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The First 1000 days



Babies are amazing! From the day that they are conceived in the womb they begin developing and growing at an incredible rate. A fully grown adult brain has an estimated 86 billion neurons, the majority of which are already formed before birth. (Herculano-Hauzel, 2009).

The first 1000 days of life, from conception to the 2nd birthday, is a critical time for the future lives of babies. Their life chances are increased by good nutrition, lack of stress, good support networks around the family, access to health provision and equal opportunities for all babies and their families.



1 - During pregnancy

Babies are vulnerable during their time in the womb. Many factors such as the mother's health, the environment in which she lives and the support networks she has around her, all influence the growth and development of the baby.

The Mother's physical and mental health have a huge influence on the development of the baby. Good support networks during pregnancy are important as a woman that feels supported by a partner, friends, family, or other agencies, during pregnancy and after the birth are more likely to feel happier and less stressed which will have a positive effect on the baby's development. Stress in pregnancy can increase the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, a low birthweight, and developmental delays in the baby.

Smoking and alcohol consumption have long been known to have a negative effect on a developing baby. Mothers are advised not to drink any alcohol during pregnancy as it passes from the mother's blood through the placenta to the baby. A baby's liver cannot process alcohol and can have a serious effect on their development. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can lead to an increased risk of miscarriage and a baby having a low birth weight. Heavy drinking during pregnancy can cause a serious condition known as Foetal alcohol syndrome, this can cause poor growth and possible learning, and behaviour problems.

Smoking during pregnancy, or breathing in second-hand smoke, can cause stillbirth, complications during pregnancy and health problems such as bronchitis and pneumonia in their first year.

This link contains more information on keeping healthy during pregnancy and support available to have a healthier pregnancy. <https://www.nhs.uk/pregnancy/keeping-well/>



2 - Nutrition in the first 1000 days

The human brain is growing faster than at any point in human life and the correct nutrients are needed to enable the brain to grow and develop. During pregnancy, a healthy maternal diet has been proven to be vital to this growth and development. This link contains information on how crucial good nutrition is for both Mum and baby.

https://thousanddays.org/wp-content/uploads/1000Days-Nutrition_Brief_Brain-Think_Babies_FINAL.pdf

Breast milk contains the perfect amount of nutrients and protein for baby's brain development, as well as hormones that cannot be replicated in formula milk. Breastfeeding also helps to strengthen the bond between Mum and baby by close interactions.



3 - *At around six months of age the NHS advise beginning weaning. Vegetables, such as broccoli, cauliflower and courgettes are the perfect starting point, moving on gradually to include new tastes, such as carrots, pasta, meat and eggs.*

There are different methods of weaning that can be tried independently, or in combination.

Spoon feeding - this method involves making purées and offering it on a spoon to the baby.

Baby-led weaning - babies are given a variety of soft foods to choose from and to feed themselves. The benefits of baby led weaning are:-

- Babies gain independence from being able to choose and explore food themselves.
- Babies get used to different textures from the beginning.
- Babies eat what the rest of the family are eating, without extra preparation being needed.

Baby-led weaning can be messy but some research shows that babies who are given more choice to feed themselves are less likely to become overweight as adults.

Belonging

A baby cannot survive without an adult to take care of their needs. D.Winnicott theorised in his paper “The Theory of the parent-infant relationship” that “There is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone.”

Love and affection are critical components of the well-being of young children. Babies need to feel safe and secure in their relationships with their primary caregivers for them to develop and learn.

Bowlby theorised that the early bonds that babies form with their caregivers can have a life-long impact. He suggested that children are born with an innate need to attach to one main figure, usually the Mother, and that a child’s chances of survival are improved by keeping the mother close.

He theorised that there are 4 distinct stages of attachment, this link gives more information on these stages.

When a baby starts at nursery it is important that secure relationships are built with adults to help the baby settle in an unfamiliar environment. A baby that has been solely cared for by their parents and has not experienced being with other children, possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, may find being in an unfamiliar environment, with new sounds and faces, difficult. We can help this by having consistent carers who are responsible for the child’s needs at the setting. A key worker approach is often used to ensure that all children and families have someone with whom they have a close relationship within the setting. The key worker is a named member of staff with responsibilities for a small number of children. The key worker will take care of the baby’s physical needs, such as nappy changing and feeding, as well as being a point of contact for the parents to discuss any problem or concerns that they may have. The key worker will also be responsible for observing and planning for the child’s learning and development during their time at the setting. Care Inspectorate Wales National Minimum Standards refers to the importance of consistent carers for children under the age of 2.

It is vital that we as Early years practitioners have excellent communication with parents to create bonds and trust between us. Research has shown that children feel a sense of belonging in a nursery setting when their parents are also involved in it. Parents should be made to feel welcome, with an open-door policy. Parents should be made to feel welcome and get actively involved. Parents can be asked to come to the nursery to share any skills they may have and be asked for their opinion on the provision using questionnaires and open days.



4 - Communication

Children have a basic need to communicate with others, either verbally or non-verbally to develop strong social relationships through their lives. To become effective communicators young children need to understand and make themselves understood. Parents and childcare practitioners need to give young children time to think and respond to speech and facial expressions. This will develop their confidence in communicating with others.

Using songs, rhymes and reading stories helps to develop vocabulary and grammar. Babies and their caregivers can enjoy books together from birth, this is a bonding time with lots of close cuddles. Many studies show that reading to children regularly is one of the best ways to expose them to language, which will in turn stimulate children's language skills, their cognitive skills and enhance their memory skills.

The Book Trust supports families across Wales to read together regularly by providing Bookstart packs, funded by the Welsh Government, to every child in Wales.



5 - Well-being

Children are influenced by the adults in their lives, the experiences that they encounter and the environments in which they live and spend time. When these all work together a child is likely to thrive. Children need to feel safe with secure attachments to feel confident in themselves.

A baby has physical needs, such as loving relationships, a safe environment to move around in and explore and the need for rest and sleep. To meet their need for loving relationships we have consistent carers for attachments to develop in early years settings. We need to ensure that the environments are safe and appropriate for the babies age and stage of development, with resources that encourage curiosity and independence. The environment should have a separate area for sleeping or rest. Sleep coracles placed on the floor are an excellent example of giving young children a choice of where and when they sleep.



6 - Sleep coracle



7 - Creativity is important for well-being for all ages. Children love being creative with mark-making, singing, dancing and having fun. As adults we need to give a wide range of materials and mark-making tools and the space for them to enjoy the process of being creative. Process art allows children to be creative and innovative without focusing on an end product.

Children's self-expression, self-esteem and creativity will be promoted without having instructions to follow.

Babies also need to have their emotional needs met, these include having close, warm, and supportive relationships, making friends, being accepted, and given choices in their care.

Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) was a Hungarian paediatrician who believed that parents and caregivers need to take time to make routine jobs, such as nappy changing, feeding, and dressing unhurried and a positive experience. She believed that by making these times calm and relaxed, the baby learns to trust that the caregiver is doing what is in their best interest.

Dr Pikler saw babies as active participants rather than being passive recipients of care. She encouraged caregivers to talk through every step of the way so that the baby knows what is happening next and given the opportunity to help in these care routines. Babies need to be given the time to respond which will build up a two-way 'conversation' between the baby and the caregiver.

Professional love

Professional Love in Early Years settings (PLEYS) was a piece of research carried out by Dr. Jools Page at the University of Sheffield looking into the relationships built between children and staff in early years settings.

In a nursery setting staff and the children in their care inevitably develop close, intimate bonds but there is a climate of wariness attached to this due to false accusations and how

others view the appropriateness of their actions. The research found that most practitioners, who were asked for their opinions, have a positive attitude to the role of 'Professional love' as part of their role in early years settings. Despite this positive attitude practitioners expressed concerns about being alone with children, with around 1 in 5 practitioners avoiding doing so.

Professional love is quite different to parental love, it cannot replace a parents love but rather it is a substitute. While in early years settings most children will look for carers to give them love, warmth and cuddles for reassurance and staff play an important role in meeting the children's needs. Staff should be given opportunities to discuss and voice any concerns about the emotional impact of these attachments through supervisions with managers.

Multi-agency working

In the first 1000 days families need support from various agencies, from primary health care, midwives, health visitors and sometimes social services, housing services, and childcare. By working together this is an effective way of supporting children, young people, and families to help secure improved outcomes. Effective early interventions means identifying and providing effective early support to children who are at risk of poor outcomes.

In Wales, the Flying Start programme helps families with children under the age of 4 years old in disadvantaged areas. The help offered by Flying Start includes parenting programmes, part-time childcare for 2–3-year-olds, enhanced Health visiting services and support for children's communication.

Exploration

Babies have a natural curiosity; they find delight in the simplest of objects and everyday occurrences. There is nothing a baby likes more than banging a saucepan with a wooden spoon!



8 - Elinor Goldschmeid (2004) developed the ideas of Treasure baskets for babies following her work at orphanages in Italy. The treasure basket is usually a sturdy wicker basket, which is filled with a collection of natural, household, and recycled objects. Babies will explore these items using their senses, by looking intently at them, by touching them, and by smelling and mouthing them. Babies who can sit up but are not yet mobile will discover the feel of the different textures and materials, while the adult sits quietly observing, but not interfering with the baby's exploration.

Goldschmeid also developed the concept of 'Heuristic play' for children who are crawling and walking. Heuristic play again involves the use of natural objects and materials that the children can investigate and find out what they do. Open-ended objects, such as curtain rings, shells, spoons, bangles, and brushes are placed around the room alongside baskets, tins, and buckets for the children to fill and empty out as they like. Heuristic play supports the transporting schema where children enjoy transporting objects from one side of the room to another using bags, baskets, and other containers. Adults occasionally help to sort the resources, but they do not intervene in the children's play.

Treasure baskets play and heuristic play are both excellent examples of giving even the youngest of children choices in their play.

The Curiosity Approach is an exciting, modern day approach to children's play and learning. This approach aims to encourage curiosity in children and ignite passion and excitement for childcare practitioners.

This link contains information on The Curiosity Approach, including videos, photographs and ideas.

<https://www.thecuriosityapproach.com/>



9 - This image shows a role-play area in a Curiosity Approach inspired setting. Authentic resources are used, including china cups and saucers. Open-ended resources are easily accessible for children to figure things out themselves. Children are challenged to use all their senses to explore and discover how different materials feel, how they sound and how they interact.

Children are natural problem solvers with a natural curiosity for the world around them. In early years settings we can encourage this curiosity by becoming attuned to the children's interests and providing opportunities to play and experiment with various materials, textures, and objects, both indoors and outdoors.

By adding open-ended resources, we will encourage children to explore the properties of materials, develop resilience and perseverance and to notice differences and similarities using their senses.

Outdoor play

Outdoor play enhances all aspects of children's development; social, emotional, physical, cognitive, cultural, and personal. Froebel (1967) saw children as creative, curious learners and theorised that through gardening and outdoor play children develop an understanding and appreciation of the natural world, and they learn to look after it. Froebel believed that by giving each child their own plot of garden they could sow seeds, look after, and harvest their own produce. The Froebellian approach encourages open-ended, creativity and exploration in the outdoor environment.



10 - This picture shows an example of children working on their own plots in a Froebelian nursery.

Outdoor play offers space and freedom for children to move with their whole bodies, and to explore and experiment with what their own bodies can do. All activities that can be done indoors can be done outdoors, such as painting, story-time, and crafts.

Spending periods of time outdoors has proven benefits for well-being, learning, problem solving and children's willingness to take risks. This is an important lesson for children to develop their resilience and help them cope physically and emotionally with unexpected events as they grow up. (Tovey, 2012)

As early years practitioners we are used to assessing risks regularly, we need to allow children to assess risks themselves and enable them to find safe ways of doing things by positively encouraging adventurous play.

One of the positive impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the increase in time that children are spending outside. It is known that the virus is less likely to be spread outdoors and childcare providers have been encouraged to take the children outside more often. We know that spending time outside, engaged in active play, is good for the mental and physical health of all children.

Forest schools

Forest School is a child-centred learning process that supports play and exploration in a natural setting. Forest School began in Scandinavia, and since arriving in the UK in 1993 has grown from strength to strength. Children's self-esteem and confidence are developed through regular sessions where they are encouraged to try things out and take risks.

This link contains information on Forest School for Babies.

<https://www.teachearlyyears.com/enabling-environments/view/forest-school-for-babies>



11 - This picture shows a young child playing with open-ended loose parts in a natural environment. He/ she is fully engaged in her play without any adult intervention.



12 - This image shows a young child happily playing with mud, filling and emptying the bowl.



13 - This image shows young children playing co-operatively in a natural environment.

Physical Development

Babies develop from top down. The first skill babies develop is head control and the muscles strengthen in the neck. Later hand co-ordination develops, which helps a baby to pull themselves forward before learning to crawl. Most babies crawl, in some fashion, before they learn to stand and eventually walk.

Every movement a baby makes, from the jerky arm and leg movements to beginning to reach out for objects at a few months old, is stored in the memory for future use. These skills are built upon and applied as they develop as well as supporting bone and muscle development.

For babies to develop their physical skills they need the opportunity, time, and space to develop their Gross Motor skills.

Enabling environment

An “enabling environment” is a warm, welcoming environment that offers a range of resources that are familiar to the baby, as well as new activities to nurture

Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) introduced a theory on the natural unfolding of babies. She stated that children have a natural motor progression where they will move into positions when they are ready, and they should not be propped up into unnatural positions using ‘bumbo’ seats and baby

walkers. Research by the Pikler foundation show that supported sitting and tummy-time may delay a child's physical development.

Activities to encourage physical development in babies and under 2's

- Opportunities to reach out for toys
- Rolling and playing on the floor
- Floor based messy play/ water play
- Ribbon & scarf playing
- Balancing activities
- Music making with shakers, bells, wooden spoons
- Boxes
- Slides, ramps, tunnels, and steps
- Pikler triangle

Resources that can help to meet physical development needs in under 2's

- Mats, rugs
- Balls
- Cushions
- Mirrors
- Tuff-trays for messy play
- Sand/ water play



14 - This image shows a Pikler triangle. This basic toy is a toddler climbing toy that can help to develop physical and cognitive development. Pikler triangles allow children to assess risk and understand (in a safe way) what happens if they miss a step.

Children's core strength is developed by using a Pikler triangle at their own pace.



15 - This image shows a cardboard box that has been enhanced by an adult with tights dangling down. Cardboard box play supports children's enveloping schema, where they enjoy making dens, wrapping themselves up and climbing through boxes and tunnels as well as being great for their exploration.



16 - This image shows young children and adults playing together with scarves. Scarf play develops children's sensory-motor skills, creative skills as they sway along with music and their co-ordination.

In conclusion the first 1000 days from conception to the child's 2nd birthday are vitally important to the child's future. Sir Michael Marmot's review of inequalities in health (2010) stated that "what

happens in these early years, starting in the womb, has lifelong effects” on a person’s health, well-being and chances in life.

Nutrition, love and affection along with positive learning experiences are the key to giving the child the best life chances.