

The first 1000 days

The first 1000 days refers to a child's life from birth to two years old. This period of time is very significant and unique. The foundations of ideal growth, health and neurodevelopment are established in this stage of life. Many factors contribute to establishing these foundations and if these foundations are not built to its optimum, a child may fail to meet their developmental potential. Even though the brain is constantly developing and changing throughout life, during the last trimester pregnancy and the first two years of life, the brain is at its period of highest plasticity. (Cusick and Georgieff, 2013).

This is supported by CDC (2022) as they state that the brain grows rapidly during the early years of a child's life. They go on to state that the factors which impact brain development include, nutrition starting in the womb, exposure to toxins or infections, the child's experiences and environments.

Ultimately, parents and practitioners play a huge role in supporting a child's brain development. These relationships affect all aspects of their development and it is their responsibility to ensure they are giving the child exceptional care. This includes meeting the basic needs of the child, enabling environments and experiences, and supporting holistic development.

This is supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory.

Environments

According to Early years matter (N,D), A child's environment is crucial for supporting and extending their development and learning. As stated by Bruce (2010. Pg. 64), the physical environment needs to appeal to children's channel of learning as well as be carefully designed for comfort and ease of movement. The environment shouldn't be too overwhelming. It is significant to take the following points into consideration; noise levels, fresh air and colour. The environment should allow children to have a variety of materials and sufficient resources.

Enabling environments allows children to feel safe, relaxed and comfortable. In a setting there are multiple ways practitioners can adapt the environment to encourage this feeling of safety.

For instance, children are affirmed when they see images of themselves and their families.

Practitioners could dedicate a display board to these images (Bruce, 2010, p. 61).

Practitioners could also create a safe space for all babies and children to go to if they feel overwhelmed such as a tented area with plenty of cushions and blankets (Mainstone-Cotton, 2019). As a result, children are able to explore their surroundings.

Giving children this opportunity is essential for their development. Through exploring, children use all of their senses.

Particularly in the first few weeks of a baby's life, they begin to learn through explorative play (NHS N,D).

Exploratory play is a form of Heuristic Play. This involves giving children a range of everyday objects and giving them the opportunity to explore whatever they like without rules or restrictions. Using everyday objects as opposed to toys gives babies and children more of a sensory experience (Twinkl, ND).

Exploratory play has a range of benefits and plays a major role in a child's development including their fine motor skills, creativity and concentration.

The intention of exploratory play is to create a curiosity in the children to reach out and discover new things (TheNewAgeParents, ND). This is supported by the Montessori method that suggests that children learn best in a child-centred, learning environment that promotes freedom for children to explore materials of their choice (Lopez, N,D).

Practitioners should also ensure that they create these enabling environments outside as well as inside.

According to Cohen (2021), Many researchers argue that children who play outside are happier and less anxious compared to the children that spend more time indoors.

Bruce (2010, pg. 64) also emphasises that children often prefer to play outside.

Being outdoors supports children's natural means of learning. Being outdoors provides multiple sensory experiences as well as gives opportunities to see nature and insects in their natural habitat (Bruce, 2010, pg. 62). Natural resources are available which gives children the opportunity to do activities that strengthen development like building dens. Large outdoor areas challenge children to be a lot more active through running or riding bikes. Practitioners could get resources like items for gardening, mud kitchens or equipment for being mini bug detectives (Bruce, 2010, pg. 65).

Even though there are many benefits to enabling these environments, practitioners may face challenges such as funding and lack of space. With lack of funds, Practitioners could supplement expensive materials with found materials such as cardboard boxes and tubes (Bruce, 2010, pg. 64).

Other challenges practitioners face when caring for babies and young children can include children who do not settle and feel comfortable in the setting. These children may have separation anxiety and struggle to completely be at ease. This prohibits learning as they will spend the majority of their time in the setting being unsettled and upset.

Activity ideas

Treasure baskets are an easy way to encourage explorative and heuristic play in children. As previously mentioned, explorative play involves children using their senses to explore everyday items and natural materials. Treasure baskets would include these items. Children are encouraged to explore these baskets completely freely.

Within the treasure basket there should be around 15-20 clean items that are safe for babies to explore with their mouths. Every day or week, the items in the basket may be changed (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 127).

Physical development

Through exploring the basket, hand-eye coordination is encouraged.

Babies will also strengthen their muscles through sitting for a long time and holding all of the interesting objects. Babies will usually interact with objects with their mouths which activates

their smell and taste. Finally, with their curiosity heightened, children spend a lot of time examining the objects which in turn, helps their eye focus (Early Impact, 2020).

Cognitive benefits

There are multiple cognitive benefits in using treasure baskets. With the fascination of them, children's concentration levels are high. Children will learn how to focus and sustain attention. They also use trial and error to have a better idea on what each item can and cannot be used for. This links to Kolb's experiential learning theory. Additionally, children are processing different shapes, sizes and textures (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 128) .

Emotional benefits

Treasure baskets are all child based. Adults do not intervene and the child has complete control over their own play. As a result, they learn independence. Children may often feel frustrated as activities are mostly adult directed. Also, Children often feel a sense of accomplishment when discovering things on their own.

Rhymes and songs

Nursery rhymes and songs are very popular. They date as far back as the 17th century and will no doubt continue to be popular in many years (BBC, ND). Singing Rhymes and songs have multiple developmental benefits and is the easiest activity to plan for children with little to no challenges. It takes no preparation and can take place at any time (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Physical Benefits

A lot of nursery rhymes are action songs.. For example, 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' requires children to use their motions and become aware of their bodies. Adults can help babies do the movements. With this practice they will soon perform them by themselves (BBC, ND). They can also encourage small fine movements such as clapping or grasping fingers (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Cognitive Benefits

Nursery songs and rhymes help children notice patterns and sounds. They also develop memory and concentration skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129). Additionally, some nursery rhymes teach basic maths like counting (BBC, ND).

Language benefits

Through songs and rhymes, children are exposed to new words and sounds. They also learn about intonation and expression (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Emotional and social development

Songs can make children feel at ease which is why adults usually sing to babies to help calm them. Songs also make children aware of different emotions such as 'If you're happy and you know it'. Children emotionally connect with adults and other children during singing (BBC, ND).

Sensory activities

There are an endless amount of sensory activity ideas using all sorts of foods and materials to further help children explore textures. Sensory activities are beneficial for all ages and are inclusive of all children including those with ALN and disorders. Sensory activities can be done indoors or outdoors and tend to be messy.

Water

Practitioners can provide water buckets and create multiple different water activities such as colour mixing water play, ice cubes play, sponge water bombs or counting / singing the alphabet with foam cut outs (MessyLittleMonster, 2020). All which encourage development in different ways such as, hand-eye coordination and motor skills (BusyBees, 2020).

Cooked foods

Cooked foods such as pasta and rice are great for sensory experiences. Practitioners can colour them with food colouring or put them in juices and water. As babies tend to explore with their mouths, this is a safe way to do so.

Practitioners can also mix cornflour and water to form a thick paste that changes textures when touched.

Sand and Mud

These natural materials are a good resource to use in sensory play and can be used in several ways. Providing tools like buckets, spades and shovels encourages fine motor skills. Sand and mud play also builds creativity and imagination. Both can be moulded into different shapes or used in small world play (Baby Sparks, 2019).

Physical Development

Sensory activities promote fine motor movements and hand-eye coordination.

Cognitive Development

Through sensory play the brain is constantly stimulated. Children learn about all different textures and materials. Additionally, it encourages 'scientific thinking' and problem solving (Good Start 2018).

Social and emotional development

Sensory activities give children a lot of freedom which makes them feel in control. Sensory activities are especially good for children with autism or other learning needs as it engages with all areas of a child's brain and can be very relaxing in times where the child is overwhelmed or frustrated (TheFCA, N,D).

Games involving throwing, catching or kicking a ball improves development all around. It involves constant repetition and practice and can be done socially or individually.

Physical development

Simple activities involving throwing, kicking, catching and dropping all encourage a child's gross and locomotor skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 135). It is also good for muscle development, balance, hand-eye coordination and fitness (Raising CHildren, 2020).

Cognitive Development

Children quickly learn and gain more spatial awareness during ball activities. They also learn the concept in which objects move in the air and drop to the floor. Ultimately, enhancing their knowledge on cause and effect (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136).

Language Development

Generally when playing these types of games, children are playing with another adult or child. This interaction will help children understand language and also encourage vocalisation (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136). This is supported by Vygotsky who argues that language is improved with social interactions (Erbil, 2020).

Emotional and Social Development

These types of activities help children understand the importance of turn taking. They also learn play skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136).

Being inclusive

As stated by the Welsh Government (N,D), A practice needs to be inclusive. This means that the practice recognises values and promotes the diversity of children and families, giving everyone equal opportunities and respect. Children should feel like they belong. Children are heavily influenced by their environment and learn from their environments and experiences. Practitioners should ensure the environment is well organised to ensure accessibility for all. This includes making the necessary adaptations to cater for all. Additionally, resources that include images and text should be diverse and not gender specific. Practitioners should also Celebrate festivals throughout the setting including all events that are relevant to the children present (The Wishing Tree, N,D). This is also supported in Article 2 of the Un convention; non-discrimination (Unicef, N,D).

Some children in settings have unique abilities and special needs. It is important for a setting to be inclusive of these children; however, according to Hoque (N,D), there are various challenges in inclusive education. Hoque (N,D) emphasises that there is a lack of awareness, positive attitude and sensitivity in settings. There is also a lack of trained teachers. Additionally, in larger settings with larger numbers of children, it is difficult to give individual attention to every child. Lack of funding for adaptations and learning aids also make it difficult to be completely inclusive.