



Critically evaluate the significance of the role of the early years practitioner in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days

Introduction:

The first 1000 days, from conception to the age of two, is when cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development is established in an individual's life. This is the age in which children are most vulnerable and need the best care possible to encourage positive development, resulting in better life outcomes (HM Government 2021 and Meiboudi 2013). According to Nutbrown (2005), baby's brains start to develop within the womb by the loving, nurturing connections they are making with the people that surround them. According to Jason Knauf (The royal foundation, 2020) these early life experiences, whether positive or negative, will go on to shape their adult lives, and if negative can have long-term consequences. Therefore the role of the Early Years practitioner is not only vital in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days, it is crucial.

Pregnancy – Birth:

Pregnancy is life changing. Not only for the pregnant woman, but also for dad, carers, and extended family. A woman finding out they are physically pregnant can conjure up a variety of emotions; excitement, fear, guilt, shock, to name a few. And so, it is vital the professionals prioritise supporting and encouraging mum and family through pregnancy to a safe delivery and beyond as holistically as possible (HM Government 2021).



Mental Health and violence:

There is substantial evidence proving that some health behaviours and social problems can have significant effects on an unborn baby's development. For example, drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental health, eating disorders, and violence during pregnancy, can all result in dangerous outcomes such as, miscarriage, stillbirth, premature delivery, low birthweight, a lack in baby brain development, baby drug withdrawal, and baby alcohol syndrome (Riley, Infante and Warren 2011 and Ostrea, Mantaring and Silvestre 2004). In some cases of violence and domestic abuse, the unborn baby may even develop brain injury or even fractured bones (Boy and Salihu 2004). Sadly, these are all enforced behaviours upon a baby who is vulnerable and unable to choose for themselves a positive start to life.

In supporting a pregnant mother and family through difficulties, there may be a need for a variety of other professionals to be involved too, such as doctors, mental health teams, dieticians, social workers, and therapists, as well as health visitors and midwives. It is vital that holistic care is provided and that the safety of both mother and baby are prioritised (NHS 2021 and NHS 2021a). This can be achieved through having regular antenatal appointments; these give time and space to talk through any concerns the mother may have, to check up on mum's mental health, and to look at home-life, current relationships, and any struggles mum may be facing (NHS 2020). Through this process, it is important that mum feels both heard and valued. Directing to more specific help such as groups, courses or social services may be required, and it is important that professionals know where to signpost as quickly as possible. (Welsh Gov 2014).





Parenting courses:



According to the City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council (2021) parenting courses can be incredibly helpful and insightful when preparing to have a baby. Whether it is the first pregnancy or the fifth, it can be just as daunting. Being with other parents, sharing stories, being honest about feelings and concerns, and practicing tasks such as bathing or nappy changing on a doll can all build confidence in parents. Mrunal (2018) encourages professionals within parenting to be inclusive and aware of diversity, understanding of backgrounds, religious views, and parenting preferences. In accordance with *The Human Rights Act (1998)*, Article 8, 'A respect for your private and family life' is of utmost importance. As professionals we must be advocating for this.

Parenting is both rewarding and challenging, and parenting courses can support you in building strong and secure relationships with your expected child (Care for the family 2021). Often, midwives, health visitors and GP's can signpost expecting parents to local parenting classes. Gov Wales, Flying Start and Care for the Family facilitate parenting courses within South Wales, including courses for single parents and preparing for children with additional learning needs (Gov Wales no date and Gov Wales 2017). More specific parenting courses can be arranged in preparation for parents whose baby may have had a medical diagnosis, for example down's syndrome and other birth defects (CDC 2020).



Nutrition – Healthy eating:

According to NHS (no date) diet matters when pregnant. What is consumed will be baby's main source of nourishment and will go on to help their brain and body develop. Research carried out by King's College London and the University of Bristol suggests that there is a link between unhealthy high-fat and high-sugar diets during pregnancy and behavioural problems in children. They say unhealthy diets during pregnancy could lead to children being diagnosed with ADHD, obesity, and other mental health problems, as well as gestational diabetes for the pregnant mother. These could be prevented, and if so, it is the professional's duty of care to help educate expecting parents on the subject of nutrition (Barker, E. *et al* 2016).



Most people will have a slightly different view and understanding of what healthy eating means. This could be due to a lack of teaching, background, generational habits, poverty, and lack of finances to afford nutritional foods. According to The Telegraph (2021) it is easier and cheaper for most British people to eat unhealthy foods.

The professional needs to do more than simply tell families about the importance of healthy eating during pregnancy; they must give them the tools, training, and direction to learn how to put it into practice (Vause, T. *et al.* 2006). For Example, project workers within Barnardos work one to one with families by helping them budget finances, write shopping lists, food shopping, and making meals together. This level of input can be inspirational and give families the confidence to make nutritional and lifestyle changes for themselves.



Birth – 2 years:

According to Ainsworth and Bowlby (Rosmalen, Horst, and Van der Veer 2016) there are three main attachment theories; secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent/resistant. One of the most important considerations of this theory is that babies need a consistent and loving relationship with one primary caregiver for them to develop into healthy and well-rounded individuals. This can be life defining. Babies need a responsive parent, one who will take care of all their needs; emotionally, physically, socially. If there is a lack of love and nurture within these early years it can result in limited brain development, relationship difficulties later in life, and higher chances of mental health problems (NSPCC 2021). Babies later become healthy or unhealthy adults, and it is the professional's job to encourage and support parents and families in developing healthy, confident individuals (Gov Wales no date).

In this video 'The impact of early emotional neglect', Dr Edward Tronick talks about the Still Face Experiment. This was to observe and assess the difference between the baby's response to an interactive and loving mother and on the contrary, baby's response to an unresponsive mother. There was a clear difference.

Responsive Mother – Baby and mum were laughing together, looking at different parts of the room together, having a somewhat engaging conversation. Both were smiling and enjoying one another's company.

Unresponsive Mother – Immediate negative emotion and confusion in baby's expression, baby then tried smiling and reaching out for mum to play but in realising mum wasn't playing became stressed and started to cry. Baby was arching her back, displaying behaviours of wanting to get away from the situation.

<https://youtu.be/aymvX-OrISO> (The school of life, 2018)

If this amount of negative emotion can be experienced within a two minute experiment, imagine how impactful these feelings could become over a two year period - the first 1000 days of a child's life.



What are some of the current challenges when caring for babies and toddlers?

Covid:

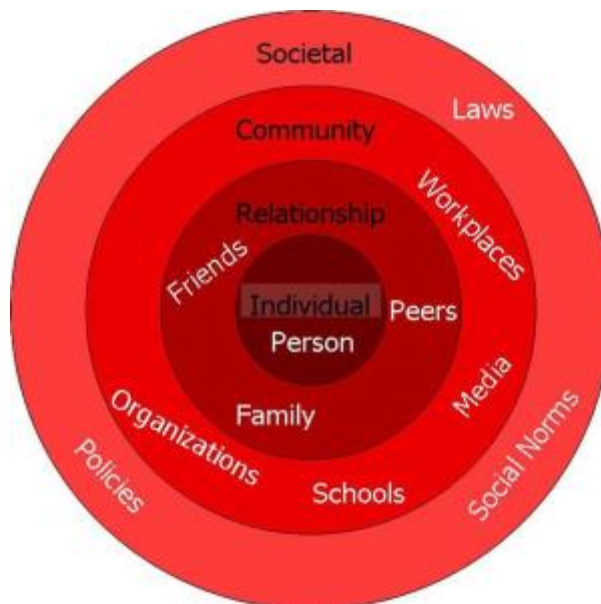
Since March 2020 there has been a Global Pandemic. This has resulted in country-wide lockdowns, lack of socialisation, limited outdoor time and overall isolation. This has caused an increase in poor mental health, domestic violence, and loneliness for a lot of adults, young people, and children (Usher *et al* 2020).



1 - Isolation

In agreement with Professor Pasco Fearon (2021) the first months and years of a baby's life are crucial for brain development, long-term health, and wellbeing as baby's brain doubles in size within the first year. Because of the pandemic there have been limited family support, social experiences such as play groups, and a lack of varied stimulating environments supporting baby cognition,

language, emotional and social milestones. Some children are finding it difficult to grasp social skills such as turn-taking, resolving conflict, and sharing toys. This reflects something of Bronfenbrenner's Theory (Bronfenbrenner 2005), where the impact of home life can be seen within a nursery setting. Due to the lack of stimulating experiences and social interactions a child has had during this pandemic, the process of integrating into a play group or nursery setting may take more time and intentional input from parents and key workers (Walton, 2021).



In a survey (Anna Freud Centre 2021) on the effects of the pandemic in the early years, nursery staff were able to see a significant change in children when returning to childcare. They noticed greater separation anxiety and difficulties in forming new relationships with staff and peers, and children were experiencing more unpleasant emotions, such as being less resilient, unsettled, quieter, and easily distressed. The nursery staff observed more challenging behaviour and greater issues with socialising, and the survey noted that some children had regressed, for example, children who were potty trained returned to nursery in nappies, and some children returned with poorer speech than before.

How distressing this is, thankfully not all is lost. WFYI (2021) are reassuring parents and professionals that babies are flexible and can easily adapt to different environments and situations. Through loving attention, nurturing and encouragement in their development, children can learn through play, relationship building, and a child/family-centred approach.

The enabling adult:

The role of the enabling adult is integral to children's learning and development. Respectful and holistic care is at the forefront. Rose and Rogers (2012) describe this role as the 'plural practitioner', a professional who wears many "hats" whilst dealing with a variety of demanding and complex tasks within the early years setting. In an ordinary day, one might comfort a crying child, listen to stories from the family's weekend, go shopping in the role play supermarket corner, observe outdoor play, find resources for activities, and assess children's communication skills and development. It is vital the professional is always aware and responsive to the children.



The Welsh Government (2021) states that practitioners are required to create a safe place for children to express their feelings, needs, likes, and dislikes. The enablers need to observe and respond to what they are saying both verbally and non-verbally. According to Children's Bureau (2019) responding to babies' cues, for example, in nappy changes, nap times and when they are hungry can contribute to positive development through an individualised approach. According to Dr. Pikler (The Pikler Approach, no date), both babies and professionals are working together in partnership, meaning professionals carry out tasks and routines with the child and not to the child. Pikler always encourages respect and gentleness when caring for children and babies with tone of voice, gentle physical touch, and allowing children the freedom to choose.



Both Piaget and Vygotsky (DeVries, 2000) researched the links between learning and play and how it significantly effects child development. Activities such as singing, reading, cuddling, clapping, eye-contact, and providing healthy foods from as young as birth can all help towards building secure attachments, resulting in impact on an child's social, emotional, and intellectual growth (Bowlby 2005). Being consistent in this approach and modelling attributes such as kindness, patience and respect along the way will almost always be imitated by the children as they get older. According to Bandura (2004) children watch and learn from practitioners.



Joubert (2009) believed that by following the child in their 'meanderings' and 'wanderings' - defining this as the practice of reflection with no time limitations - practitioners might stumble across significant teaching and educational conversations and opportunities. This creates space for child-led learning and thinking. For example, a child may notice snow falling outside and may want to put their coats on and go out to play in it. This is when the practitioner could talk about weather, clothing, snowmen, making it an interesting and exciting lesson for the children. Another example could be that the child is drawn to musical instruments; the practitioner could turn this into an enjoyable time of song, music, and dance. Following a child's lead will result in exciting, enjoyable play times. Equally, the Foundation Stage Guidance (2000) believed it is vital for practitioners to encourage child engagement in well-planned and thought-through play activities too, both indoors and outdoors.

The Te Wariki (The Ministry of Education New Zealand, 1996) is a framework that provides for children's early learning and development from an holistic, social, cultural context. It encourages partnership working between teachers, parents, families, and the community. This framework takes into consideration the influential roles each of these people have on a child's life and the need to work together in giving early years children the best opportunities and experiences for a richer and more rounded development.

When communication and trust between parents and practitioners have developed, everyone involved is able to have a greater understanding of the complexities of both home life and the child-care setting. This makes it more possible to provide rounded support and individualised care. According to Early Years Alliance (2019) the benefits of partnership working will improve children's educational outcomes, encourage parents to engage in children's learning at home, improve communication between parents and practitioners, and improve relationships between parents/families and children. Each of these will help to broaden child learning and development, help both parents and professionals measure child progression, and will enable practitioners to have an acute awareness to any safeguarding and welfare needs (Department of Education 2010 and Early Years Alliance 2019).

The Enabling Environment:

According to Froebel (Early Childhood Outdoors 2022), it is undeniable that time spent outdoors positively effects child development, self-esteem, physical and mental well-being, and promotes both curiosity and imagination. Maynard, Waters and Clement (2013) talk about time outdoors encouraging imaginary play, creativity, and a greater awareness, interest, and respect for nature. It is important that young children are given a variety of opportunities both indoors and outdoors to help give them the confidence to try new things, to support them in their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to enhancing their knowledge and understanding of the world and people around them (Welsh Government, 2021).



According to Early Childhood today (2021) children learn to problem solve as early as birth. Hungry new-borns move their heads to the side and open their mouths when near their breastfeeding mum to show they want milk. Toddlers may be more advanced in their problem-solving approach. For example, wanting their juice cup which has been placed higher up on a dining table, the toddler may manoeuvre furniture, stand on their tip toes, or even climb to get to their drink.

Hughes (2009) writes of four main keys that children follow when developing the skill of problem solving and reasoning; having a goal (being thirsty), seeing an obstacle (juice cup is too high up), working out a strategy (pulling up a chair), and achieving the goal (taking the cup and drinking). Adults must always be aware of danger, but equally it is important that we encourage and nurture young children in developing the skill of problem solving in every age and stage.



2 - 1. Thirsty toddler



3 - 2. Juice cup too high



4 - 3. Pulling up a chair

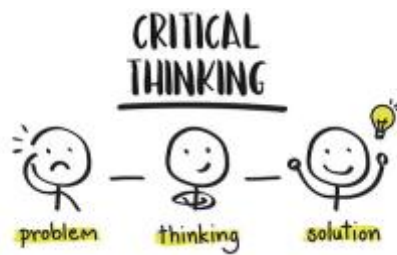


5 - 4. Toddler drinking from sip cup

The Reggio-Emilia is an early childhood pedagogical approach which supports self-directed, experiential learning within safe environments and positive relationships (Hocevar, Sebart and Stefanc 2013). One of their values and founding points is that the environment is the educator, alongside trained and observant practitioners (Gardner and Jones, 2017). Trevarthen, Delafield-Butt and Dunlop (2018) explain that the curiosity of children and the sensitivity of professionals towards child-centred learning can widen and quickly enhance child development; encouraging children to take initiative, explore surroundings, reach understanding and make independent decisions.

The role of the adult is to create a setting that brings wonder and curiosity to young children and babies. This can be done by asking children questions throughout the day, such as, 'Can you hear the pouring rain?', or when playing outside 'Why is the sky so high?', whilst allowing space and time for all children to answer (Early Childhood today, 2021). It is important professionals affirm their thoughts, ideas and opinions as this will help build in them confidence and a sense of security when

sharing ideas in the future. According to the Enabling Pathways document, this kind of affirmation will nurture their self-esteem, diversity, vocabulary, their creativity, their critical thinking skills, and their independence (Welsh Government 2021).



Enabling Experiences:

Oakwood Primary (Department of Education 2008) highlights the positive outcomes when creating a setting dedicated to enabling experiences for children. They believe that making all indoor and outdoor role-play areas, rooms, toys, paints, and colours accessible for all children, gives them space to be creative, curious, risk taking, independent learners. Montessori nurseries believe that specialist equipment for practical life learning, sensory play, and understanding topics such as maths, literacy and cultures should be provided for children to strengthen their development (Isaacs 2013) They also encourage professionals to teach and support children in a personal, child-led approach, by planning activities based on themes and tasks children enjoy and have asked for, for example cake baking, or enjoying the theme of The very hungry caterpillar book (Day nurseries 2021).

Sensory play:

Sensory play can be any kind of activity that engages children's senses, whether that be touch, smell, sight, sound, or taste. According to Forbes (2004) it also covers movement, spacial awareness, and balance. She expands by saying that senses are developed from birth onwards by looking, seeing, and understanding the world around them, and every sensory experience builds nerve connections that develops and grows the brain. According to Gascoyne (2018) children develop language skills by sensory, messy play, and start to learn simple concepts such as colours, numbers, textures. Some examples could be water play, sand pit, painting, and a soft play area with different lights, toys and textures to feel and look at.





Music and movement:

From babies as young as in the womb, listening to music can cause healthy brain development and facilitate neuron connections due to brain stimulation. Partanen *et al* (2013) encourages prenatal music exposure, as from week sixteen, the baby can hear and respond to music. Pregnant women can also use music as a stress reliever, as melodies can have a calming and soothing effect (Tiny Love, 2015). Movement and exercise also have positive benefits during pregnancy for the mother, as it can strengthen muscles in order to adapt to changing body shape and weight gain, and can even ease the discomfort of labour (NHS 2020).



Children of all ages love to engage in music and movement. It can help them to express emotions, whilst building confidence in the areas of creativity and imagination. Playing an instrument can improve fine motor skills and the development of hand-eye coordination. Singing can improve vocabulary and develop language in a fun way, whilst learning about a variety of cultures. Movement, singing and music can improve focus and memory, as there may be times children have to recall actions or words back due to patterns, rhythms, and rhymes. These can promote independence, self-esteem, enjoyment, and even teamwork as children learn to play, listen and enjoy together (Austin Children's Academy, 2017).



Music therapy, according to Edward (2011) and Bowlby (1951) can also support parent and baby in developing a secure attachment and bond, which is why parent and baby singing groups are often encouraged during pregnancy by midwives and health visitors.

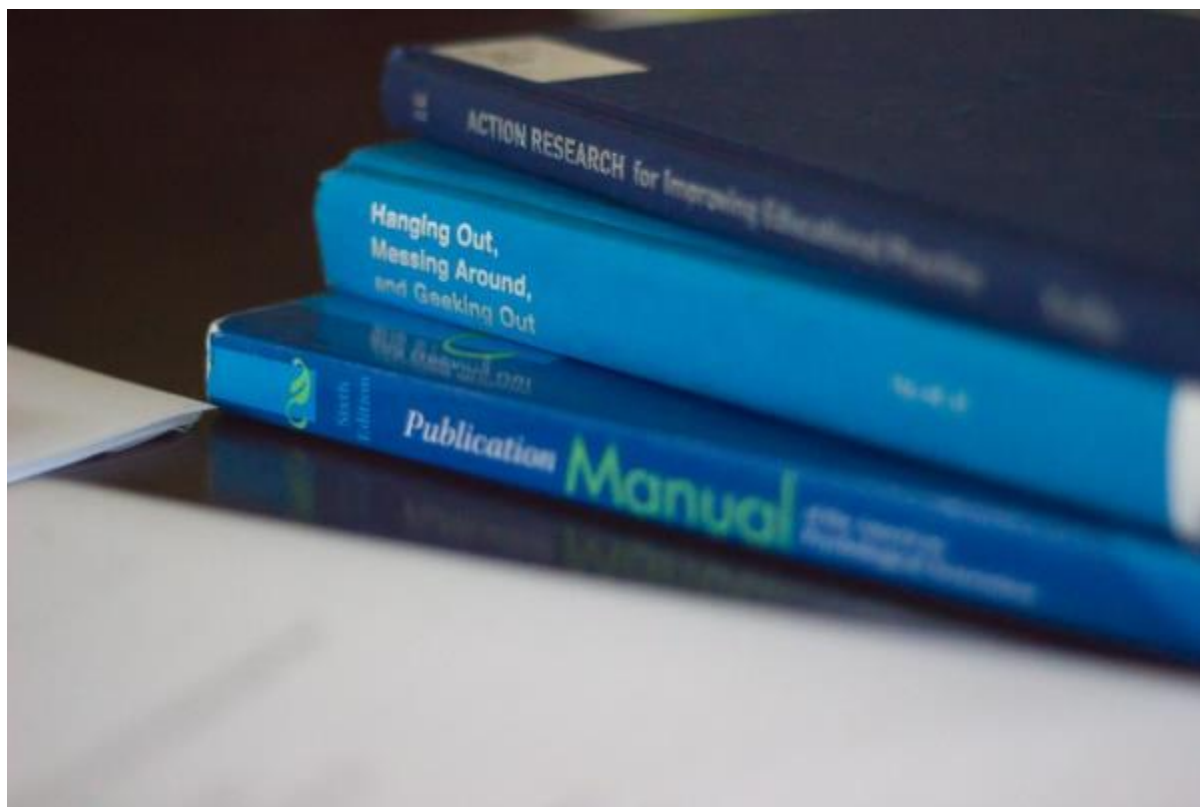


6 - Secure Attachment bond

Conclusion:

Exceptional care in the first 1000 days is vital for both mother, baby, and extended family. Consistency in support and trusted relationships can calm anxieties and fears for everyone involved, making pregnancy and new parenting experiences more enjoyable. It is vital the professionals are aware of family dynamics and circumstances during pregnancy so that sufficient support is implemented.

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