learner and documenter, facilitate based on children's questions and ideas
- Community: Strong parent and community involvement is integral to learning process
- Curriculum: children direct the curriculum and play a high role in the outcomes, this builds confidence, self-expression, communication and problem-solving skills

(This vs That, n.d)

Forest School

- Environment: entirely outdoors in woodlands or natural spaces, nature itself being the primary learning environment
- Play focus: child led exploration, risk taking, den building, and using natural materials for holistic development
- Teacher role: facilitator, ensuring safety while encouraging independence, resilience and deep engagement with the natural world
- Curriculum: follows national curricular but delivers it through outdoor, experimental learning often complementing indoor schooling.

(This vs That, n.d)

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