



The first 100 days : Exceptional Care



1 - The first 1000 days.

What?

The first 1000 days is a very significant stage of a child's life it is when they build the foundations to holistically develop. It is also when they are most vulnerable which is why it is so necessary that they are cared for efficiently by caregivers including parents, key workers, and early years practitioners. During the first 1000 days, babies have the most capability to learn. This period in their life is when their brains develop rapidly. According to Cusick & Georgiff (2013) the first 1000 days is when the brain has the highest plasticity and growth, therefore, enabling it to absorb a lot of information quickly and is when the early development of the prefrontal cortex happens which is what controls areas such as attention and flexibility.

In the first 3 years of a baby's life, they learn rapidly the skills they require in order for them to become independent learners ready to explore and function in the world around them. According to Cathy Nutbrown (2005) brain development in recent studies has established that learning does not just start from birth but from when the baby is in the womb, they are born with an innate desire and ability to learn. The response they receive from those around them promotes their rapid development. From the moment they are born a baby's brain has the capability to start forming important connections, these connections are vital to a baby's development. So giving them the opportunity to explore, discover and build connections enables them to develop.

The provision of exceptional care is essential for a child to develop efficiently. The experiences, knowledge, and skills for lifelong learning are acquired in the early years. So ensuring children get the appropriate opportunities to learn and build these skills is essential. The new curriculum for non-

funded settings (2021) states that the curriculum is designed to support the holistic development of children. Putting the children's developmental needs at the forefront of practice. According to the HM Government (2021) babies need encouragement and support from their parents and carers to learn the skills and to monitor their development. HM Government (2021) highlights the importance that the skills developed during the first thousand days in building the foundations that allow the child to succeed later in life. Stating that these have the best chance of development if the child has at least one secure attachment with an adult.

Current Challenges



Challenges that childcare settings currently face include the impacts of COVID-19. During the pandemic children were unable to attend their childcare settings, therefore, missing out on development opportunities that they would not be able to have in their homes. Oxford Brookes University (2021) suggests that time spent at a nursery or with a childminder can help strengthen their cognitive and social development. Stating that childcare can help to stimulate a child's holistic growth that they need in order to transition to school Blair *et al.* (2018) support this by stating that early years settings are fundamental in providing children with the opportunity to develop their social skills and building positive relationships.

According to Wise (2022) babies that were born during the first year of the pandemic scored lower on the developmental screening test than babies born six months prior to the pandemic. Suggesting that this could have been a result of covid-19 related maternal stress the mothers experienced. Early years settings are now seeing the impact of COVID first hand, Morton (2022) carried out a survey asking 555 professionals who work with babies and their families about the negative impacts covid had on their babies born in the pandemic. The results highlighted that the majority of participants were seeing the negative impact covid had on the babies' social skills. 92 percent of the participants believed that the pandemic has a significant impact on the children's communication skills and well-being. Morton (2022) found that a lot of the concerns raised by participants related to the lack of staff in early years settings and the amount of staff who had poor mental health. Mayes (2022)

states that covid is having long-lasting effects on children's holistic development and wellbeing and is therefore making it difficult for settings to be able to meet the needs.

Activity Ideas



2 - Sensory play

Gascoyne (2011) and Prendiville (2021) define sensory play as a form of play that engages all of the body's senses. John Piaget (1896-1890) believed children enter a development stage referred to as the sensorimotor in which the child enters between birth and 2 years of age. John Piaget (1896-1890)

suggested that in this stage children learn how to use their bodies to get a better understanding of the world around them.

Sensory experiences within this period of a child's life are encouraged in order for them to build the best foundations for their development journey. Gascoyne (2011) supports this by emphasizing just how beneficial sensory play is stating that sensory experiences build the foundation on which all knowledge, thoughts, and creativity are established. Nancy Wartik & Lavonne Carlson-Finnerty (1993) suggests that when a child experiences a sensory stimulus a neuron connects to another neuron creating a new connection. Therefore with every sensory experience the thicker and stronger the connections become. Which then allows for the signals to travel at a much faster pace.

Froebel (1782-1852) advocated for sensory play as he recognized first-hand experiences were an efficient vehicle for learning. Maria Montessori (1870-1952) also saw the importance of using sensory play in a child's education stating that children have 'sensitive periods' in which their senses are the aptest for learning, and if we catch these periods we can support their development more efficiently.

One example of a sensory play activity is treasure baskets. Treasure baskets were something that Elinor Goldschmied created and was thought to be an effective sensory experience for babies aged 7-12 months of age. Sonia Jackson and Elinor Goldschmied (2003) suggest that babies' brains develop with every sensory experience. Sonia Jackson and Elinor Goldschmied (2003) believe that the treasure baskets encapsulate and provide a variety of stimuli that are chosen to trigger these senses and bodily movements, stating that treasure baskets ensure that babies are receiving enrichment that allows for connections to be made and for knowledge to be instilled.





3 - Reading stories together and singing together provides a wonderful opportunity for parents and caregivers to have positive interactions and build secure relationships with the children, while simultaneously providing children with the opportunity to develop their language skills. The UK Government (no date) suggests that reading stories aloud and sharing books provides the child with an opportunity to develop language and learn new concepts.

Story books give children the opportunity to understand the world around them, and encouraging children to talk while reading provides them with the chance to improve their communication and language skills.

National Literacy Trust (2020) supports this by highlighting just how many benefits reading together with your child can bring, stating that giving your child your undivided attention allows your child to feel like they matter and can encourage your child to feel comforted, relaxed and happy while also building their self-esteem and their vocabulary. This is also a really good example of serve and return. According to Harvard University (2023) serve and return refers to when a child babbles, gestures or cries and an adult responds appropriately. An example of this could be when a child gasps at something in the story and the caregiver responds with a shocked expression in return. Serve and return is believed to strengthen neurological connections which support a child's communication and social skills.

Enabling Environments



Enabling environments are fundamental for a child in the early years, the environment in which they are cared for is responsible for a lot of their early development and the opportunities provided in the environment determine just how well they develop. an enabling environment does not just consist of the physical environment but also the emotional environment. Welsh Government (2021) supports this suggesting that an enabling environment that environment is a key factor in a child's development, and that practitioners should consider not just the physical space but also the emotional support that allows children to reach their potential. Welsh Government (2021) also states that an enabling environment should provide wide and varied opportunities for children to express themselves creatively giving them the opportunity to follow their own interests independently or alongside others.

According to the CIW minimum standards (2016), children should be provided with an environment that has resources and opportunities that encourage their development and promote curiosity. As well as an environment that allows them to feel confident, independent, and has respect for themselves and others. Pacey (2023) suggests that an enabling environment plays a fundamental role in a child's development as it is acknowledged that in environments in which the child feels supported, and cared for with resources that cater to their needs with freedom to play and explore they learn and develop more effectively.

Froebel (1800) likened designing an enabling environment for children to 'planning an organic and everchanging garden which can inspire and guide children's imagination and behaviour. Oxfordshire County Council (2008) describes the emotional environment as the mood and atmosphere of the setting stating that the relationships determine the emotional environment, It is often monitored based on how people interact with each other, speak to each other, and how inclusive the setting is. Babies are incredibly responsive to their surroundings so it is important that caregivers consider this. Bristol Early Years (no date) supports this stating that babies are sensitive to the emotions of their caregivers. So ensuring the well-being of the staff in turn allows us to provide a positive and calm environment for the children.

Montessori (2021) believed that the environment's goal should be child development therefore Montessori curated an environment which encourages the child the opportunity to direct their own play ensuring all resources were at child height to promote independence in her classrooms. Montessori (2021) designed 'the prepared environment' using 6 key principles.

Freedom - Providing the children with the freedom to choose their work, move around freely and explore their own interests as long as they are behaving respectfully and in a reasonable manner that is in line with the boundaries and structure of the setting.

Structure and order - While the main aim of the prepared environment is to allow children freedom to follow their own interests and chose what they would like to do for how ever long they would like to do it. Structure is in place to allow children to become familiar with routine and organization. Order refers to the organisation of the materials in the classroom everything has it's own place. This allows children to practice organization by recognizing where each item belongs and what activity takes place where. Montessori classrooms usually encourage children to put whatever resource their using back before moving on to another resource. Materials are set out in a left to right progression order which starts with the easiest and progresses in difficulty as you go along.

Nature, Beauty and Reality - prepared environments are clean, organised spaces with a lot of natural materials, neutral colour palettes and child height furniture which was designed to encourage independence. The neutral colour palette with minimal vibrant colours is chosen as to not have a main focal point which allows for more freedom of choice by the child. Materials are all real materials in a Montessori classroom, there are no plastic bowls or cartoons instead there are ceramic bowls and images and resources of real objects, animals, landscapes. This is to provide the children with real-life experiences that build the foundations for them to feel confident in real life scenarios.

Social & Intellectual environment - The prepared environment should feel like home to the children, they should feel comfortable being independent and socialising with others in the classroom. This allows them to develop their social and emotional intelligence. The nature of a Montessori classrooms give children the freedom to interact with each other, therefore promoting positive social interactions in which children work together, empathise and understand how to work through an emotion constructively in a way that is socially appropriate. The materials provided promote the development of mathematical, language, cultural and sensory knowledge therefore supporting the child's growth through various intellect.

Lose parts play also provides an opportunity for an enabling environment. According to Daly, Beloglovsky and Daly (2014) lose parts play is the term used for when children particularly babies play with objects that they discover that sparks a level of curiosity in them such as natural materials such as pinecones or stones or scarves and keys. Daly , Belogovsky and Daly (2014) suggest that Lose parts play offers infinite play possibilities as the object has multiple possible uses to a child.

Being Inclusive



According to PACEY (2023) practitioners have the responsibility to ensure that their practice is inclusive to each individual child in their care. Ensuring that they include and support every child no matter their culture, background or disability. Every child has different needs, children have the right for those needs to be met with love and care. (United Nations Convention on the Rights of The child, 1989) Therefore early years settings policies and curriculums need to take this into account when devising their policies and curriculums. The department of education (2021) highlight the importance of inclusion within the early years framework, stating that practitioners should consider the individual needs, interests and development of each child and if there is a concern that a child may have an additional learning need or disability that the setting communicates with the parents to discuss how to support the child moving forward.

The Welsh Government (2022) states that the curriculum for non-maintained settings in Wales highlights just how important it is that children receive the appropriate support in order to participate and succeed. Welsh Government (2022) states that the environment should be prepared with relevant adaptations being implemented when necessary ensuring that the space and the resources are accessible for children who may have barriers that would hinder their learning and development.

Practitioners should ensure that they consider the rights of the child and ensure that they are providing appropriate resources that enable all of the children in their care to reach their full potential. CIW (2016) national minimum standard 16 states that all children should be treated with equal concern and respect.

Professional Partnerships/ Relationships



Professional partnerships refer to the relationships with everyone involved with the care of the child, WJEC (2019) suggests that developing effective professional partnerships enables everyone involved to work together to ensure the needs of the individual child and family are being met. Practitioners should aim to have open and honest communication with colleagues and the child's families regarding the child's development and any concerns they may have in order for the child to be supported in the best way.

According to Parent Infant Foundation (2023) Relationships during the early years of a child's life influence the babies brain particularly on their emotional and social development. Bowlby's attachment theory (1997) highlights the importance of a child's emotional bond with their primary caregivers, suggesting that when this bond is disrupted or taken away that the child can suffer psychological trauma that will have a long-lasting impact on them. According to NSPCC learning (2023) Bowlby (1997) recognised that children can form an attachment to multiple caregivers, but the bond that they have had with those who have closely cared for them are the most significant. It is also important that caregivers are responsive to the child's needs so that they can provide the child with the appropriate care.

WJEC (2019) suggest that building positive with children is important as it allows the child to feel comfortable when they transition from one stage to another. Children who have positive relationships with the caregivers are more likely to have a positive approach in the setting. It is important that practitioners are aware of professional boundaries when it comes to working with children and young people and have a sufficient understanding of what their responsibilities are.

Busch *et al.* (2018) discuss how barriers can prevent practitioners from building professional partnerships, one of these being language barriers. A child's parents may not speak English or a child may have a disability or other language barrier such as being nonverbal. Practitioners can overcome these barriers by ensuring appropriate policies and practices into place to prepare for these obstacles. These could include having a translator or staff having training in sign language.

Respectful care and meaningful learning



McIntyre (2018) highlights the importance of respectful care in early years settings, stating that children should be respected in every interaction. Practitioners should respect a child enough that if they are full we do not try to force them to eat anymore, communicating with them when you want to do something to them such as wipe their face or hands, or when you want to change their nappy.

Dr Emmi Pickler is thought to be the most influential practitioner to put on the emphasis on respectful care in the early years. According to Marlen (2023) Dr Emmi Pickler's aim was to ensure the physical and mental health of an infant or a child was considered in practice. Pickler recognised that the most effective way to achieve this was through maintaining secure attachments particularly providing respectful care when carrying out any bodily care. Pickler believed that during nappy changes or anything as intimate in nature must only be carried out with cooperation from the infant themselves and should never be something that is just done to the child.

It is common especially in the current circumstances of early years settings struggling with staff ratios that things such as nappy changes are rushed and often carried out with little to no interaction with the child. But it is important that caregivers consider interacting with the infant in a positive manner to maintain positive relationships and make the child feel safe and secure in such a vulnerable moment. Stounhouse (2012) supports this by stating that nappy changes can be viewed as an ideal learning opportunity for the carer and child, suggesting that nappy changing time can be used as an opportunity to interact with the child using rhymes, songs or games. It can be an ideal opportunity to teach the child about the nappy changing routine, providing them with a chance to learn about self care by giving them the opportunity to do things for themselves such as wash hands and help dress themselves if age appropriate. Having a language rich environment allows us to continue to provide an environment which enables the children to develop and progress. United

Kingdom Government (no date) suggests that children develop language skills best in language-rich environments where there are opportunities to learn new words.

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