



DIGITAL SCRAPBOOK: THE FIRST 1000 DAYS

ECEY4005



Why the first 1000 days matter



The first 1000 days of a child refers to the period from conception, through pregnancy, and up to a child's second birthday. This timeframe is recognised as a crucial stage of development, during which the brain grows rapidly and the foundations for physical health, emotional wellbeing, learning, and behaviour are established. Experiences during the first 1000 days, including nutrition, responsive caregiving, secure attachments, and a safe environment, play a significant role in shaping a child's future outcomes. Development during this period is so rapid. Early support and high-quality care can have a lasting positive impact on a child's life (Department for Education, 2023; Public Health England, 2019).

Research highlights that positive early experiences can improve lifelong health, resilience, and educational achievement, while adverse experiences may increase the risk of developmental delays and inequality. Understanding the importance of the first 1000 days is therefore essential for parents, caregivers, and early years professionals, as early support and high-quality care can make a profound difference to a child's future (Department for Education, 2023; Public Health England, 2019).

- The first 1000 days of a child's life are important because this period is critical for their holistic development. During this time, neural connections are formed at a rapid rate, and early experiences have a lasting influence on learning, behaviour, and health. Positive experiences in the first 1000 days support resilience, emotional regulation, and cognitive development, while adverse experiences can increase the risk of developmental delays and poor health outcomes later in life.
- Early intervention and high-quality care during this period help create strong foundations for lifelong wellbeing, educational achievement, and social development (Department for Education, 2023; Public Health England, 2019; Shonkoff et al., 2012).



(South Dakota Department of Health , No Date)

Caregiving is vital in supporting children's emotional security, development, and wellbeing, especially in the early years.

Consistent, responsive care helps children form secure attachments, building confidence, resilience, and positive relationships. Warm, sensitive interactions also support communication, social skills, and emotional regulation.



Within the Early Years Foundation Stage, effective caregiving helps children feel safe and supported, providing a strong foundation for learning by meeting individual needs and responding to children's cues (Department for Education, 2023; Bowlby, 1988).

Exceptional care goes beyond meeting basic needs, providing compassionate, responsive, and individualised support so individuals feel safe, respected, and valued. In childcare, it involves building trusting relationships and responding sensitively to each child's needs to promote wellbeing, dignity, and development. Exceptional care is defined not only by what is provided, but by how it is delivered, through empathy, professionalism, and continuous improvement (Department for Education, 2023; Early Years Alliance, 2021).

Caregiving



An enabling environment supports children's learning by offering a safe, stimulating, and well-organised space that responds to individual needs, interests, and stages of development. Inclusive practice ensures that all children, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, are valued, supported, and able to participate fully in learning experiences. By working in partnership with parents and other professionals, early years settings can remove barriers to learning and promote equality, wellbeing, and positive outcomes for every child (Department for Education, 2023; Early Years Alliance, 2021).

Professional Partnership

Effective partnership working is vital in supporting children's development and wellbeing, especially in the early years, as it promotes a consistent and holistic approach to care and learning. Working with parents, carers, and professionals enables information sharing, early identification of needs, and coordinated support. Clear communication between multi-agencies supports early intervention and prevention.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the importance of partnership working, showing that a child's development is shaped by interconnected systems. Strong partnerships strengthen the mesosystem by creating positive relationships between key adults, leading to consistent support, emotional security, and improved learning outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Department for Education, 2023).

Maternal factors such as physical and mental health, nutrition, lifestyle choices, stress, and access to healthcare can influence fetal growth, brain development, and long-term outcomes. Poor mental health, high stress, or inadequate nutrition during pregnancy may affect attachment, emotional wellbeing, and physical and cognitive development.

- Early Years practitioners support children's learning and development through warm, consistent interactions that build secure attachments, supporting emotional security and brain development. They observe and assess development to identify needs early and provide timely support or referrals.
- By working in partnership with parents and carers, practitioners offer guidance on routines, communication, and development, building family confidence. They create inclusive environments that meet individual needs, including those of children with disabilities, and work with professionals such as health visitors and speech and language therapists to support early intervention and positive outcomes (Department for Education, 2023; Public Health England, 2019; Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Childcare practitioners face a range of challenges when working in a classroom, which can impact both their wellbeing and the quality of care and learning provided. One common challenge is managing children's behaviour while meeting the individual needs of each child. This can be addressed through clear routines, consistent boundaries, and positive behaviour strategies that promote emotional regulation and respect. Another challenge is balancing learning opportunities with health and safety requirements.



Providing high-quality care in early years settings presents a number of challenges, particularly as children's experiences and expectations continue to change. One key challenge is ensuring that children are able to learn, explore, and take appropriate risks while maintaining a safe and secure environment. Practitioners must balance play-based learning with safeguarding and health and safety requirements, which can be difficult in busy or low resourced settings. Keeping children engaged and interested is also increasingly challenging. The widespread use of digital technology, such as tablets and screens, means that children may expect constant stimulation and become bored more quickly, placing pressure on practitioners to continually refresh activities and resources. In addition, managing stress and workload is a significant challenge for early years practitioners, as high levels of responsibility, emotional demands of the role and time pressures can impact wellbeing and the quality of care provided. As childhood continues to change due to technological and social influences, practitioners must adapt their practice while maintaining developmentally appropriate, high-quality care (Department for Education, 2023; Ofsted, 2019).

Loose Parts

Loose parts in childcare refer to open-ended materials that can be moved, combined, redesigned, and used in many different ways by children. Unlike fixed toys with a single purpose such as cars, loose parts encourage creativity, problem-solving, and independent thinking because children decide how the materials are used. The concept is based on the idea that children learn best through exploration, play, and hands-on experiences.

Examples of loose parts include natural materials such as stones, sticks, shells, pinecones, sand, and leaves, as well as everyday items like wooden blocks, fabric pieces, cardboard tubes, bottle tops, baskets, tyres, and recycled containers. These materials can be used across all areas of learning, supporting physical development, communication and language, mathematics, expressive arts, and understanding the world.

Loose parts can be included in the classroom by creating accessible, well-organised areas where children can independently choose and return materials. Practitioners can rotate resources to maintain interest and use loose parts in both indoor and outdoor environments. Observing children's play and extending learning through sensitive questioning helps deepen engagement while keeping play child-led. Providing loose parts supports the EYFS principle of enabling environments and promotes creativity, confidence, and sustained shared thinking (Department for Education, 2023; Nicholson, 1971; Early Years Alliance, 2021).

Simon Nicholson was a British architect and educator best known for developing the Theory of Loose Parts, which emphasises the importance of open-ended materials in children's play and learning. He believed that creativity and problem-solving are enhanced when children are provided with flexible resources that can be manipulated, combined, and redesigned in many ways. Nicholson argued that environments rich in loose parts empower children to take ownership of their learning and express ideas freely. His work has had a lasting influence on early years education, particularly in play-based and child-led learning approaches (Nicholson, 1971).



(Etsy, 2025)

Problem Solving

Problem solving activities in early years help children develop thinking skills, resilience, and independence by encouraging them to explore, test ideas, and find solutions. Problem solving skills are important and beneficial for children under two because they support early brain development, independence, and curiosity during a period of rapid learning. Even at a very young age, babies and toddlers solve problems through everyday experiences such as reaching for a toy, fitting objects into containers, or finding ways to communicate their needs. These early problem-solving experiences help build neural connections and support cognitive development (Department for Education, 2023).

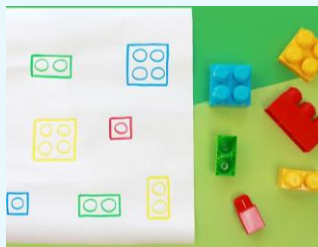
Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development explains that children under two are in the sensorimotor stage, where learning occurs through exploration, trial and error, and interaction with their environment. Through problem solving, children begin to understand cause and effect, object permanence, and develop memory and thinking skills (Piaget, 1952). Lev Vygotsky also emphasised the importance of social interaction, highlighting that adults support young children's problem solving skills through guided interaction and scaffolding, even in the earliest years (Vygotsky, 1978).



Tired Mom Supermom (2025)



Meredith Plays (2025)



LA Historia de Tu Life (2021)

1. Loose parts construction

Provide materials such as blocks, tubes, fabric, and natural objects and ask children to build a bridge, tower, or shelter.

2. Puzzles and matching games

Jigsaws, shape sorters, and matching cards help children recognise patterns, trial solutions, and develop persistence.

3. Water play challenges

Using cups, funnels, and tubes encourages prediction, testing, and adapting ideas.

4. Role play scenarios

Set up situations such as a shop, café, or home corner where children solve real-life problems (e.g. sharing resources, counting money, organising roles).

5. Outdoor problem-solving

Activities like obstacle courses, building dens, or figuring out how to cross a space using planks encourage teamwork, risk assessment, and physical problem-solving.

6. Story-based problem solving

Pause during a story and ask questions such as “What could the character do next?” or “How could they fix the problem?”

1. Storytelling and shared reading

Reading books daily and using expressive voices, actions, and open-ended questions helps children develop vocabulary, listening skills, and understanding.

2. Singing songs and rhymes

Nursery rhymes and action songs support rhythm, sound awareness, and early speech patterns.

3. Small-world play

Using figures, animals, and play scenes encourages children to create narratives, describe actions, and use new vocabulary in context.

4. Role play and pretend play

Role-play areas such as shops, cafés, or homes encourage conversation, turn-taking, and the use of everyday language.

5. Open-ended questioning

Asking questions such as “What do you think will happen next?” or “How could we do that?” encourages children to express ideas and extend sentences.

6. Talking during routines

Everyday routines like snack time, nappy changing, and getting ready to go outside provide valuable opportunities for one-to-one conversation and language modelling.

7. Sensory play with language prompts

Activities involving sand, water, or dough can be supported with descriptive language, helping children learn new words related to texture, size, and action.

Supporting Language

These activities support communication and language by promoting interaction, vocabulary development, listening, and confidence. They align with the EYFS principle that language develops best through responsive relationships and play-based learning. (Department for Education, 2023) (Early Years Alliance, 2021)

Language skills games are important and beneficial for children under the age of two because this is a critical period for early communication and brain development. During the first two years of life, children rapidly develop listening skills, understanding, and early speech through interaction, repetition, and play. Language games such as singing, turn-taking sounds, peek-a-boo, and naming everyday objects help children make connections between words, sounds, and meaning, supporting early vocabulary development and communication.

Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory emphasises that language develops through social interaction with more knowledgeable adults. For children under two, responsive adults who model language, repeat words, and engage in playful communication support learning within the child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, Jerome Bruner highlighted the importance of routines and interaction, suggesting that early language games and shared activities provide a structure that supports language acquisition (Bruner, 1983).

Physio Inq (2025)



1. Key person time

Spending regular one-to-one time with a key person helps children feel secure, valued, and confident. Simple activities such as reading a book or talking during play support attachment and trust.

2. Circle time and group discussions

Short, age-appropriate circle times encourage children to listen to others, take turns speaking, and develop a sense of belonging within the group.

3. Cooperative games

Games that require children to work together, such as passing a ball, building something as a team, or parachute games, help develop cooperation, turn-taking, and shared goals.

4. Role play and pretend play

Role-play areas encourage children to explore relationships, emotions, and social roles. This helps them practise communication, empathy, and understanding others' perspectives.

5. Sharing stories and emotions

Using stories, puppets, or emotion cards helps children recognise and talk about feelings, supporting emotional literacy and positive relationships.

6. Buddy or partner activities

Pairing children for simple tasks, such as tidying up or completing a puzzle, helps them learn to work with others and build peer relationships.

7. Celebrating diversity and inclusion

Activities that reflect children's cultures, families, and experiences promote respect, inclusion, and positive relationships.

Building relationships

These activities support the EYFS Personal, Social and Emotional Development area by helping children develop secure attachments, empathy, confidence, and positive relationships with adults and peers. (Bowlby, 1988) (Department for Education, 2023) Early Years Alliance (2021) Relationship building activities are important and highly beneficial for children under the age of two because early relationships form the foundation for emotional security, brain development, and future social skills.

During the first two years of life, babies and toddlers rely on consistent, warm, and responsive interactions with adults to feel safe and understood. Activities such as peek-a-boo, singing together, turn-taking games, and shared play help children develop trust, attachment, and early communication skills. John

Bowlby's attachment theory emphasises that secure attachments formed in early childhood are essential for healthy emotional and social development. When caregivers respond sensitively through relationship building activities, children are more likely to develop confidence, resilience, and positive relationships later in life (Bowlby, 1988). Similarly, Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory identifies the first stage of development as 'trust versus mistrust', highlighting that responsive caregiving in the early years helps children develop a sense of trust in others and their environment (Erikson, 1963)



My Gym Singapore (2025)



Freepik (no date)

1. Playdough and malleable materials

Squeezing, rolling, pinching, and shaping playdough strengthens hand and finger muscles needed for writing and self-care tasks.

2. Threading and lacing

Threading beads, pasta, or buttons onto laces or string helps develop hand–eye coordination, control, and concentration.

3. Mark making and early writing

Providing crayons, chalk, paintbrushes, and pencils encourages children to practise grip, control, and hand movements.

4. Cutting activities

Using child-safe scissors to cut paper, card, or playdough supports coordination and control of hand movements.

5. Peg and tweezer activities

Using pegs, tweezers, or tongs to pick up objects strengthens finger muscles and supports precision.

6. Construction and small-world play

Building with blocks, Lego, and small figures encourages manipulation, coordination, and problem-solving.

7. Everyday self-care tasks

Activities such as buttoning clothes, opening lunch boxes, pouring drinks, and washing hands support fine motor control and independence.

Developing fine motor skills

Fine motor activities develop the strength, coordination, and control needed for writing, drawing, and self-care. These skills support independence and later learning and are a key part of the EYFS Physical Development area (Case-Smith, 2013; Early Years Alliance, 2021; Department for Education, 2023).

Jean Piaget (1952) explained that children under two learn through physical interaction in the sensorimotor stage. Activities such as grasping and manipulating objects support understanding of cause and effect, object permanence, and problem-solving through hands-on experience.

Lev Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the importance of adult support in learning. When adults model fine motor tasks and encourage participation, they provide scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), while shared activities also support communication and bonding.

Maria Montessori (1967) emphasised purposeful movement in developing independence. Fine motor skills prepare children for practical life tasks, such as self-feeding and early writing, helping build confidence and motivation.

Arnold Gesell (1940) suggested development follows a predictable, maturation-led sequence. Fine motor activities support this progression by strengthening hand and finger muscles, moving from reflexive to controlled, precise movements through practice.



This image is of a small group of children using string, beads and blocks to support the development of their fine motor skills. (This image has been enhanced using AI)

International approaches

Forest School and Reggio Emilia are two internationally recognised approaches to early childhood education that place strong emphasis on child-led learning, but they differ in their environments, teaching methods, and underlying philosophies.



The Forest School approach originated in Scandinavia and focuses on outdoor, nature-based learning. Children spend extended periods outdoors, where they are encouraged to explore, take appropriate risks, and develop confidence, resilience, and physical skills. Learning is experiential and play-based, with practitioners acting as facilitators rather than instructors. Forest School strongly supports holistic development, particularly physical wellbeing, independence, and emotional resilience (Knight, 2013).



In contrast, the Reggio Emilia approach, developed in Italy, emphasises the environment as the “third teacher” and focuses on creativity, communication, and collaboration (Malaguzzi.L, 1993). Learning is project-based and driven by children’s interests, with a strong emphasis on documentation, reflection, and the use of expressive arts (Malaguzzi.L, 1998). Practitioners carefully observe and record children’s learning to inform future planning, and parents are viewed as active partners in education (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012).



While both approaches value child-led learning, exploration, and the role of the practitioner as a guide, they differ in their learning environments and priorities. Forest School centres on outdoor, physical, and nature-based experiences, whereas Reggio Emilia places greater emphasis on indoor environments, creativity, and symbolic expression. Together, these approaches highlight different but complementary ways of supporting children’s learning and development through meaningful, engaging experiences.



Free Haven Forest School (no date)



Invitations to Play (2018)



These images are of children taking part in a forest school and Reggio Emilia experience. (These images have been enhanced using AI)



The Play Cycle

The play cycle is a concept used mainly in early childhood education to describe how children initiate, develop, and conclude play. It helps educators understand children's learning, social development, and thinking processes through play (Brown.F, 2008). The play cycle refers to the sequence of stages children move through during play, from the first spark of interest to the resolution of the play episode. It emphasises that play is dynamic, child-led, and socially negotiated. Peter King developed the idea of the play cycle to help practitioners understand how play starts, develops, and ends through social interaction. His work is widely used in UK early years practice and aligns strongly with play work theory. King described the play cycle as the pattern of interactions that occur when children invite others into play, respond to those invitations, and sustain play together (King. P, 2020).



(Art of it, no date)

Key Theorists Linked to the Play Cycle:

Mildred Parten Identified social stages of play, which often occur within the play cycle:

- Solitary
- Parallel
- Associative
- Cooperative

Her work helps educators observe how children participate in play cycles. (Parten, M. 1932).

Tina Bruce is a strong advocate for free flow play. She emphasised that children revisit play cycles repeatedly. She also stressed the adult's role in supporting and not interrupting play (Bruce, T. 2011).

Friedrich Froebel is the founder of kindergarten. He believed play was the highest expression of human development, and influenced cyclical, holistic views of learning through play (Froebel, F. 1887)

Why the Play Cycle Matters in Practice

- Helps practitioners observe learning, not just behaviour.
- Encourages sustained shared thinking.
- Supports planning environments that allow play to begin, deepen, and conclude naturally.
- Reinforces the idea that play is not random, but purposeful and developmental.

Pikler

Emmi Pikler was a Hungarian paediatrician whose work has strongly influenced early childhood practice, particularly infant care, play, and development. She believed children are competent from birth and learn through self-initiated activity, free movement, and uninterrupted play. Pikler emphasised respectful, responsive caregiving, viewing daily routines as opportunities to build secure attachments and emotional wellbeing. Her approach encourages adults to observe rather than direct, supporting independence, confidence, and concentration (Pikler, 1969; Tardos and David, 1991; Bruce, 2011).

Central to the Pikler approach is free movement, where children are not placed in positions they cannot achieve independently, promoting physical confidence and body awareness. Equal importance is given to respectful care during routines such as feeding and nappy changing, which strengthen relationships and attachment. Self-initiated, uninterrupted play supports concentration, autonomy, and motivation, promoting emotional security and holistic development (Pikler, 1969; Tardos and David, 1991; Bruce, 2011).



(Brodie. K, 2024)

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