

The First

1000

Days





Definition:

The first 1000 days span from the day of conception up until the child's second birthday. It is crucial to recognise its importance as they help to shape the foundations for a child's future development and well-being (UNICEF, 2017).

According to Lawler (2023), an incredible 80% of a child's brain development happens during the first 1000 days. As a result, if children do not receive adequate nutrition and care, their brain development may suffer, resulting in long-lasting difficulties. These difficulties can negatively impact their future learning and overall health.



Pregnancy

The First 1000 days consist of three stages: Pregnancy, Infancy and Early Childhood.

First Trimester

- From the mother's last menstrual period up until 13 weeks.
- The baby starts to develop all of its body structures, and all its organs begin to grow (Bal and Karyakram, 2018).
- Folic acid is vital for preventing birth defects (NHS, 2020).
- This is when a baby is growing at its fastest pace (Tommy's, 2015).
- It is important to avoid alcohol, drugs and certain medications as babies are much more at risk of their damage at this point (John Hopkins Medicine, 2019).

Second Trimester

- Starts at 13 weeks and lasts until 27 weeks (Pampers, 2021).
- As the baby continues to grow, so do its organs. It is during this trimester that its liver, pancreas and kidneys all start to function (Healthdirect Australia, 2022).
- During the second trimester, it is important to keep healthy, by consuming nutritious food and engaging in consistent exercise (UNICEF, n.d.)
- The baby experiences immense growth throughout, starting at about the size of a peach, and ending the trimester at the size of a cauliflower (UPMC | Life Changing Medicine, 2024)!

Third Trimester

- Typically is said to start around 28 weeks, and ends when the baby is born. This will usually be between 37 and 42 weeks.
- The baby continues to grow, and its lungs fully mature by 38 weeks (Stanford Children's Health, 2019).
- This is when the baby prepares for birth, by moving its head downwards (Jackson Health System, 2023).



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Infancy and Early Childhood

Infancy

The infancy stage is the first year of life after birth. Babies grow and change a lot during this time, so their brains are BUSY! According to Brodie (n.d.), babies' brains make an astonishing 1 million neural connections every single second! Breastfeeding is incredibly important, especially in the first six months, as it can help to prevent asthma, eczema and diabetes. Breastfeeding also protects babies from some diseases and illnesses (John, 2011). After turning 6 months of age, babies begin to have extra nutritional needs so it is recommended to start giving babies solid foods, starting with purees and eventually leading to whole foods. It is important to gradually introduce each one so that babies can adjust to eating solids (Group Danone, n.d.).

Early Childhood

The early childhood stage is from the age of one until they reach two years. During this stage, children experience remarkable brain development. Their ability to process information greatly increases. This allows them to handle more complex tasks with a higher success rate (1000 Days, n.d.). Activities such as playing, chatting, and sharing meals enhance their learning experience. These interactions not only nurture a sense of love and belonging but also help build a child's confidence. Also, they are vital for developing key skills for the future, including social and emotional abilities (Raising Children Network, 2022).

What is Exceptional Caregiving?

Attentive

Partnership

Respect



Engaging

Inclusive

Supportive



Exceptional Caregiving



Exceptional caregiving includes planning meaningful interactions, and ensuring these moments are enjoyable for both the caregiver and the child (Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.). Some examples of these interactions include essential daily activities such as:

- ★ Toileting
- ★ Feeding
- ★ Washing
- ★ Sleeping
- ★ Dressing

However, this brings about the question: how can it be ensured that these otherwise ordinary parts of a child's life can be turned into enjoyable experiences? By introducing playful elements, engaging conversations and creative approaches, early years practitioners can transform everyday tasks into enjoyable and unforgettable moments. This approach not only creates a joyful environment but also strengthens the bond between the caregiver and the child. This helps to make sure that every interaction becomes a meaningful chance for development and connection.

How can early years practitioners provide exceptional care to children?

Playful Elements

Children can learn a lot at mealtimes, which can serve as more than just gaining nutrients. Alcock (2007) discovered that mealtimes provide a wonderful opportunity for children to engage in play and learning. During these moments, children use repetition, imitation and imagination, which are crucial skills that contribute to their overall development and growth. When children experience joy at the dinner table, they not only learn more effectively but also develop a greater appreciation for the food they consume. This enjoyable atmosphere makes mealtimes memorable enhancing both their social skills and their nutritional intake, ultimately promoting healthy habits for the future.

Engaging Conversations

A fantastic way to encourage engaging conversations between caregivers and children is through storytelling. To really grab children's attention, the storytelling should ignite their imaginations. This helps them to think in new and creative ways. When early years practitioners add elements that spark curiosity, it deepens their bonds. This method makes the experience more of a two-way conversation, instead of a one-sided story. This helps to create a lively learning environment that boosts children's communication skills (Vezzani, 2019).

Creative Approaches

Children should have the chance to explore and take part in their everyday tasks, as this independence helps to grow their confidence and self-reliance. They find joy when interacting with various objects, no matter what they are. It is helpful to allow children to play with items that relate to their everyday tasks. This is because this kind of engagement nurtures their creativity and imagination. It also encourages them to enjoy and actively participate in the tasks. This can make the entire experience more enjoyable and meaningful (Talu, 2018).



**Challenges to
providing
exceptional care**



Funding

Lack of
Communication

Understaffed

Behaviour

Lack of
Training

No
Diagnosis

Transitions

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Stress +
Burnout

Inadequate
Healthcare

Behaviour

How does behaviour challenge exceptional care?

Challenging behaviours in young children can hinder early years practitioners from delivering exceptional care during the crucial first 1000 days of development. These behaviours can disrupt the early years setting, creating tension between children and staff. Therefore, practitioners must develop effective strategies to manage these behaviours and maintain a supportive atmosphere for all children (Doubet, Ostrosky and Quesenberry, 2023).

What can be done?

1. The implementation of a comprehensive Positive Behavior Support (PBS) model has been shown to effectively address challenging behaviors. This approach emphasises the creation of a caring and supportive environment tailored to the unique needs of young children, resulting in improved outcomes for both educators and students (Hemmeter et al., 2007).
2. Creating a structured and stimulating environment is really important for helping young children learn effectively. A key aspect of this is providing support for the professional growth of early years practitioners, especially those who are just starting out in their caregiving roles (Balikci, 2021).



(The Therapist Parent, 2021)

Stress + Burnout

Preventing stress and burnout in early years settings is essential for supporting the well-being of caregivers and promoting positive learning experiences. A variety of strategies have been recognised to help practitioners in coping with stress and steering clear of burnout. These approaches include:

1. Self Care

It is essential for early years practitioners to prioritise self-care. It can enable caregivers to effectively maintain their mental and physical well-being, build healthy relationships, and enhance both their professional and personal lives (Walker, Hester and Weiler, 2021).

2. Support Network

Having a strong support network is super important for early years practitioners. They can build this network by communicating with their coworkers and connecting with people outside of their usual circles. This network could include mentors and support groups.

A solid support system not only helps them grow professionally, but also helps to reduce stress and burnout. Additionally, it creates a sense of community which can give practitioners the empowerment to face challenges, which ultimately benefits the children and families they work with (Nursery Book Limited, 2024).



(Kinderly, 2024)

Transitions

Supporting transitions in early years settings is essential for establishing a nurturing environment. Implementing effective strategies can alleviate the anxiety that often comes with these changes, enabling children to go through them with confidence.

Positive Engagement

Using positive engagement methods can greatly benefit children. Offering compliments and planning fun activities for children during transitions can make a big difference. This can reduce stress, making transitions smoother. When children feel happy, they are more likely to learn and develop effectively. By creating a positive environment, challenging behaviours can be minimised, and children's overall development can be improved (Obee et al., 2024).

Enabling Environments

Creating an enabling environment is really important. In an early years setting, there should be different areas that provide fun play options and enriching experiences. These specially designed spaces should encourage children to explore and interact with each other. That way, they can build a strong feeling of safety and belonging, which is important for their emotional health during these transitions (Nursery Story, 2021).



(Nursery Story, n.d.)



How can early years practitioners support children in the first 1000 days?

Nutrition

Children require essential nutrients such as protein, zinc, iron, and vitamins for optimal brain development. These nutrients are crucial for their overall growth and health. Caregivers should prioritise offering nutritious meals. Proper nutrition is vital, as it can help avert significant health issues in the future, including obesity and diabetes (Schwarzenberg and Georgieff, 2018).

Stimulating Activities

Infants and toddlers under the age of two can really boost their thinking skills when early years practitioners involve them in fun and interesting activities. For example, letting babies touch and play with different objects and textures helps them learn about their environment and how things work. Also, playing games like hide and seek with toys helps them figure out the difference between themselves and the objects, which is great for building their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Cunha, Leite and Almeida, 2015).

Child-centred approach

Child-centred approaches are all about recognising and addressing the unique needs and rights of each child. They aim to empower children by viewing them as key participants in their own development and care. By prioritising the child's voice in decision-making, these approaches help children feel more in control and responsible for their own experiences. Specifically, child-centred care values what the child thinks, encouraging them to engage while respecting their personal experiences and wishes. This approach supports emotional well-being. It also creates a caring environment where children feel valued, heard, and understood (Coyne, Hallström and Söderbäck, 2016).

How can early years practitioners support families in the first 1000 days?

Parental Support and Education

Parents require practical support that is based on solid evidence and is easy to access to ensure their children grow up healthy. Early years practitioners can assist by offering clear advice on any concerns or questions parents might have, all while being compassionate and understanding. This way, parents can access the necessary knowledge while also increasing their confidence in their parenting skills, which in turn positively impacts their children's healthy development (Hennessy et al., 2020).

Open-door Policy

An open-door policy is a childcare setup aimed at promoting transparency and building trust between parents and caregivers. This method gives parents the ability to drop by or check on their child whenever they wish throughout the day, without having to give notice or make an appointment (How to Start a Home Daycare, 2023). An open door policy creates a welcoming atmosphere where families feel appreciated and heard. This can boost parents' confidence and sense of capability, both of which are crucial for effective parenting and the healthy development of children (Webster, 2022).

Why are professional partnerships so important when considering the first 1000 days?

Support Systems for Parents

Professional partnerships are really important for parents, especially in the first 1000 days of their child's life. They help parents find the right resources and get expert advice. These connections also link parents to community services. This kind of support is crucial because it helps with immediate problems and promotes long-term health benefits for children (Boelsma et al., 2021).

Knowledge Sharing Among Professionals

Professional partnerships provide a space for early years practitioners to bring in new ideas about how to care for the children they work with. By sharing information with their coworkers and other specialists, they sometimes see that their current ideas are supported, but other times, they are inspired to reconsider and improve those ideas. This ongoing process helps them grow in their careers and also supports the growth of the children they look after. By keeping up with the newest research, practitioners can improve their care and better support the learning and development of young children (Clark and Stroud, 2002).

Positive Learning Environment

Professional partnerships are essential for creating a positive learning environment. By improving communication, teamwork, and mutual respect, these partnerships significantly impact children's development. When parents and practitioners join forces, they establish a nurturing environment that promotes children's growth, inspires exploration, and builds confidence. This results in a richer educational journey for every child (Syuraini et al., 2022).

How does maternal mental health affect her children in the first 1000 days?

Parent-child interactions: Maternal mental health issues, including depression and anxiety, can have a detrimental impact on the interactions between a parent and child, as well as their attachment. These factors are essential for the child's emotional and mental growth (Wardoyo et al., 2023).

Health issues: Children whose parents face mental health challenges are at a notably increased risk for a range of health problems, such as injuries, asthma, and malnutrition. This risk is typically higher in low-income countries, where access to support and intervention resources is often limited (Pierce et al., 2019).

What support is out there?:

- NHS talking therapies - can ask a GP or self-refer, although it is recommended to speak to a midwife or a GP beforehand (NHS, 2020).
- Charity help - PANDAS provides a beacon of hope, compassion, and unwavering support for every parent navigating the challenging waters of emotional well-being or mental health issues. They ensure that no one feels alone during their difficult journey (Maternal Mental Health Alliance, 2023).

Activities



Sensory Play

(Mothercould, 2024)



Sensory play during the first 1000 days of a child's life can greatly help their growth, especially in food exploration, imaginative play, language development, and social skills. There are a multitude of different activities within sensory play. These include:

- Water play
- Sand play
- Food play
- Arts + Crafts
- Sensory bottle/bucket

(Action for children, 2022)

Sensory play has many benefits for children under two. Some of these are:

- It develops healthy eating habits (Coulthard and Sealy, 2017).
- It enhances fine motor skills, promotes cognitive growth, and supports language development (Creative Play, 2016).
- It builds bonds and promotes trust between children and caregivers (Yogman et al., 2018).

Outdoor Play

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Outdoor play is crucial for the development of young children. It allows them to interact with nature, embrace healthy challenges, and connect with their peers. These activities help to build vital skills that contribute to their overall growth and well-being (Bento and Dias, 2017).

Playing outside during the first 1000 days of a child's life has many great benefits. First, it helps kids stay healthy and fit by getting them to move around and exercise, which is really important for building strong muscles and bones. Also, being outdoors can reduce feelings of anxiety and stress, allowing kids to enjoy their playtime and connect with nature. When children play outside, they get sunlight, which gives them vitamin D that helps them grow strong. Plus, outdoor play encourages kids to explore and be creative as they discover their surroundings. Finally, playing outside helps kids develop emotional and social skills by allowing them to interact with friends, learn about teamwork, and improve their communication skills (Early Years Alliance, 2022).

International Approaches

Countries across the globe are ramping up their investments in early childhood development. Many governments are motivated by the need to make safe and nurturing spaces for children, allowing parents to return to work with peace of mind. Additionally, nations are increasingly acknowledging the compelling evidence that highlights the advantages of high-quality early years education, which significantly contributes to both social and educational growth (GOV.UK, 2023).

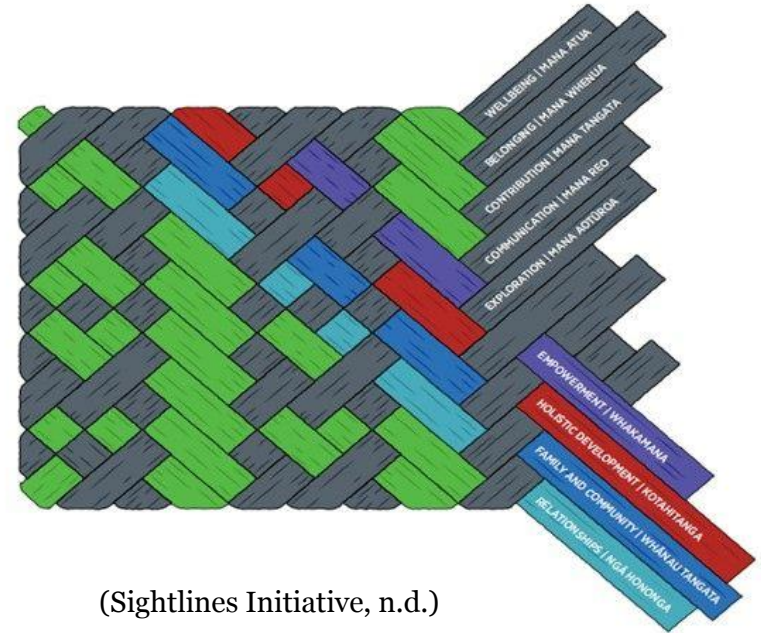


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New Zealand – Te Whariki

Te Whariki is the framework for early childhood education in New Zealand that started in 1996. It is known for being thorough, bicultural, and inclusive, aiming to support children's growth while honouring their cultural backgrounds.

The framework is based on four key principles: Whakamana (Empowerment), Kotahitanga (Holistic Development), Nga Hononga (Relationships), and Whānau Tangata (Family and Community). These principles shape how the curriculum is put into practice, highlighting the significance of cultural identity, language, and the role of the community in early childhood education (Lee et al., 2013).



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