



Exceptional care in first 1000 days.

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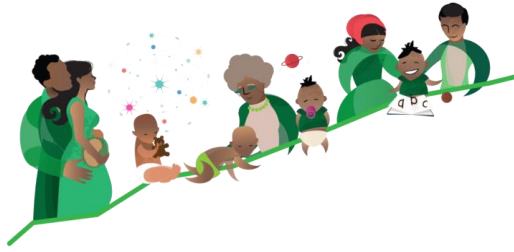
Introduction:

The first 1000 days of a child's life relates to the period between conception to the child's second birthday. During these first 1000 days the child experiences rapid development and growth, the brain develops quickly and works to strengthen connections and create new networks. These connections are created two times faster during the first two years of life than they do for adults. By the age of two the brain is around 83% of the size of an adult brain. Brain development and language skills are supportive of each other, early language is encouraged by healthy brain development and this in turn supports brain development (Save the Children, 2016).

Brain development is influenced by the experiences and environment the child has access to and the quality practitioners within settings (Save the Children, 2016).

The experiences of early childhood influences a child's physiological systems, which includes negative experiences having a negative effect on the development of those systems and the brain (Gerhardt, 2014).

The importance of practitioners who understand the individual needs of each child, who is able to provide engaging and interesting environments and a caring relationship with the child, is key to the development of the child (Nutbrown, 2011).



1 - The experiences of the first 1000 days are vital as these go on to shape an adult's later life (HM Government, 2021).

Environment:

During the first 1000 days a child can develop from being stationary to fully independently mobile with the support of an engaging environment and a positive relationship with their caregiver. Many theorists talk about the importance of an exciting, enabling environment for children to engage and learn in. This has been adopted by Welsh Gov (no date) who state the importance of an enabling environment to develop during early childhood.

Nutbrown (2011) states that recent theorists have discovered that babies have the ability to become disinterested in their surroundings. This means that practitioners need to offer exciting environments and resources, which are rotated or changed regularly in order to provide stimulation and learning opportunities and challenge and to avoid excessive boredom for the children in their care.



2 - Resources do not need to be expensive or plastic toys, children are able to find joy in exploring every day objects (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004).

Welsh Gov (no date) emphasises the importance of exploring and supporting children's inquisitive natures with the setting's environment, staff and resources. Practitioners can offer such resources within settings, in a way which is inviting children to explore.



3 - One such approach which offers children loose parts in order to inspire intrigue and creativity with interesting and authentic materials is The Curiosity Approach. This is based on 5 theorists beliefs, one of which is Froebel's belief that children learn with hands-on experience and that children learn through play (The Curiosity Approach, 2019).



4 - These resources are open ended and can spark a child's imagination, provide child centred learning (as the child is able to use the resources to suit their own interests) and meaningful play opportunities (The Curiosity Approach, 2019).

Maria Montessori is regarded as formative in understanding the importance of how children develop and learn within the early years. She named the first stage of brain development "The Absorbent Mind" describing how babies are unknowingly gaining knowledge from their surroundings. She believed that a child would not develop to reach their potential in surroundings which do not stimulate and encourage them and understood the importance of a sensory approach during this time in order to become foundations to educational learning (Isaac, 2018).



5 - Practitioners are required to scaffold learning and support as children become independent learners in an enabling environment.

However Montessori believed that babies thrive with a routine as they are able to recognise cues for forthcoming activities for example bath and bedtime routines. Montessori understood the need for an enabling environment in regards to physical development, providing opportunities to strengthen their gross motor skills. Additionally Montessori's method places the child at the heart of the learning, following the interests of the child and places great value on the child's ability to lead their own learning (Isaacs, 2018).

Similarly to The Curiosity Approach, Montessori put emphasis on authentic materials for children to explore with all of their senses and to use within their play. This enables them to use the resources open-endedly and therefore there is no wrong way, building self confidence in children (Inspiring Scotland, 2016). Practitioners should therefore ensure that the areas of the setting are organised and there are resources readily accessible to the children, providing opportunities for children to follow their own interests and build on their knowledge.



6 - Montessori placed value on well organised, free flowing space for children to investigate independently.

The Outdoor Classroom:

Outdoor learning offers stimulation and learning opportunities, from the quiet of the garden to the noise and colours of town. Being outside offers children space and opportunity to explore and develop. The outdoors offers opportunities to develop hand/eye coordination, movement through exploration for example crawling, pulling to stand, cruising, walking, sensory opportunities and much more (Siren Films, 2010).

The weather and seasons provide an ever changing learning environment, altering forms of stimulation and learning opportunities such as the warmth of summer grass to its watery surfaces during the rain, the changes to plants during the different seasons, the cold of snow, and the scientific learning around ice forming and melting.



7 - The outdoor classroom offers many sensory opportunities which change naturally.

Being outdoors offers children space to move freely. Space and movement is important as it encourages muscle growth and balance as well as firing up the brain, forming connections (The Motor Story, 2014). Margret Macmillan also believed that children require space and the outdoors in order to discover and learn. While Froebel advocated the benefits of space and natural light (Pound, 2005).

Utilising the outdoors offers children the opportunity for children to discover, to build perseverance and resilience as they attempt to master new concepts (Slee and Allan, 2019).



8 - The outdoors is an amazing resource in itself, offering different height surfaces and platforms, slopes, steps and slides, practitioners should offer a stimulating, enabling environment.

Early years providers can support development by offering a continuous outdoor provision, regardless of weather by providing suitable outdoor clothing. It is vital that practitioners advocate the outdoors and are encouraging children to engage in their environment as this is vital to the development of a love for nature and an understanding of seasons, habitats, vegetation, food growth, to enable children to develop into adults who care for the planet and all that lives on it (Tovey, 2020).

The Froebel Trust offers lots of guidance around outdoor learning and its benefits:

<https://www.froebel.org.uk/uploads/documents/FT-Outdoor-Play-Pamphlet.pdf>





Activity Ideas:

Treasure baskets:

Treasure baskets, an idea first developed by Goldschmied, offer opportunities to touch, shake, throw/roll, squash and mouth common objects and investigate with all of the senses. Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) believed that the investigation of these common objects with their senses allows babies to think about its dimensions, the sounds and characteristics of the object with oversight, however little interjection and disruption, from the practitioners, unless for safety purposes, as this can hinder the learning experience. It is also suggested that these baskets are required to be made from a natural material, flat bottomed and to not have a handle, must not contain bought toys and its contents should be rotated often (Goldschmied and Jackson, 2004).



9 - Babies are born with a powerful sense of smell, touch and hearing and learn through investigating objects using their senses (Siren Films 2010).

Loose parts:

Offering a range of age-appropriate loose parts allows children to freely play and absorb themselves in activity without fear of making a mistake, with no rules. The parts can take on any identity, following the interest of the child. Inspiring Scotland (2016) explains that loose parts can come from nature or be man made materials. The opportunities to widen loose part resources are endless!

Inspiring Scotlands (2016) likens loose part play to a visit to a natural environment where the resources can be carried, moved and adapted to fit the child's ideas of play. For example a stick in the woods can be used to draw/mark make or a number of sticks can be used to make a sculpture. This is also the view of Play Scotland (2023) who state that in nature we can discover the most exciting loose parts.

With access to loose parts babies will use their senses to explore and discover what they can do with the loose parts. This could be mouthing, chewing, dropping, stacking, putting inside another or wrapping in cloth. All of these activities allow the child to discover more about his world (TTS, 2018).

<https://www.thecuriosityapproach.com/blog/what-are-intelligent-resources>



This is not a stick...

It's a wand
 It's a guitar
 It's a shovel
 It's a horse
 It's a baton
 It's a telescope
 It's a sword
 It's a microphone
 It's a ski pole
 It's a spoon
 It's a fishing pole
 It's a treasure finder
 It's a paddle.

and anything else a child can imagine!



10 - Loose parts play offers endless possibilities to children's play and learning.



11 - Pacey (2019) recommends that loose parts be readily available and stored accessibly, supporting the use of open access shelves or a "Tinker Tray".

Nutrition:

UNICEF (no date) explains the importance of a balanced diet to childhood development and advocates the importance of this more so during the first 1000 days.



12 - NHS (2022) states the importance of waiting until babies reach around 6 months before weaning commences.

UNICEF (no date) goes on to say that there is a preference placed on breastfeeding until a baby's second birthday as well as the importance of a diet containing a variety of vitamins and minerals, post weaning, to support healthy growth and development.

NHS (2022) also explains that at this age if babies are eating it is in addition to breast or formula milk, and that babies should still be getting the majority of its vitamins and minerals from its milk intake. This is supported by WHO (2021) who state that babies up to their first 1000 days should receive responsive breastfeeding and that solid foods are complementary to this.

Practitioners and settings can support breastfeeding by enabling Mums to breastfeed in areas within the setting which are private or supporting mixed feeding by accepting breast milk and storing correctly. Additionally practitioners and settings can support families to offer children a balanced and varied diet, offer diaries to show the eating patterns whilst in the setting and signpost families who require additional support to guidance such as the NHS guidance on infant nutrition.



13 - Public Health England (no date) suggests that breastfeeding decreases the danger of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and some childhood illnesses.

<https://www.nhs.uk/start4life/baby/feeding-your-baby/breastfeeding/>

Respectful care:

Nutbrown (2011) discusses the positive effect of meaningful relationships, where children are encouraged to participate in everyday routines and are valued as individuals.

During the first 1000 days, a baby's brain develops its communication skills, through the formation of relationships the baby will instinctively seek reciprocity with others. Starting with baby babble, cooing and non verbal communication for example facial gestures and sharing or offering of objects (Forbes, 2004).

<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/5-steps-for-brain-building-serve-and-return/>



Pikler USA (no date) discusses the relationship between child and caregiver being a partnership rather than a dictatorship and that children should feel as they are involved in all aspects of their care and that as they grow independence is supported and encouraged.

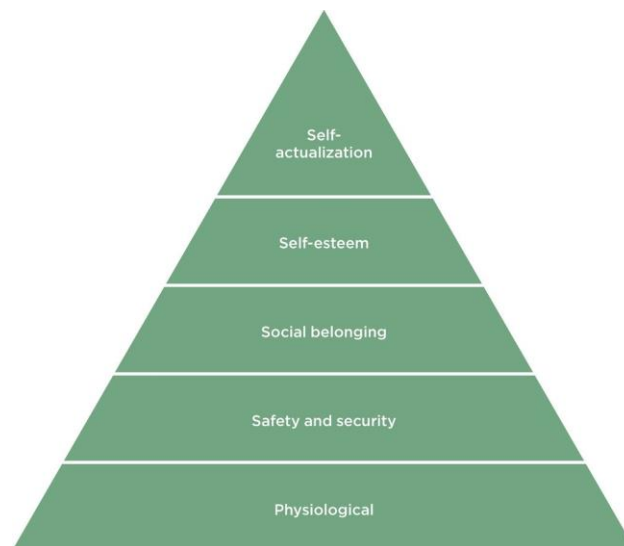
Pikler UK Association (no date) states that children should be engaged with during the daily routines such as nappy changes and feeding times from the earliest days as these are all learning opportunities and that these engagements help children to form relationships. As these routines are repeated respectfully and offer attention to the child, the child makes brain connections and developments.

Pikler's approach highlights the need for a relationship between the child and caregiver which is meaningful, following the child's needs and offers them dignity and freedom of choice (Pikler USA, no date).



Professional Love:

Children require a feeling of relationship, belonging and love, as Maslow describes within the hierarchy of needs, to enable them to become fully engaged, established and happy within themselves and their surroundings. It is only once the child is feeling this way that the child will begin to develop within the setting (Morgan, 2020) Therefore it is vital that practitioners work to build relationships with the children in their care.

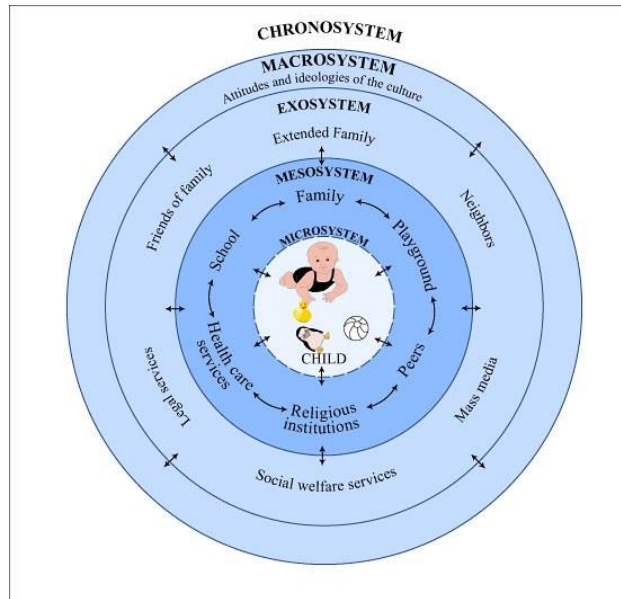


This is a view that is supported by Birth to 5 Matters (no date) states that practitioners must build supportive and respectful relationships with the children likewise the Professional Standards for Assisting Teaching (Welsh gov, 2016) states that it is vital to build relationships and work in collaboration with parents and all other stakeholders around the child in order for the setting to meet the needs of the child and for the child to flourish.

This is supported by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory which places the child at the centre and an importance on relationships and information sharing between all of the stakeholders around the child. The microsystem, those closest to the child (school setting, family and community) is deemed to have the most influence on the child's development, thus placing a vital importance on the settings and practitioners clearing respectful, nurturing relationships with the children (University of Aberdeen, 2017).

However there are challenges in regard to this. Professional love, building relationships with children, can provide practitioners with concerns over the implications of any form of physical touch or intimate care. For example, soothing a crying baby or changing a nappy. Practitioners are cautious about what is considered the relevant responses within their role. Inappropriate touch is a concern for safeguarding children and so practitioners are aware of the behaviours which may be considered inappropriate to their role and so are less likely to attend to the needs of a child with a physical response such as a hug, for fear of allegations being made (Page, 2017).

That said, there are benefits to children from physical touch as it can improve their well-being and is vital to building trusting relationships when used to attend to children's needs (Johansson, Åberg and Hedlin 2021).



International Approaches:



Reggio Emilia

The Reggio approach was founded in Italy by Malaguzzi and is an approach which is considered with high regard within Early Years practice. The approach regards learners as capable and puts listening to learners and the environment in which they learn, including the practitioners, as central to its ethos. Reggio Emilia also emphasises the importance of practitioners who build strong relationships with the children and become enabling adults within the settings. Observing and assessing is key to ensuring that the environment is well equipped to support the individual development of the child. (Malaguzzi, no date). Light, space and colour are key features of Reggio approach settings. The Reggio approach values the organisation of the setting and the resources available so much so that it is regarded as “The third teacher” (Thornton and Burton, 2007). The Reggio approach also places value in opened resources such as those found in treasure baskets, loose parts play and The Curiosity Approach. Spaces in Reggio settings have defined areas for activities, for example creative areas, investigation stations and areas for teachers as well as parents (Thornton and Burton, 2007).

Te Whariki

The principles and strands of Te Whariki's woven mat place value on the relationships a child builds, families, empowering the children and learning through a holistic approach in order that they become explorers, enabled to contribute and communicate, and feel a sense of belonging and a sense of well-being. It values children as capable learners however separates children into age ranges which overlay -

Infant: birth to 18 months, there is an emphasis on the importance of respectful care. Toddler: 12 months to 36 months, there is an emphasis on exploration and curiosity leading learning opportunities.

Young children: 30 months to school aged, there is an emphasis on child led learning.

(Ministry of Education, 2017)

Forest School

Forest school is a child-centred, outdoor approach to learning, which originated in Scandinavia, that encourages socialisation and enables learners to learn using curiosity, take measured risks and gain resilience and well-being. Forest school also aims to inspire a love for outdoors, wildlife and our planet through regular sessions through two seasons (FSA, no date).

Current Challenges:

Covid-19 presented major challenges to babies and infants. This period of lockdown has impacted the development of children due to the lack of social interaction and opportunities to visit engaging environments. Simple activities such as going to the park and other outdoor areas or parent and toddler groups were restricted or cancelled. Restrictions also discouraged or simply postponed some NHS services such as health visitor service or speech and language services or these were provided online. Parent-Infant Foundation (2023) surveyed 5000 parents and reported that during the pandemic period only 11% of those families had contact with the health visitor service face-to-face. Online services in itself presented challenges to parents who may not have an electronic device, perhaps due to poverty, or simply were unable to engage or had no inclination to do so. Some parents during Covid 19 may have had to work from home, without their usual support from family to care for their children, which also poses challenges to parenting children while working.

Welsh Gov (2021) discusses the findings of experts, the common theory of whom is that the four areas of physical development, social and emotional development, cognitive development and speech and language development were adversely affected by the pandemic.

Poverty during the Covid 19 may have placed children at disadvantage. Welsh Gov (2021) suggests over 80% of experts believed that poverty adversely affected children during covid-19 lockdowns. Living within deprivation, adversely affected the child's opportunity development which may be due to a number of contributing factors such as limited outdoor experiences such as exercise were limited to once per day at the height of the pandemic, lack of social interaction which is proven to promote development, reduced opportunities to form relationships, parents on furlough and so a further reduced household income.

Looking to the near future, the current cost of living crisis may adversely affect the development of current babies and those born over the coming years as parents look for ways in which they can reduce

outgoings, similarly to the results of living in poverty during the pandemic. This may see children, expectant mothers and breastfeeding mothers malnourished which can hinder brain development.

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/sites/default/files/Nutrition%20Matters%20for%20the%20early%20years%200118.pdf>

Parents may choose to turn off their heating which can cause children to become unsettled, as with Maslow's Hierarchy of needs, children who do not feel they have their fundamental needs met will struggle to find self actualisation and promote child development.

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