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The First 1000 Days

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Introduction

- The first 1000 days is the period of time from conception to the age of 2. This can be defined by three stages; pregnancy, infancy and toddlerhood.
- The first few years of life have a significant impact on a child's future, shaping their brain development, health, happiness, learning abilities, and even their future earning potential. During this early stage, a baby's brain forms over 1 million new connections every second, a rate that's never seen again later in life. (Unicef, no date)
- This highlights the importance of early experiences, making the right food, stimulation, and care, crucial for proper brain development in the first 1,000 days. (Unicef, no date)

Pregnancy is split into 3 parts, called trimesters

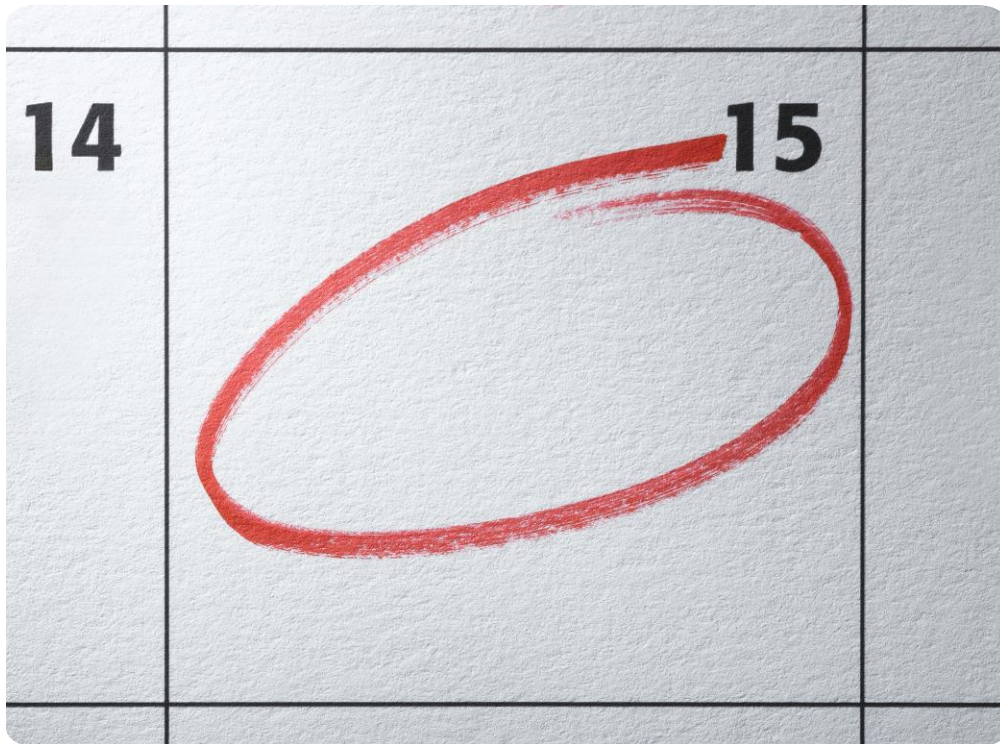
- Conception occurs about two weeks after a woman's menstruation when the egg is released, and pregnancy tests can detect pregnancy at this time. In weeks 4 to 5, the embryo grows within the womb, with cells forming three layers that develop into different systems: the inner layer becomes the respiratory and digestive systems, the middle layer forms the heart, blood vessels, muscles, and bones, and the outer layer becomes the brain, nervous system, skin, and nails.
- By 6 weeks, many women realise they are pregnant and can seek healthcare. At this stage, the fetal heartbeat is visible via ultrasound, and the fetus has transparent skin. By 9 weeks, facial features, taste buds, and limbs begin to develop. By the end of the first trimester, the fetus has fully developed organs, limbs, muscles, bones, and sex organs, and will focus on growing and maturing. (NHS, 2021)

Second Trimester

- During the second trimester the baby continues growing, most women begin to notice a bump growing during this trimester as their uterus moves up from inside the pelvis. At around 16 weeks, the baby's sex is visible on an ultrasound scan.
- Mothers will be offered a 20 week anatomy scan during this trimester. The scan screens for 11 physical conditions in the baby, although it doesn't detect all possible conditions. It examines areas such as the abdomen, bones, brain, face, heart, kidneys, and spinal cord. The scan is carried out by trained sonographers. (GOV.UK, 2021)



Stock image



Third Trimester

- The third trimester begins at 28 weeks, at this point many mothers begin to feel much more tired and uncomfortable. Women are encouraged to have vaccinations during pregnancy. During pregnancy, a mother passes her antibodies to her baby. These antibodies are part of the immune system and help protect the baby against bacteria and viruses. They provide the baby with protection from infections during the first few weeks after birth. Timely vaccinations are important to ensure the baby receives the best protection. (NHS, Start for Life)
- By 37-42 weeks a baby is considered full term. Most babies are born around the 40 week mark, which would be their 'due date.'

Infancy and Toddlerhood

- In the first few months after birth, parents are offered various screenings for their child. Hearing tests are often done before you leave the hospital, and the newborn heel prick tests in the next few days. A general check is offered to all babies within the first 72 hours, this is to check their eyes, heart, hips and more.
- Vaccinations are offered at 8, 12 and 16 weeks. Another vaccination is then offered at one year. (NHS, 2023)
- Vaccinations in childhood are important as a baby's immune system is not fully developed at birth, leaving them more vulnerable to infections and severe illness. Vaccines help the immune system recognize and defend against germs, building up the baby's natural defenses and offering protection. (NHS inform, 2024)

Developmental Milestones

- Babies develop rapidly in their first year. By 2 months, they can hold their head up, move their limbs, smile, and watch people. By 4 months, they may laugh, make cooing sounds, and roll from tummy to back. At 6 months, babies recognize familiar people, blow raspberries, and can sit with support. Many start solids at this age. By 9 months, babies might show separation anxiety, respond to their name, make simple sounds like "mama" or "baba," sit without support, and begin crawling. By 12 months, they can pull themselves up to stand, play simple games, call a parent, and walk with support. (Understood, 2022)

Milestones continue into toddlerhood, which is the point where small children may begin to test boundaries, learn right from wrong, and learn to play, share and their language skills develop. By age 2, toddlers notice when others are upset, can point to items in books, say two-word phrases, try using toys with buttons or switches, play with multiple toys at once, kick a ball, run, walk up stairs with help, and eat with a spoon. Children may begin to potty train around 2 years old. (ASQ, No Date)



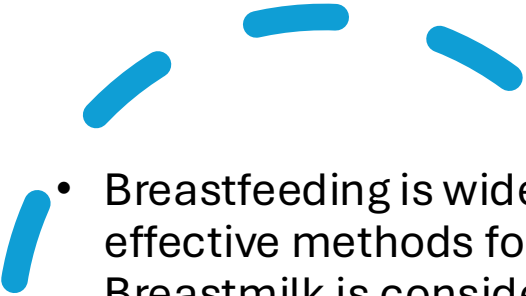
Caregiving

What is Exceptional Care?

- It is the caregiver's responsibility to provide exceptional care for the children they look after. A good example of this is being responsive to a child's needs. Bowlby's attachment theory explores the importance of a healthy attachment between child and caregiver, as well as how an unstable attachment can have negative effects.
- Attachment is a process that develops gradually in a child, but parents and carers can begin to establish an emotional connection with their child even before birth. In some cases, parents or carers may struggle to form this bond, especially if they are dealing with mental health challenges or lack a strong support system. (NSPCC Learning, 2021)
- It is important for a mother to be supported in the most vulnerable stages of postpartum, as illnesses such as postpartum anxiety or depression can affect the bond between her and her child. A multi agency team can help with this, providing support from health visitors, peri-natal mental health, GP and other sources. (Mind, 2024)

Attachment

- It is very important for caregivers to foster healthy attachments as babies and young children with attachment issues may be more prone to behavioral problems like ADHD or personality disorder. These issues can also make it difficult for them to form healthy relationships as they grow, as their early experiences may lead them to view others as unreliable or untrustworthy. As adults, individuals with attachment issues are at a higher risk of entering unstable relationships, struggling with parenting, and facing behavioral or mental health challenges. (NSPCC Learning, 2021)
- Gerhardt, (2014) writes about how babies are unable to control their cortisol levels when they are very young, and it is the carers responsibility to help soothe and calm them. Sleep training techniques, such as cry-it-out, go against this and this can increase the chances of a child being unable to regulate their emotions as they grow. A caregiver who wants to form a healthy attachment would respond to an infant's cries and help them regulate, helping their cortisol levels regulate more efficiently.
- A baby's bond with their caregiver is formed through shared interactions and how the caregiver meets the baby's needs. This involves providing food, sleep, cleanliness, and comfort, along with showing affection, making eye contact, cuddling, playing, and speaking to the baby. These actions help the baby feel safe, secure, and loved, building a strong emotional connection. (Raising Children, 2023)

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- Breastfeeding is widely regarded as one of the most effective methods for promoting infant health. Breastmilk is considered the ideal nutrition for newborns, as it is not only safe and clean but also contains antibodies that help protect against a range of common childhood illnesses. For the first 6 months, breastmilk provides all the essential nutrients and energy an infant requires. Research suggests that children who are breastfed perform better on intelligence tests, are less likely to suffer from obesity, and are at a lower risk of developing diabetes later in life. Breastfeeding has also been shown to reduce the risk of breast and ovarian cancers in mothers. (WHO, 2025)



Nutrition- Breastfeeding

Nutrition

- Infant formula is a good substitute for babies that are unable to breastfeed. Formula milk supplies babies with the necessary nutrients for growth and development, but it does not offer the same health benefits as breastfeeding for both the baby and the mother. For instance, it does not provide protection against infections. (NHS, 2023)

Caregivers are advised to wait until around 6 months before starting to introduce solid foods to their baby, as the baby's digestive system and kidneys are still maturing. Introducing solids too early may raise the risk of conditions such as asthma, eczema, digestive issues, allergies, and obesity later in life. (Public Health Agency, 2018)

- Providing food is one of the basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, without adequate nutrition a child will not have the nutrients and energy needed to thrive.



Enabling Environment

- An enabling environment supports a child's potential by providing safety, understanding, and opportunities for growth through challenges. Strong relationships help children learn from mistakes and explore confidently. Early experiences shape a child's future, and education plays a key role, especially for those facing disadvantages. The approach we take is crucial in creating an inclusive and supportive environment that gives every child the best start in life. (Institute of Early Years Education, 2024)
- An enabling environment should be inclusive, for example, using the Montessori approach of equipment that is accessible for children. In Montessori classrooms, wall displays are at child-height, classroom tools and instruments are accessible, and children can move freely through different areas of the room depending on their needs (i.e a quiet area available for children seeking calm) (Isaacs, 2018)

Challenges

- Early years settings are currently facing significant challenges, particularly in terms of recruiting and keeping qualified staff. Common issues include low wages, poor working conditions, and high staff turnover, all of which can negatively affect the care and development of children, especially in areas like safeguarding and maintaining consistent relationships with key staff members. (GOV.UK, 2024)
- To address these challenges, it's important for leaders to prioritise communication, thorough staff inductions, and ongoing training. Supporting staff well-being through career development opportunities, mental health support, and a positive working environment is also crucial. (GOV.UK, 2024)
- A 2021 survey found that maintained nursery schools are seeing an increase in children with SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities), but financial challenges are making it harder to support them. Many schools reported having less funding for SEND, staff cuts because of financial problems, and cuts to local authority services for specialist support. Only 26% of schools said they could still take in children with SEND without any problems. Some schools mentioned that while they were still accepting these children, it was affecting the quality of care or overloading staff. (Early Education, 2021)
- There are grants available for early years settings to help with these financial issues, alongside reaching out for community support. Examples of this would be holding fun days, having raffles, tombola, and other fun things for families to enjoy whilst contributing. Another useful way to save money is using low cost resources, reaching out for donations for loose parts, and recycling.



Professional Partnerships



Settling-in Sessions

- When a child begins in an early years setting, it's important that the parents/guardians and the practitioner work together to ensure the child has a smooth and supported transition.
- Settling-in sessions are brief visits to the nursery designed to help the child and their parents or carers adjust before starting regular hours. It may take several sessions or weeks for the child to feel comfortable. Typically, nurseries start with a short session of one to two hours and gradually increase to a full day. The settling-in process can differ based on the nursery and the child, but it is crucial as it helps the child experience their parents or carers leaving and returning, which supports their adjustment. (Twinkl, 2025)
- Some children may find it difficult to adjust to a nursery setting, so it's important to let the settling-in process happen at the child's pace, as being in a new environment with unfamiliar people can be overwhelming. Some nurseries may offer a home visit to learn more about your child in a familiar setting and understand their preferences.

Communication

- Practitioners depend on parents to provide information about their babies, including care routines, food preferences, and soothing methods. Since parents are the experts on their own children, practitioners must have two key skills: the ability to communicate effectively and compassionately with parents, and the ability to address the care and educational needs of the children. (Brodie, 2018)
- Building an effective, meaningful, and authentic relationship with parents and guardians is a crucial aspect of the practitioner and key person role. This is important for successfully sharing information, which may sometimes involve personal details about the baby in your care or any concerns you may have. (Brodie, 2018)





Role of Practitioner

- It is the practitioner's responsibility to ensure that the children they are looking after receive the best possible care. This includes ensuring the children have basic needs met – they're safe, clean and fed, and have opportunities to play, socialise and learn.
- The transition from baby to toddler involves a lot of changes in how children grow physically, mentally, and emotionally. Practitioners need to keep an eye on these changes and adjust their care to support the child's development. As children become more independent, the way they are cared for also changes, and practitioners need to use different skills to help them move from being totally dependent to more independent.(Brodie,2018)
- This includes doing regular risk assessments as the children's abilities change, for example the risks of an immobile infant are different to a child who has learned to walk. As well as this, being aware of the changes in a child's routine – babies develop quickly and their needs change often, such as nap times and sleep needs.

Enabling Adult

- The curriculum in funded non-maintained nursery settings emphasizes the important role of adults in helping children develop and make progress. By providing effective support, adults become "enabling adults," a key factor in fostering the growth of all children. Their involvement is crucial for ensuring that children can thrive and advance in their learning. (Estyn, 2024)
- As an enabling adult, it is important to understand child development and apply this knowledge in practice. observing children's interests and behaviour allows adults to plan future experiences and identify patterns in their exploration. Children thrive when given opportunities to practice and repeat activities in different contexts, which aids their thinking development. Enabling adults also support children's resilience, independence, and confidence by encouraging them to take safe risks and challenges.(Welsh Government, No Date)

Maternal Factors

- Maternal factors can have an affect on a child's early education, for example a family living in poverty may not have access to the internet to apply for, or have knowledge of flying start provisions. Professional partnerships are very helpful in situations like these, as a Health Visitor would be able to signpost the parent to services available which would allow a child to access crucial early education they are entitled to.

Mothers suffering from mental health issues which cause a barrier for them can access support through the family support services. Again, this can be accessed through their health visitor, again demonstrating the importance of a multi-agency support strategy.

- This can be linked to Bronfenbrenner's biological model. For example, situations in the exosystem can indirectly affect the child. If a parent is experiencing stress or struggling with mental health issues, they might become less patient or more upset at home, which can influence the child's well-being. (Gray., Mcblain 2012)



Activities

Image: Authors own

Physical Play

- Article 31 of the UNCRC acknowledges that children have the right to rest and leisure, engage in play and age-appropriate recreational activities, and freely participate in cultural and artistic life. This highlights that play is a fundamental right for all children, and they should be given the opportunity to play, explore, and learn.



Image: authors own

Infants – Tummy Time

- Tummy time involves placing a baby on their stomach while they are awake for short periods, allowing them to get used to this position. It helps the baby explore different ways of moving their head, limbs, and neck. The NHS recommends tummy time as a way to strengthen the muscles needed for sitting and crawling. By engaging in tummy time, the baby will build strength in their back, neck, and shoulder muscles while also improving their coordination. This type of development, which involves large body movements, is referred to as gross motor skills. (BBC Tiny Happy People, No Date)

Tummy time is a great activity for babies from birth, and can be enhanced with the use of sensory mats, water trays (for older babies), and toys for baby to reach for.



Authors own, November 24

Pikler

- Pikler's approach focuses on creating an environment where babies could develop motor skills independently, without interference. A key principle of this method was giving babies complete freedom of movement, avoiding adult interventions such as forcing them to sit, stand, or walk before they were ready. This approach supports autonomy, physical security, and emotional well-being, as babies learn through self-directed movement.(Vamos, 2015)

Toddlers – Loose Parts

- In early childhood education settings, loose parts are interesting and natural materials that children can play with in many different ways. These objects, like stones or acorns, don't come with instructions, so children can move, combine, and change them however they want. For example, a stone could become part of a story, or an acorn could be used in an imaginary soup. Loose parts encourage children to talk to each other, work together, and think creatively. These skills, like creativity and teamwork, are really important later in life. (Daly, Belogovsky 2014)
- This sort of imaginative and free play links well to Vygotsky's theory of the More Knowledgeable Other, as children playing alongside one another with loose parts will gain ideas and improve their play from observation. This helps a child develop their imagination. Loose parts play is great for the outdoors, with use of tyres, pipes and tarpaulins etc children are able to create dens with the help of a supporting adult or older child.



Authors own, April 2023

International Approaches

Waldorf/Steiner

Waldorf education was founded by Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) from Austria.

- Waldorf education focuses on a well-rounded learning experience, where children develop knowledge, skills, and abilities to support lifelong learning. Formal schooling starts at age 6, which is a bit later than in many other education systems but aligns with successful global practices. Throughout Waldorf schooling, there is a balance of learning through thinking, art, and hands-on activities. Education is not just about exams but also about being creative, curious, and finding one's own path. This approach is seen in the curriculum, relationships, environment, and community. Artistic and physical activities like art, music, crafts, games, and movement help make learning enjoyable and support children's overall growth. (Waldorf UK, No Date)
- Many countries in Europe have a later starting age to align with Steiner education, with kindergarten lasting up until age 5 or 7. Steiner schools are calm and home like in these early years, focusing on well-being. Similar to Montessori, Steiner school will have loose parts and simple, open-ended toys. Children are encouraged to take part in the upkeep of the setting, to prepare food, and making and repairing toys. (Taplin, Nicol. 2017)

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