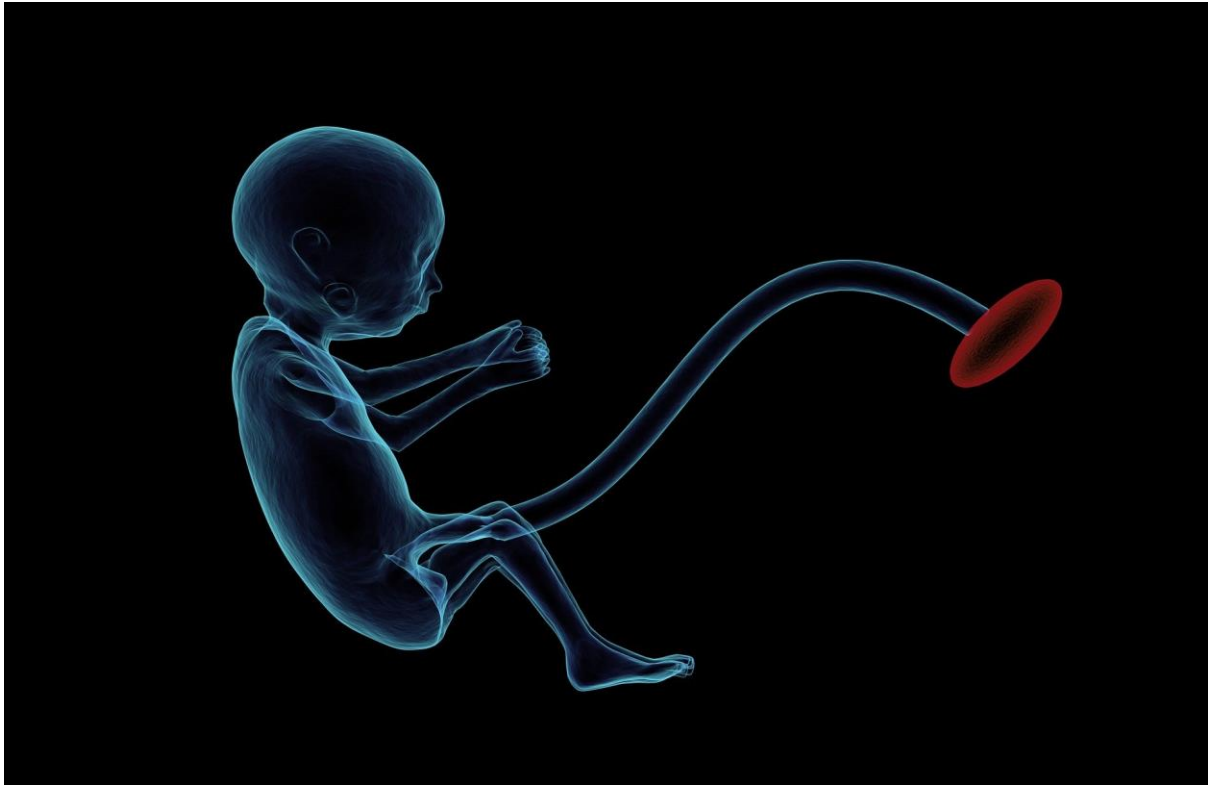
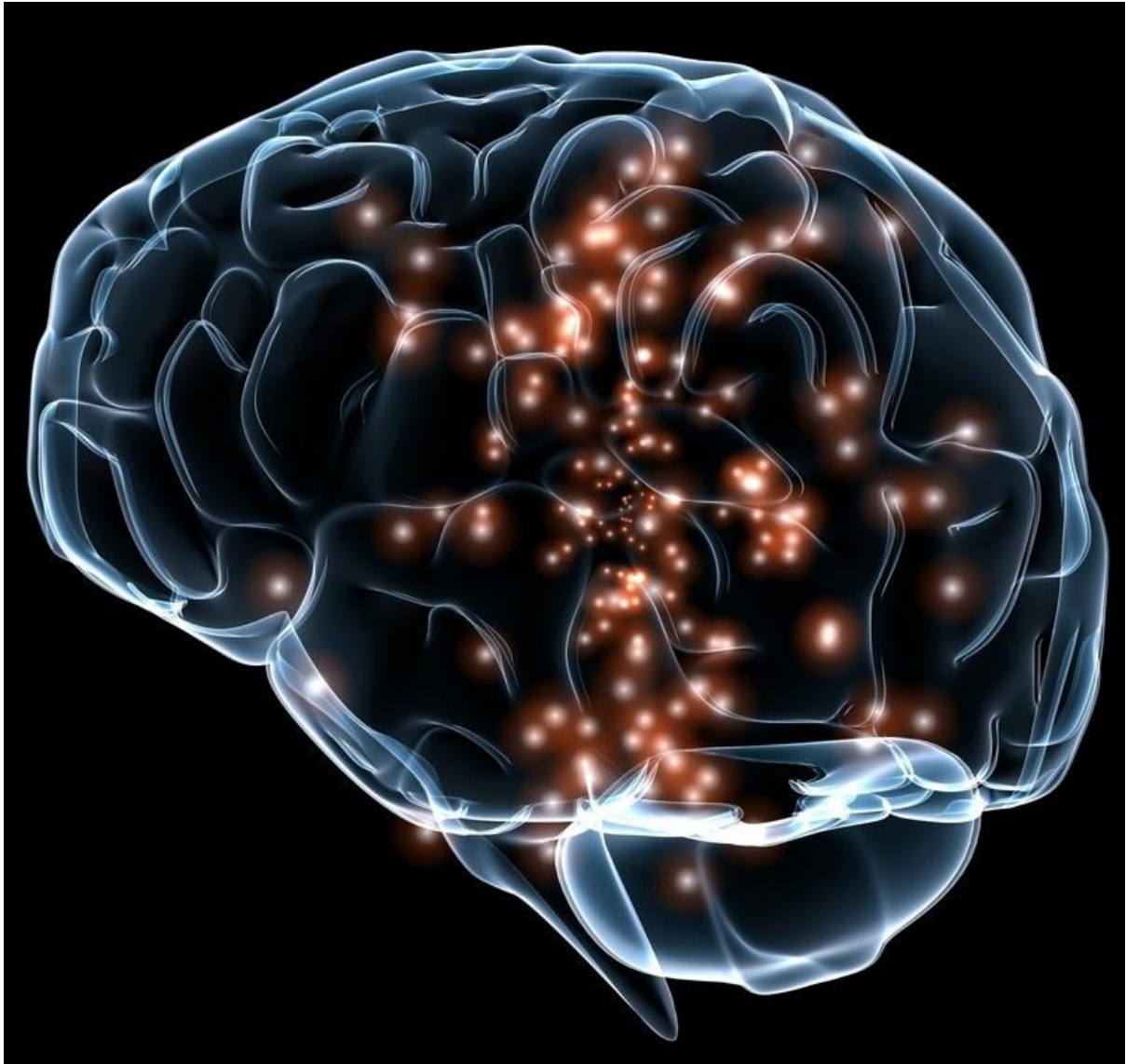




The First 1000 Days

Introduction



The first 1000 days of a child's life, spanning from conception to the age of two, are widely recognised as a crucial period for development. This critical window of time sets the foundation for a child's physical, cognitive, social, and emotional well-being throughout their life. The experiences and interactions a child have during this period have a profound impact on their future health, learning abilities, and overall development (Welsh Gov, 2023).

Scientific research has provided compelling evidence of the significance of the first 1000 days. Studies in the fields of neuroscience and development psychology have shown that early year's experiences have a profound impact on child development. During the first years of life, the brain undergoes rapid growth and neural connections are formed at a remarkable pace. Positive interactions, responsive caregiving, and enriching environments contribute to healthy brain development, laying the groundwork for learning, behaviour, and emotional regulation (Public Health Wales, 2021).

Numerous child development theorists have emphasized the significance of the first 1000 days. According to Erikson (1950), the first stage of development is trust v mistrust, occurs during the first year of life. During this stage, a child's sense of trust and security is heavily influenced by the

responsiveness and care provided by their primary caregivers. Positive experiences during this stage lay the groundwork for the child's ability to form healthy relationships and trust in the future.



Another influential theorist, Jean Piaget, focused on cognitive development in children. Piaget's theory emphasises the importance of sensory experiences, for example what a child can touch, see, hear, taste and smell, and a child should have the ability to explore and investigate during early years. The experiences children have during the first 1000 days play a fundamental role in shaping their cognitive development and ability to learn (Piaget, 1971).



Furthermore, the benefits of providing good care during the first 1000 days extend far beyond early childhood. Research has linked early nurturing experiences to better physical and mental health outcomes in later life. A secure attachment to caregivers during infancy has been associated with resilience, emotional stability, and positive social relationships in adulthood. Conversely, neglect or adverse experiences during this critical period can lead to long-term negative effects on physical and mental health (Bowlby, 1969).



Investing in the well-being of children during the first 1000 days is not only beneficial at an individual level but also has broader societal implications. Children who receive nurturing care and support early in life are more likely to succeed in school, contribute positively to their communities, and grow into healthy productive adults. By prioritizing the needs of young children and providing resources for the parents and caregivers, society can foster a generation of individuals who are equipped to thrive and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole (Welsh Gov, 2023).



The first 1000 days of a child's life are a critical period for development, with far-reaching implications for their future. The experiences of care provided during this time significantly influence a child's physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being. The Welsh government recognises the importance of this and is investing in high quality care in early years, backing policies and programmes that support healthy development of children in, these include the new curriculum, expanding flying start funding, and 30 hours free childcare (Welsh Gov, 2023).

Caregiving



Exceptional Care

Exceptional care in relation to childcare and their caregivers encompasses the provision of nurturing, responsive, and supportive environments that cater to a child's holistic development. It involves the consistent and compassionate care provided by caregivers, which is essential for fostering a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being. It refers to the provision of high-quality early years childcare that maximizes child outcomes (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years, 2009).

Theorists such as John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth have contributed significantly to our understanding of exceptional care in early childhood. Bowlby's attachment theory as previously mentioned, emphasises the importance of secure attachments formed through consistent and sensitive caregiving. Ainsworth further expanded on this theory, identifying different attachment styles based on a caregivers responses and a child's needs (Krumwiede, 2014) .



In practice, exceptional care involves creating safe, stimulating, and nurturing environments for children. Caregivers play a pivotal role in meeting children's physical needs, providing emotional support, and engaging in responsive interactions (Wales Gov, 2023).

Engaging Adults

According to Prof Anne Fernald (2019), interaction with babies and children in the first 1000 days, provides them with the foundation of language development. By engaging with a baby by talking and changing your expressions and voice, this helps aid their language learning and is essential for brain development. Here crucial periods of rapid brain development for acquiring speech and language happen.

Building relationships and enabling child centred care is an essential part of providing exceptional care as babies start to communicate from the day they are born. In the first year of life, infants typically begin to coo, babble, and make various vocalizations as they explore with sounds. Responding to these vocalizations and engaging in back -and -forth vocal interactions support the development of these language skills (Speech and Language UK, 2023).

Shonkoff (2008), explains the serve and return metaphor and emphasises the importance of responsive interactions between caregivers and children. The concept is rooted in the understanding that positive interactions such as engaging in face-to -face activities, responding to a child's cues, and allowing the child to "serve" by initiating reactions, play a crucial role in again shaping the architecture of the brain.

Focusing on interactive face-to-face activities involves engaging with the child through eye contact, mirroring their expressions, and responding to their vocalizations. This type of interaction fosters a sense of security and attachment, which is vital according to Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) and it allows the child to feel seen and understood. When caregivers consistently respond to a child's cues, they are reinforcing the child's sense of agency and building secure attachments which helps the child's ability to engage with others (NSPCC, n/d).



1 - Experiences Build Brain Architecture Video.



Stimulating and Nurturing Environments

The Welsh government's investment in childcare reflects its commitment to promoting exceptional care for children. The Enabling learning document is created to offer guidance in Wales for those working with children to enable caregivers identified in this guidance as: enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments.

These enablers are interrelated and interdependent and the interplay between them is integral to teaching and learning across Curriculum for Wales. Attention should be paid to the following key features, which are essential for this period of learning: play and play-based learning, no more sitting on the carpet for unnecessary amounts of time. Being outdoors, - this includes all weathers,

exploring, jumping in puddles, climbing, picking up stones, sand and water areas. Observation and authentic and purposeful learning, play based on the child's interests (Welsh Government, 2023).



2 - The Curiosity Approach

The Curiosity approach is a an early childhood educational approach that focuses on nurturing children's natural curiosity and fostering a love of learning. It is based on the idea that children should learn through hands-on experiences and exploration rather than traditional didactic methods (The Curiosity approach, 2019).

The approach draws inspiration from several theorists including Maria Montessori (1912), who emphasised the importance of self-directed learning and hands-on exploration; Emmi Pikler (1930), who emphasized respectful care and free movement for infants and young children; and Reggio Emilia approach, which values the environment as the third teacher and encourages children to express themselves through a variety of media, such as painting, sculpting, dramatic play, dancing, puppetry and construction. (Marlen, D .n/d), Early Learning and Childcare (2023).



3 - Construction area

In Wales, early years may incorporate elements of the curiosity approach by creating rich, stimulating environments that invite exploration and discovery, providing open ended materials for children to engage with, such as cardboard tubes,- these encourage imagination, the tube could be a walking stick, a telescope, a tunnel for a car and so on. It stops limitations of creativity unlike plastic toys which are created for a specific purpose or game (The Curiosity approach, 2019).

The new Welsh Curriculum encourages purposeful learning where the child is at the forefront of their learning, where practitioners build strong respectful relationships with children and support their independence and decision-making, this is again what the curiosity approach aims for, prioritizing child-led learning, sensory experiences, and the role of the environment in shaping children's learning and development (Welsh Gov, 2023).



Professional Partnerships

Early years practitioners play a vital role in supporting children and their families during the first 1000 days, which is a critical period as stated previously for child development. This period, from conception to age two, lays the foundation for the child's future and that is why it is essential for early years practitioners to provide crucial support to both children and their families (Welsh Gov, 2011).

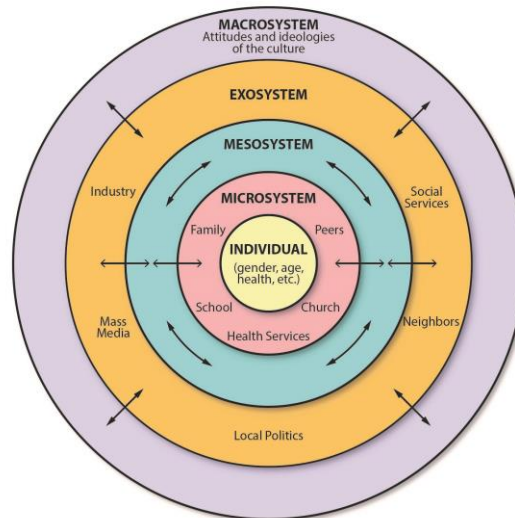


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model considers the child's environment as a nested series of interconnected systems. [Image modified from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory]

One of the key elements of supporting children and their families in the first 1000 days is through partnership working. This concept is rooted in ecological theory, particularly the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979), which emphasises the interconnectedness of a child's environment and the importance of multiple systems in influencing a child's development. Understanding this theory enables practitioners to recognise the interconnected systems that influence a child's development, including the family, community, and broader society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

In Wales the government has recognised the significance of the first 1000 days and has outlined specific policies and guidelines to support children and their families during this crucial period. The Government's "Healthy Child Wales Programme", provides a comprehensive framework for supporting families during the first 1000 days, focusing on early prevention, and building strong foundations for children's health and well-being (Welsh Government, 2016).



Early years practitioners are in a unique position to support families by providing guidance and resources to address a range of maternal factors that can impact on a child's development. For example, practitioners can offer support for maternal mental health, including access to mental health services and counselling (NHS Wales, 2023).

Additionally, they can provide guidance on nutrition and healthy eating during pregnancy and the early years of a child's life. Understanding the specific needs of each family and having a holistic view, and providing tailored support is essential in addressing maternal factors that may impact a child's development (Welsh Gov, 2011).



By collaborating with early years, practitioners can create a supportive and nurturing environment that promote developmental outcomes for children. They can offer educational resources, parenting support, and access to community services that can empower families to provide the best possible care for their children during the crucial 1000 days (Public Health Wales, 2024).

Early years practitioners in Wales play a fundamental role in supporting children and families, partnership working and understanding the interconnected nature of child development through Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and aligning with the Welsh Governments policies and guidelines, practitioners can provide essential support to families and positively impact the developmental outcomes for young children in Wales (Public Health Wales, 2024).

Challenges



Providing high quality care in Wales comes with several challenges. The weather can present logistical difficulties, particularly in rural areas where extreme weather conditions may hinder access to care. Outdoor activities may be affected by the heavy and constant rainfall and flooding occurring in places.



The Flying Start expansion in Wales is continuing, offering funded places to all two-year-olds, however the funding rate for the majority of childcare places has not been increased since 2022, where inflation rose significantly. According to National Day Nurseries Association (2024), there is a workforce crisis in the early years sector, with many qualified staff leaving for more flexible, better paid jobs in hospitality and retail.



These issues highlight the need for adequate funding and support for early years childcare providers to ensure they can continue to offer high-quality education and care. It's a complex issue with many

factors at play, and ongoing efforts are being made to address these challenges (National Day Nurseries Association, 2024).



Complex parental situations can add additional layers of complexity to providing care, as understanding and addressing the needs of the family unit is crucial for effective care provision. Including the family in discussions and listening to what they have to say is vital in providing good quality care, although some individuals do not have the child's best interests at heart. Sources like NICE highlight the complexity of the issue and the need for comprehensive support and understanding for families with complex needs. It's a multifaceted issue that requires a holistic approach to ensure the well-being of both the children and their parents (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2024).



Lastly, ensuring adequate staffing levels and managing workforce shortages is a common challenge in childcare and healthcare settings in Wales. This significantly impacts on the quality of care and education provides in children in nurseries. Adequate staffing is essential for meeting the individual needs of each child, ensuring their safety, and providing meaningful interactions and activities. Insufficient staffing may lead to decreased supervision, limited engagement with children, and

challenges in addressing the specific developmental needs of each child and the ability to constantly deliver high-quality care (Welsh Government, 2023).

Activities



Meaningful learning

Montessori (1967) and Froebel (1887)'s loose parts theory emphasize the importance of open-ended, unstructured play in early childhood development. These theories propose that providing children with a wide variety of loose parts (objects that can be moved, manipulated, and combined in different ways) promotes creativity, problem-solving skills, social interactions, and overall cognitive development.

Building Blocks



4 - By allowing children to freely explore and interact with loose parts, they are encouraged to use their imagination and develop critical thinking skills. For example, providing a collection of different-sized blocks allows children to build structures of their choice, fostering spatial awareness, hand-eye coordination, and engineering skills.

Why have sensory play?

Sensory play is crucial for the development of young children, especially those under the age of two, as it engages their senses and helps them make sense of the world around them. Piaget chose to call this stage the sensorimotor stage, using skills and abilities they were born with. (Piaget, 1971).

Here are some key reasons why sensory play is important:

1. **Brain Development:** Sensory play stimulates various areas of the brain, including those responsible for language, motor skills, problem-solving, and social-emotional development. By engaging in sensory play, children's neural connections are strengthened, facilitating overall brain development.
2. **Cognitive Skills:** Sensory play promotes cognitive skills such as attention, memory, and concentration. When children explore different textures, colours, smells, and sounds, they are building their cognitive abilities by making connections and associations.
3. **Language Development:** Sensory play provides opportunities for children to learn new words, concepts, and descriptive language. As they engage with different materials and experiences, they can express themselves and communicate their observations, preferences, and feelings.
4. **Fine Motor Skills:** Sensory play encourages the development of fine motor skills, as children manipulate and explore objects. Pouring, scooping, squeezing, and sorting materials all help refine their hand-eye coordination, finger dexterity, and strength.
5. **Emotional Regulation:** Sensory play is calming and soothing for young children, helping them regulate their emotions and reduce stress. It provides a safe outlet for self-expression and can alleviate anxiety or frustration.



Sensory Play Activities



5 - Texture Exploration: Provide various materials with different textures such as smooth fabric, crinkly paper, soft fur, or bumpy surfaces. Let children touch, feel, and explore these materials through their senses.



6 - Sensory Bins: Fill a shallow container with different materials like rice, sand, water, or beans. Add scoops, cups, and spoons for children to manipulate and pour. Ensure close supervision to avoid ingestion.



7 - Messy Play: Engage children in finger painting with baby-safe, non-toxic paints or let them explore with edible sensory materials like mashed bananas or cooked pasta. This allows them to engage their senses while also fostering creativity.



8 - Water Play: Offer supervised water play using shallow containers of warm water. Provide child-friendly cups, funnels, floating toys, or sponges for squeezing. Water play helps to develop hand-eye coordination and sensory exploration.

Treasure basket



9 - A treasure basket: is a collection of carefully selected everyday objects that are safe for infants to explore and manipulate independently.

The concept of a treasure basket was introduced by Elinor Goldschmied and Sonia Jackson in the 1980s as a key component of heuristic play. Heuristic play, as encouraged by Goldschmied (1994), refers to the spontaneous exploration and experimentation that young children engage in when provided with open-ended materials and objects. Goldschmied believed that this type of play is essential for young children's cognitive, sensory, and emotional development. This aligns with Montessori and Froebel's loose parts theory, and also the vision of the previously mentioned "Curiosity Approach".

Books



10 - Books: play a significant role in the development of children under the age of two. Books aid Language Development as they introduce young children to the language and vocabulary used in everyday life. Reading to infants and exposing them to different words and sounds helps expand their vocabulary and supports language development.

According to the social interactionist theory proposed by Lev Vygotsky, reading and engaging in conversation with caregivers enhance language acquisition and communication skills, (Vygotsky 1978).

Books also support Cognitive Development as it exposes children to various concepts, ideas, and images, stimulating their cognitive development. By engaging with books, infants and toddlers develop their attention span, memory, and problem-solving abilities. According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children actively construct knowledge from their experiences, and books provide valuable cognitive experiences and new information, (Piaget 1971). This theory was behind the "Read on, get on" campaign, where a selection of experts, professionals and teachers all aim to collaboratively work to the ambitious goal of all children reading well by the age of 11 by 2025, a campaign to raise awareness of the importance of books, songs and rhymes in early years development (Save the Children, 2016).

Forest school and outdoor play



11 - Forest school is an international approach that promotes learning and play in natural, outdoor settings. It encourages children's independence, self-esteem, resilience, and environmental awareness. Forest school activities may involve nature walks, den building, plant identification, and storytelling around a campfire.

The National Minimum Standards agency in Wales sets regulations and guidelines for child care and early education providers. It ensures that these settings meet the necessary quality standards and provide a safe, stimulating, and nurturing environment for children (National minimum Standards Agency, 2023).

Reggio Emilia is another renowned approach to early childhood education originating from Italy. It emphasizes child-led exploration, collaboration, and the environment as the "third teacher." Reggio Emilia-inspired activities often involve project-based learning, documentation of children's experiences, and the use of art and creative materials to express ideas. The learning process is considered to be of much higher importance than the final product and teachers create in-depth projects based on information from parents and observation as well as the interests of children (Daynurseries.co.uk, 2024).

Enabling environments for children in the first 1000 days is a concept that recognizes the critical period of development from conception to age two. It focuses on providing a supportive and stimulating environment that promotes healthy brain development, emotional well-being, and positive attachment between children and caregivers. It involves responsive caregiving, age-appropriate activities, nurturing relationships, and holistic support for children and their families.

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