

The First 1,000 Days

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First 1000 Days

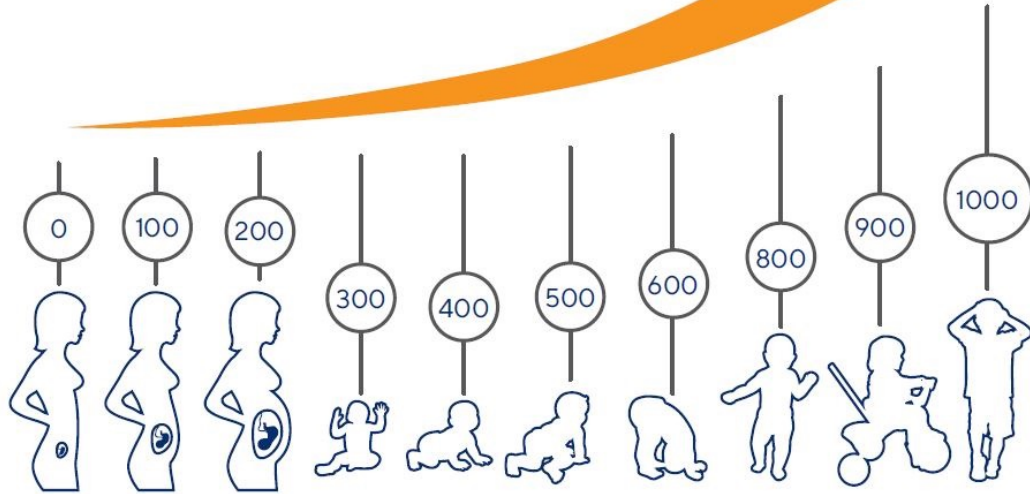


Image A: (Ausnutria, no date).

The First 1000 Days: According to Gov UK (2021) the early years healthy development review 'The Best Start for Life', the first 1000 days encompass the time between conception (pregnancy) and up to the child's second birthday. Broken down as pre-natal stages to birth, newborn and to growing baby.

It is widely recognised that this period of a baby's development from foetus to 24 months of age is a significant time in laying out the foundations for a healthy and happy life, it is a unique period of opportunity when the foundations of optimum health, growth, and neurodevelopment across the lifespan are established (Children's Commissioner, 2020; UNICEF, 2013). The first 1000 days of a child's life represent a critical phase of heightened vulnerability (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee (2019). Understanding the basic timeline and significance of the first 1000 days sets the stage for a deeper exploration of why this period is pivotal for child development.

Importance of The First 1000 Days

House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee (2019), recognises the first 1000 days as being crucial, and additionally it recognises that more must be done by local authorities to support children during this significant window of time. Additionally, the best start for life review, highlights and emphasises the growing international consensus of the importance of the first 1000 days. The review further recognises how during the first 1000 days babies are at their most vulnerable, with some babies being diagnosed with disabilities or having developmental needs. As such recognising that experiences during this period can have lasting effects on brain architecture, learning abilities, social skills, and overall health outcomes. Recognising the crucial nature of the first 1000 days, it becomes essential to delve into how these early moments shape brain development and lifelong learning capacities.

Human Brain Development

Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially

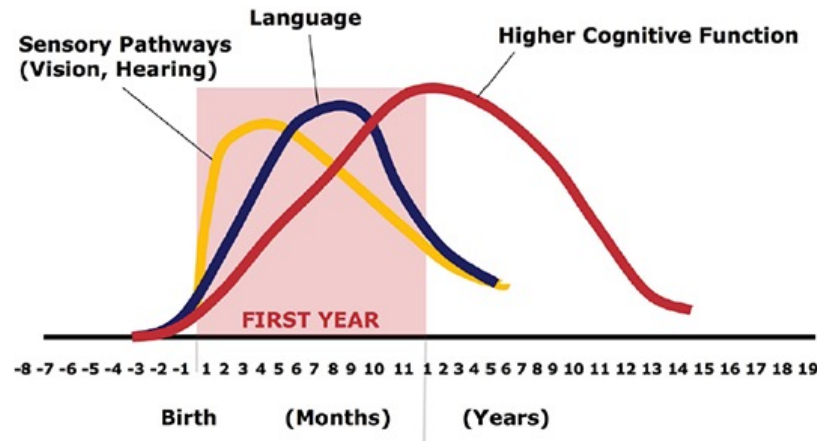


Image B: (Center on the Developing Child, 2007a).

Brain Development: Railings and Payne emphasise, (2016) From birth to age 18 months, connections in the brain are created at a rate of one million per second. The earliest experiences shape a baby's brain development and have a lifelong impact on that baby's mental and emotional health.

Additionally they recognise that when a baby's development falls behind the norm during the first year of life, it is much more likely to fall even further behind in subsequent years, than to catch up with those who have had a better start.

The Center on the Developing Child (2007b) tells us how the brain begins developing from the moment of conception and how early years matters as the quality of these experiences can shape the brains foundations. Influencing future learning, health, and behaviour moreover, it is understood in the first few years of life, the brain creates over 1 million new connections every second. The rapid pace of brain development during the early years highlights the critical role of pre-natal care in setting developmental trajectories.

Pre-natal Stage: Gov UK (2021) further emphasises, a healthy pregnancy establishes the groundwork for the unborn child's well-being. As the foetus develops within the womb, it is profoundly affected by the mother's surroundings, mirroring her experiences and reactions. This underscores the vital importance of both the physical and mental health of the mother in ensuring the healthy development of the baby. While prenatal care is foundational, it is also susceptible to adverse influences, such as toxic stress, which can significantly derail early development.

‘A pregnant mother suffering from stress can sometimes pass on the message to the unborn baby that the world will be dangerous, so that as a child he or she will struggle with many social and emotional problems’ -: 1,001 Critical Days Manifesto (2019)

Toxic Stress: According to Railings and Payne (2016), a foetus or baby exposed to toxic stress during foetal development or infancy can suffer long-term distortions in stress responses, particularly cortisol levels, later in life. Such stressors may come from factors like the mother suffering from depression or anxiety, having a strained relationship with a partner, or external traumas such as bereavement.

This occurrence is commonly referred to as 'Toxic Stress'. The Center on the Developing Child (2007b) states, Toxic Stress occurs when a child faces persistent and severe adversity, including but not limited to physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, carer substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and family economic hardship, without sufficient adult support. The prolonged activation of stress response systems in such circumstances can adversely affect the development of brain architecture and other organ systems. Furthermore, it heightens the risk of stress-related illnesses and cognitive impairments persisting into adulthood.

UNICEF (2013) emphasises the importance The first 1000 days as being crucial for establishing the foundations of health, growth, and neurodevelopment. Additionally linking Malnutrition during this time having potential of leading to significant long-term consequences, including mortality and morbidity. Addressing the impacts of toxic stress underscores the need for exceptional care strategies that support both mother and child through these formative years.

Exceptional Care

The House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee (2019) review acknowledges the multifaceted importance of implementing support and interventions for mothers and children prior to birth. It underscores the critical nature of the first 1000 days as a pivotal window of opportunity, particularly during times of heightened vulnerabilities for both children and their mothers. The concept of exceptional care entails providing comprehensive support and interactions that aid both the child and their caregivers from conception through early childhood.

According to [Thousanddays.org](https://thousanddays.org/) (no date), exceptional care encompasses nurturing interactions, adequate nutrition, and protection from adverse circumstances during the crucial first 1000 days of a child's life. It emphasises every child's inherent right to thrive (Article 6) (UNICEF, 2024) and recognises the challenges faced by many children born into unstable environments or lacking essential resources.

Exceptional care goes beyond ensuring children reach their full developmental potential; it extends to promoting the mother's well-being and facilitating a healthy pregnancy. The environment surrounding the mother significantly influences the development of the foetus in the womb, impacting factors such as sound perception, nutrient intake, and responsiveness to maternal emotional states.

Moreover, poor maternal mental health during and after pregnancy can lead to bonding issues between mother and child within the first year (O'Higgins et al., 2013). Additionally, it is widely acknowledged that such circumstances may result in challenges for the child in handling stress later in life (Railings and Payne, 2016).

Why it is Important: According to the Health Foundation (2018), differences in children's developmental levels become evident by the time they start school, persisting and potentially worsening over time. This suggests that early disparities in development can have enduring effects throughout childhood and into adulthood.

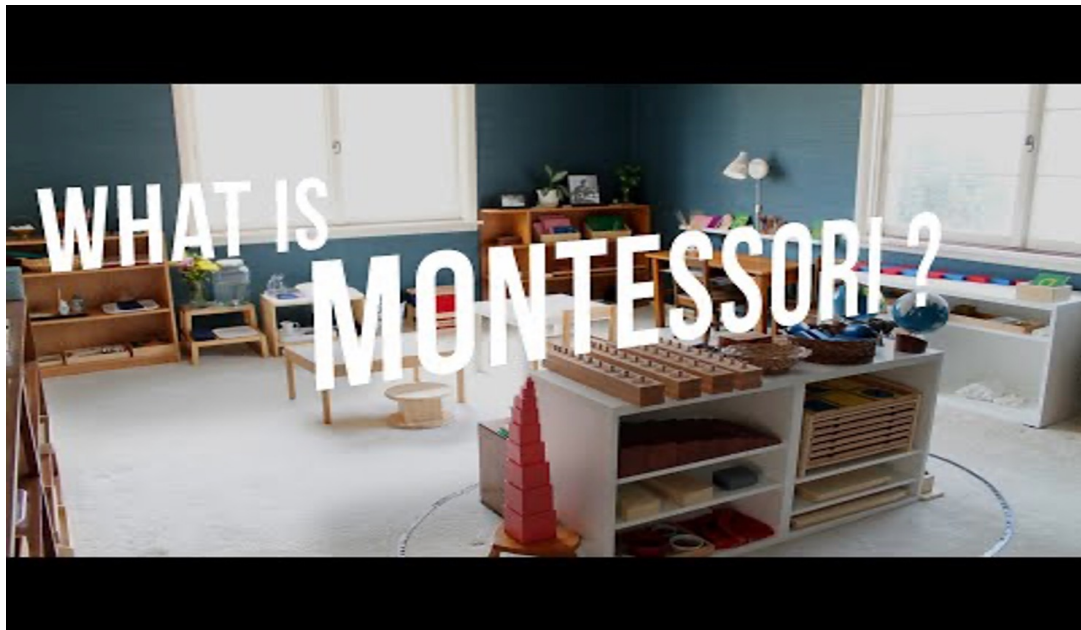
Similarly, Barnardo's (Rallings and Payne, 2016) highlights the vital importance of exceptional care for infants, particularly stressing the considerable influence of caregiver attachment on a baby's social and emotional growth. Serious case reviews often involve infants under one year old, and many infants in the UK face complex family circumstances with elevated risks. Additionally, there is a clear link between a family's economic status and various aspects of children's development, often resulting in poorer outcomes for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Author de Onis (2006) underscores that the WHO child growth standards, derived from children raised in optimal conditions, reflect normal growth patterns. This underscores the importance of early intervention in identifying changes in growth or developmental patterns, ensuring that parents and caregivers receive timely guidance and support to address any concerns.

Exceptional care plays a significant role in fostering secure attachment (Bowlby, 1969), promoting healthy development, and establishing the foundation for positive relationships and lifelong well-being. It also involves implementing systems or support mechanisms to provide children with equity, thereby offering them the best prospects for the future. Furthermore, it builds trust and a sense of security in children, providing a stable foundation from which they can explore the world and develop essential skills. Implementing exceptional care practices aligns closely with innovative educational approaches that further support early development during the first 1000 days.

Current Approaches in Early Childhood Education: Montessori, Pikler, and Reggio Emilia: Current approaches are important in shaping the early years, enhancing brain development, and mitigating toxic stress. They foster environments that not only promote cognitive, linguistic, and emotional growth but also provide vital frameworks to support healthy psychological development during the first 1000 days.

Montessori Approach: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eY2Y2DfosYI>



Video A: (Dad Verb, 2022).

Developed by Maria Montessori, this method empowers children to become independent learners at their own pace, enhancing brain development through self-directed and practical life activities. The structured yet flexible environment also helps mitigate toxic stress by promoting emotional stability (Montessori, 1989).

Current Approaches in Early Childhood Education: Montessori, Pikler, and Reggio Emilia:

Founded by Emmi Pikler, it emphasizes respectful, responsive caregiving and the importance of allowing children freedom of movement. This approach supports brain development by promoting motor skills and sensory integration, and fosters emotional growth through secure attachments, crucial for mitigating toxic stress.

Pikler Approach: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7tauaQg_Z8



Video B: (Pickler USA, 2016).

Current Approaches in Early Childhood Education: Montessori, Pikler, and Reggio Emilia:

Reggio Emilia Approach: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7n2hCebmT4c>



Video C: (Sprout, 2016).

Initiated by Loris Malaguzzi, this project-based, child-centred learning environment acts as a significant educator. It encourages creative expression and complex problem-solving, stimulating cognitive growth. The community-focused environment reduces stress and builds strong, supportive relationships (Edwards *et al.*, 2011).

Alignment with the Curriculum for Wales: The Curriculum for Wales places a strong emphasis on experiential learning and developing each child as a whole (Welsh Gov, 2023). The principles from Montessori, Pikler, and Reggio Emilia approaches align well with these goals:

Reggio Emilia's Emphasis on Creative Expression and Environment as Educator supports the curriculum's aim to develop enterprising, creative contributors by encouraging children to express themselves through multiple "languages" (modes of expression) (Learning Journal, 2024).

Pikler's Focus on Respectful, Responsive Care and Autonomy in Learning aligns with the curriculum's objectives to promote well-being and create healthy, confident individuals who feel secure and valued (Learning Journal, 2024).

These educational philosophies enrich the understanding and implementation of child-centred learning in Wales, enhancing the foundational principles laid out in the Welsh educational framework and ensuring that early childhood education addresses the holistic needs of young learners.

Professional partnerships

Effective partnership working in early years settings is essential (Preschool learning alliance, 2019a). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (2005), the development of a child is influenced by various environmental systems, which include interactions within the childcare setting and at home. Practitioners can collaborate with parents, healthcare providers, and social workers to create a cohesive support network that fosters the child's growth (NHS, 2023). This integrated approach ensures that children receive consistent care and that families are supported holistically, addressing not just the child's immediate needs but also long-term developmental outcomes.

For instance, The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) highlighted in the EIF's report on "Growing up in the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021)" underscore the necessity of identifying and addressing developmental issues early. Practitioners can use insights from such reports to adapt their practices to mitigate adverse effects from external stressors, like the pandemic, thus maintaining the focus on critical early development stages. Beyond structured educational methods and partnerships, ensuring inclusivity in early years settings is paramount for accommodating the diverse needs of all children.

Inclusive Practice: Inclusivity in early years settings is crucial for accommodating the diverse needs of children and their families. This involves acknowledging and respecting various cultural, socioeconomic, and personal backgrounds and ensuring that all children have equal access to resources and opportunities for development (Preschool learning alliance, 2019b).

Importance of Inclusivity for Infants and Families: Inclusivity ensures that every infant and family feel valued and understood. This approach fosters an environment where children from all backgrounds can thrive. Inclusive practices involve adapting communication methods to meet the diverse needs of families, which is pivotal for forming effective partnerships. For instance, providing multilingual resources or using visual aids can help bridge communication gaps, ensuring that all families have the information they need to support their child's development.

Significance of Professional Relationships, Communication, and Meeting Holistic Needs: The strength of professional relationships within early years settings significantly impacts the effectiveness of childcare. Clear, consistent communication between practitioners and families ensures that caregivers are well-informed about the children's daily experiences and developmental progress. Holistic support addressing emotional, social, physical, and intellectual needs requires practitioners to observe children closely and communicate their findings with families and other professionals, crafting a supportive network that facilitates comprehensive developmental support.



Image C: (Ette Tete, 2023).

Importance of Respectful Care: Respectful care, as advocated by Emmi Pikler, is about acknowledging babies and young children as active participants in their own care. This approach is essential during routine care activities like eating, changing, and sleeping, where practitioners must ensure that each interaction is conducted with care, respect, and attention to the child's cues and preferences.

Pikler's Perspective and the Role of the Enabling Adult: Pikler emphasized the importance of slow, attentive care practices that allow the child to be an active participant. This could mean waiting for a baby to signal readiness to be lifted or involving toddlers in the process of dressing by offering them choices. The enabling adult's role is to support the child's autonomy while ensuring safety and providing gentle guidance.

Challenges and Impacts in Early Years Education

Staffing and Resource Challenges: Early years settings face significant obstacles due to staffing challenges. Ensuring that staff are adequately trained and equipped to address the diverse needs of young children is crucial. However, continuous professional development is often hindered by funding limitations and high staff turnover. Achieving optimal staff-to-child ratios for personalized care is essential but remains challenging due to budget constraints and recruitment difficulties. Moreover, inadequate funding can affect the quality of facilities, availability of learning materials, and staff salaries, impacting recruitment and retention efforts. Additionally, adhering to regulatory requirements demands substantial administrative effort, which can divert attention from direct care and education.

Parental Engagement and Child Needs: Engaging parents in their children's early education is vital but complex, due to varying family circumstances and barriers like language differences or limited understanding of the importance of early development. Meeting the unique needs of each child, including those with disabilities or special educational needs, requires significant expertise and resources.

Factors Influencing Child Development: Several factors crucially shape a child's development. The family environment and parenting styles significantly impact emotional, social, and cognitive growth. Issues like parental stress and inconsistent parenting practices can pose substantial obstacles. Socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and inadequate healthcare or nutrition, can lead to developmental delays and poorer educational outcomes. Health and nutrition, especially during the first 1000 days, are fundamental, with chronic illnesses or nutritional deficiencies having lasting effects. Cultural and linguistic diversity also influences development, posing challenges if children's needs are not adequately met. Furthermore, attachment styles and early caregiver bonds are essential for emotional security and social competence, with disruptions potentially leading to attachment disorders and other emotional difficulties (Lickhar *et al.*, 2022).

Economic Factors and Their Impact on Development: Poverty significantly influences various aspects of child development. Children in poverty-stricken environments face developmental risks due to limited access to nutritious food, secure housing, and quality healthcare. This deprivation extends beyond nutrition, including limited opportunities for early learning and exposure to language-rich interactions, crucial for cognitive and language growth. Additionally, poverty restricts access to quality early childhood education programs, widening developmental gaps among socio-economic groups (Lickhar *et al.*, 2022).

Policy Implications: These findings highlight the need for robust social support systems to alleviate poverty's impact on children. Programs offering direct assistance like food security, healthcare access, and stable housing are essential. Moreover, economic policies that focus on lifting families out of poverty, such as employment initiatives and financial aid, are crucial for fostering a stable environment conducive to healthy child development.

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care: High-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) plays a pivotal role in fostering optimal child development. These programs provide environments that nurture cognitive, language, social, and emotional skills. Quality ECEC influences child development by offering structured yet flexible learning environments that promote exploration and learning through play. Trained educators adept at fostering academic and social skills is crucial, as is peer interaction for developing social competencies and emotional intelligence.

Addressing the challenges posed by poverty and ensuring access to quality early childhood education are paramount for levelling the playing field and enabling all children to reach their full potential. The insights from Lickhar *et al.*, provide a robust framework for understanding and addressing the complex factors influencing child development, advocating for holistic child welfare and development policies. Creating an inclusive environment is just the beginning; the next step involves designing specific activities and environments that stimulate holistic development.

Design and Organization of Early Years Environments

The design and organization of early years environments, both indoors and outdoors, play a critical role in supporting the holistic development of infants. These settings should be rich in stimuli, safe, and adaptable to meet the evolving needs of growing children.

Indoor Environments: Indoor spaces should be warm, welcoming, and filled with a variety of resources that promote learning through play. Key features include:

- **Multi-sensory Play Areas:** Equipped with soft mats, toys with different sounds, textures, and bright colours to stimulate hearing, touch, and sight.
- **Quiet Zones:** Designed with cushions and soft lighting where children can read or relax, helping them develop self-regulation skills.
- **Interactive Displays:** Featuring tactile boards or simple puzzles that engage infants and encourage motor skill development.



Image D: (Community Plaything, 2010).

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Outdoor Environments: Outdoor spaces provide unique opportunities for physical development and exploration:

- **Nature Play:** Gardens or areas with safe, natural materials like sand, water, rocks, and plants encourage interaction with the natural world.
- **Physical Play Equipment:** Includes soft climbing structures or secure swings that support gross motor skills and physical health.



Image E: (Early Years Staffroom, 2019).

Benefits of Effective Environments: These thoughtfully designed environments benefit infants by supporting their development across multiple areas:

- Physical: Robust play aids muscle development and coordination.
- Cognitive: Exploring a variety of objects and settings enhances problem-solving skills and cognitive flexibility.
- Social and Emotional: Shared play fosters social skills and emotional understanding.
- Language: Exposure to rich language environments boosts vocabulary and communication skills.

These practices align with several developmental theories: Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory: Suggests children learn best through interactive play, supporting cognitive development through stages. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Emphasizes the role of social interactions and cultural contexts in learning. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory: Shows how different environmental layers influence child development, making well-designed settings crucial microsystems for growth.

Importance of Sensory Activities: Sensory activities are essential as infants explore the world primarily through their senses. These activities support the development of nerve connections in the brain, enabling more complex learning tasks:

- Touch: Handling different textures helps develop tactile senses and fine motor skills.
- Sight: Bright colours and varied patterns stimulate visual development.
- Hearing: Music and sound-based toys enhance auditory processing.
- Taste and Smell: Safe introduction of varied flavours and scents encourages sensory exploration.

Storytelling and Music: These are powerful educational tools that enhance listening skills, rhythm, and language development through interactive experiences and musical activities.



Image G: (Canva, 2024).



Image F: (LinkedIn, 2023).

Incorporating Loose Parts and Heuristic Play: Using materials like wooden blocks, fabric pieces, and natural items, along with everyday objects like wooden spoons and metal bowls, supports heuristic play. This kind of play encourages:

- Cognitive and Creative Development: Loose parts stimulate imagination and understanding of spatial and mathematical concepts.
- Physical Skills: Manipulating diverse objects enhances fine and gross motor skills.
- Social and Emotional Growth: Shared spaces foster interaction and negotiation, crucial for social development.
- Language Skills: Conversations during play enhance vocabulary and linguistic skills.

These activities and environments not only cater to individual learning styles and preferences but are essential components of high-quality infant care. They enrich the learning environment and lay the foundation for future educational success, promoting independence and creative problem-solving in young learners.



Image H: (Instagram, 2019).



Image J: (My First Five Years, 2023).

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Thank You

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