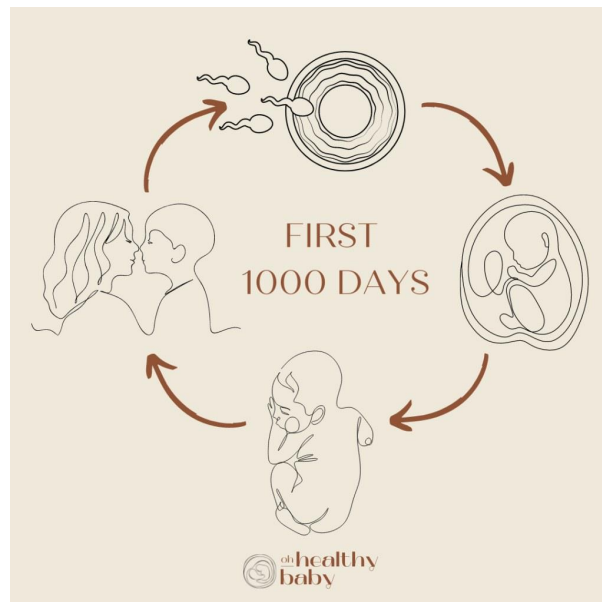




Exceptional Care in the First 1000 Days

What are the first 1000 days?

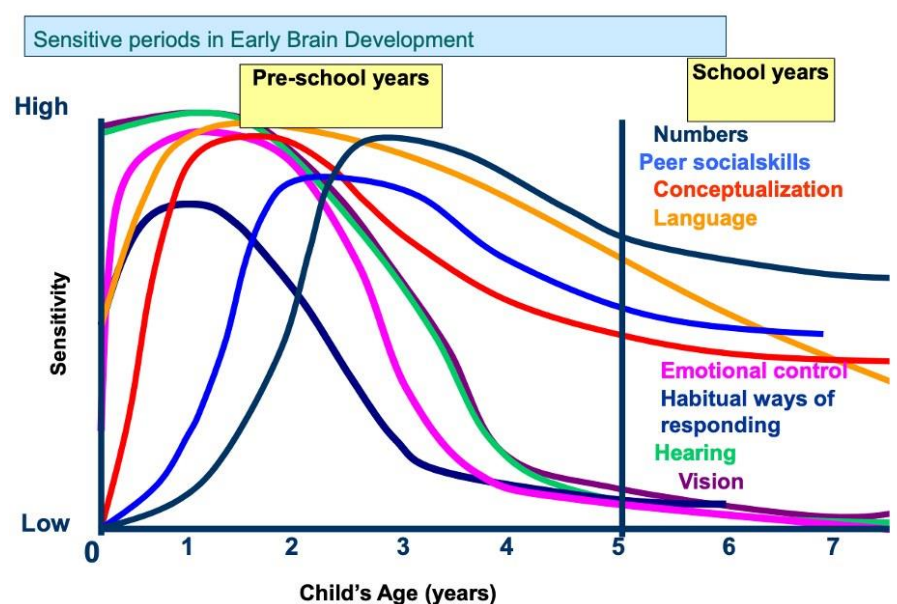


1 - (Source: Ohhealthybaby, n.d.)

The first 1000 days refers to the period between conception and the child's second birthday (Karakochuk *et al.*, 2018). This period is crucial for a child's health, development and

wellbeing (Yates, 2015). This is because during the first 1000 days, the foundations of a child's development are laid, and the trajectory is established (House of Commons, 2019).

As stated by HM Government (2021), the first 1000 days of life is the most vulnerable time of a child's life. Barnardo's (2019, quoted in House of Commons, 2019, pp. 7) says that when development falls behind the norm of the first 1000 days, it is more likely the child will continue to fall behind others who have had a better start to life. This is supported by Yates (2015) who says that stress and malnourishment will result in reduced energy, which affects developing brain functions and therefore unintentionally increases the inequalities in society at this very early start. If these adversities are left unaddressed, the hardships that the child has faced can stay with them throughout their lives and can harm themselves as well as others (House of Commons, 2019). This can be shown in the graph below.



2 - (Source: Southeast Regional Intersectoral Committee, 2011)

The graph shows that the first 1000 days are crucial for development. It shows that most areas of brain development peak well before a child is two years old. After this time, a child's sensitivity towards these skills falls dramatically. This shows that the first 1000 days are fundamental for the development of a child and that the brain grows quicker in the first 1000 days than any other time in life (Yates, 2015). This is supported by the Welsh Government (2024) who states that babies are born with one hundred billion brain cells and that through a stimulating and loving environment, connections are established.

Likhar and Patil (2022) say that the first 1000 days sets the foundation for a child's long-term health and that development depends on good nutrition during pregnancy and the early years of life. During the first 1000 days, the developing brain is vulnerable, and poor nutrition can be a dangerous threat to a child's development. According to Harvard University (2015), when the brain senses a threat, it can activate a stress response, and this response can have a serious threat on the developing brain. This is because when an infant is

experiencing toxic stress, they are at risk of permanent changes to the brain's architecture, which can lead to mental disorders and poor health outcomes in adulthood (Franke, 2014). Therefore, with proper nutrition in the first 1000 days, the brain is given the correct nutrients needed to develop without stress and the infant is given the best opportunity to develop, learn and thrive (Likhar and Patal, 2022).



3 - Ted Talk on the first 1000 days and whether they determine the rest of our lives.



4 - The first 1000 days by UNICEF



5 - Nutrition in the first 1000 days by UNICEF

What is Exceptional Caregiving?



6 - (Source: Hey Sleepy Baby, n.d.)



7 - Video of a baby's development from using the Pikler Triangle.

Exceptional caregiving refers to a caregiver being an enabling adult who gives outstanding care to the children they are responsible for. This includes being a nurturing and loving presence to the child, while offering an enabling environment (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). The World Health Organisation (2018) states that exceptional caregiving is important in the first 1000 days as it supports the development of a child.

According to Harvard University (2024), more than one million neural connections are formed every second. These connections are formed by the experiences that a child has. These experiences include interactions with adults, and the activities that are provided to them (Stead, 2024). Therefore, the environment that caregivers create for an infant sets the stage for lifelong learning. Adolph and Hoch (2019) state that motor skills create opportunities for exploration and enable babies to create new opportunities. This is supported by Emmi Pikler, who advocated for freedom of movement, which relates to free, uninterrupted play (Mason, 2023). Sandseter and Kennair (2011) suggest that children need to encounter calculated risks to develop their own risk-taking skills. By providing challenges in an early years setting, infants are able to take on challenges that promote their development and confidence (Stead, 2024). This can be shown through risky play. An example of an introduction to risky play is Pikler's triangle, which is a climbing frame designed for babies (Lily and River, 2022). The apparatus gives infants free movement and helps to develop their balance, which allows an infant to develop their motor skills independently and build their self-confidence (Marlen, 2019).

The importance of an enabling environment is shown in the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. It states that it is important that the environment is not only physical, but also emotional, so that strong relationships between the practitioner and child can grow (Welsh Government, 2022a). Relationships between practitioners and children can have a positive impact on the world and can be shown through Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. In this theory, children are at the core of an ever-expanding world, which is made up of four systems which are directly influencing the child (Sadownik, 2023). One of these systems is the microsystem, which includes people who have direct contact and influence on the child (Sadownik, 2023). This includes an early year's practitioner. Through exceptional caregiving, love, and instilling confidence and feelings of self-worth, practitioners are transforming the lives of children and the world around them (UNICEF USA, 2018).

The importance of the relationship between infants and caregivers can also be shown through John Bowlby's attachment theory. The theory's focus point is on the bonding between caregivers and children, particularly the impact this has on development (Keenan *et al.*, 2016). According to Wilson-Ali *et al.* (2019), Bowlby believed that children need to develop close attachments with practitioners to be provided with security during the absence of their main caregiver. This relates to Elinor Goldschmied's key person approach. According to Barnardos (2016), this approach is a method of care in early years settings where the focus is aimed at enabling attachments between children and practitioners. In this approach, the practitioner is given a small group of children in which they are responsible for and forms an attachment with each child through the enabling environment (Murphy, 2022). Attachments between infants and practitioners are vital as the nurturing environment created by strong relationships develop an infant's mental health. This is supported by the Department for Education (2023), who claim that children in safe environments, with adults

that they trust, learn to self-regulate their emotions and communicate their needs effectively.

The role of an Early Years Practitioner in supporting children and their families in the first 1000 days



8 - (Source: JustChildren, 2023)

The role of an early years practitioner in supporting children within the first 1000 days is to be an enabling adult (Welsh Government, 2022a). This includes safeguarding and providing a secure environment. Safeguarding in the first 1000 days is important as this is a critical time during development (House of Commons, 2019). The NSPCC (2025) state that over half a million children suffer from abuse in the UK every year. Therefore, the role of a practitioner is to identify signs of abuse and report concerns to their designated safeguarding person (Welsh Government, 2022b). According to Maslow (1943), children need structure in their lives as inconsistency and unpredictability can cause children to feel anxious and unsafe. Therefore, children need a routine in place that they can count upon and thrive under, especially through difficult times. Therefore, secure environments bring children the opportunity to play and develop, away from the stress caused by the world around them (Laxton and Cooper, 2022).

Early Years practitioners must support families during the first 1000 days. This includes offering emotional support and being a person for the parents to offload onto. Education Scotland (2020) highlights that some find the experience of being a parent challenging, and that there may be times where practitioners need to offer support and signpost to other service providers. It is important that an early year practitioner gives tailored advice as children's experiences in life are unique and not all support is catered towards that child's needs (Welsh Government, 2022a). This is supported by government legislation which states that professionals who are working in partnership must ensure that families are receiving holistic support that tailors to their specific needs (*Childcare Act 2006*). Therefore, it is important to work in partnership with parents and other service providers. Partnership working refers to a broad range of actions and can be described as people and organisations

coming together to achieve a common purpose (Community Change, 2010). Working in partnership with parents is essential in the first 1000 days as research shows that involving parents into children's learning is the most important factor in enabling children to do well in life (Department for Education, 2021).

Maternal Factors

Marmot (2010) states that what happens in the womb has lifelong effects on an individual's health. Therefore, it is important to consider the maternal factors that could impact development. Indrio *et al.* (2023) state that by focusing on the mother's health during pre-conception, the development and health of the newborn is improved. Likhar and Patil (2022) believe that poor maternal nutrition during pregnancy can result in poor birth outcomes. This is supported by the NHS (2023) who state that a balanced diet is needed during pregnancy, with plenty of fruit and vegetables, to provide vitamins and minerals. This is needed as poor diets lacking in nutrients, such as iron and calcium, can cause pre-eclampsia and postpartum haemorrhages, stillbirths, low birthweight and developmental delays (UNICEF, 2024).

One support service that is offered during pregnancy is the Foodwise in Pregnancy app, which has been developed by NHS Wales professionals. The Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board (n.d.) states that the Foodwise in Pregnancy app features nutrition advice with recipe and meal planning, exercise advice and practical ideas to keep active during pregnancy.

The Foodwise in Pregnancy app



Are you pregnant?

Do you want to know more about what foods are best for you and your baby during pregnancy and beyond?

Are you unsure where to find advice and support about eating well and keeping active in pregnancy that you can really trust?

Would you like quick and easy access to this information - all in one place and at the touch of a button?

This FREE new app, developed by NHS Wales professionals is designed to provide all this, and more. It brings together trusted nutrition, physical activity and healthy weight advice to support you throughout your pregnancy journey.

There are six main sections to explore at your own pace, all with interactive games, quizzes and tools, including;

- how to achieve a healthy diet for you and your baby
- practical ideas for keeping active
- step by step exercises ideal for pregnancy
- setting goals to keep you on track
- recipe ideas, label reading, shopping tips and meal plans




Download on the App Store

GET IT ON Google Play



The app is available to download from Apple Store and Google Play

9 - (Source: NHS Wales, n.d.)

UNICEF (2018) recommends that babies should be breastfed in the first six months of life and continued up to two years old or beyond. Likhar and Patil (2022) state that breast milk provides all the nutrients a baby will need develop. Additionally, colostrum aids in immunity building and infection prevention (Likhar and Patil, 2022). Capitani *et al.* (2023) believe that inadequate breastfeeding can result in developmental problems. This is supported by Indrio *et al.* (2023) who state that cognitive development is linked with exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months of life.

While some mothers state that if it was not for the support from their local hospital, they would have given up on breastfeeding, many women have reported that they have felt a lack of support with breastfeeding on labour wards (House of Commons, 2019). Many mothers report that they have suffered from anxiety and depression as a result of worrying about breastfeeding and not receiving adequate support (House of Commons, 2019). Therefore, support is needed to provide help to mothers during this time. Breastfeeding support groups can help with the difficulties that mothers may be facing and enable mothers to share experiences with others (Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, n.d.). Cardiff and Vale University Health Board (n.d.) provide breastfeeding support groups led by health visitors and the maternity services Seren team most days a week.

These support groups are available [here](#)

Tommy's

The pregnancy and baby charity

10 - An excellent charity that provides support during conception, pregnancy and after birth. [Tommy's - The pregnancy and baby charity](#)



11 - A brilliant website by the NHS which gives advice during pregnancy, birth and parenthood. [Better Health - Start for Life](#)

Challenges in providing high quality care

Poverty

There are many challenges in providing high quality care. Poverty is one of these many challenges. Poverty can include low income, poor housing conditions, and a lack of resources to fulfil basic needs (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024b). Poverty is a significant challenge in the UK due to the cost of living crisis. According to the Child Commissioner for Wales (2024), 30% of children in Wales are living in poverty. In fact, child poverty is expected to rise further (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024a). Capitani *et al.* (2023) suggests that these adverse situations compromise the ability for parents to provide high quality care to their children. This is supported by NHS Wales (2023) who state that poverty effects a parent's ability to provide the basic needs to support their child.

Poverty affects children's health. This is supported by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2024) who argue that children living in poverty have less access to medical care. This is because of the costs relating to travel, parking and loss of earnings (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2024). Additionally, dental care has become difficult for children living in poverty. Bidmead *et al.* (2024) state that NHS waiting lists have become excessively long. Children's dental health is deteriorating and has become a national problem, yet 8 in 10 NHS practices are not taking on new child patients for treatment (Dentistry, 2022). Parents living in poverty are unable to afford private dental treatment, and children's health is suffering as result (Bidmead *et al.*, 2024).



12 - (Source: The Guardian, 2023)

Covid-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant impacts on early childhood education and care. According to the UK Parliament (2021), COVID-19 has impacted the early years sector in many ways, including the closure of settings and child development. Although there were recruitment issues and problems retaining staff prior to the pandemic, COVID-19 has continued to impact the sector (UK Parliament, 2021). Ofsted (2021) report that there is an ongoing decline of the number of childcare providers. Infact, the number of childcare providers registered with Ofsted fell by 4% between August 2020 and August 2021 (Ofsted, 2021). This continuous decline is detrimental to the early years sector, considering that there were issues relating to the number of staff and childcare providers beforehand.

The pandemic has put vulnerable children at risk. According to the Children's Society (2020), children who are living in households with domestic violence and poverty face increased hardship. This is supported by Harvard University (2015) who note that prolonged stress responses can harm children's development. While confined at home, children are not receiving the support they got before the pandemic. During lockdown, young children did not have access to trusted adults beyond their household (NSPCC, 2020). This resulted in abuse and neglect not being caught by health workers, early years practitioners or social workers.

The Child Commissioner (2020) reports that over one million children did not have access to the outdoors during lockdown. This has directly impacted development. Outdoor play is an essential part of development and encourages young children to make their own choices and to build their independence (Tinney, 2022). Gray (2011) states that during the pandemic, there were less opportunities for children to play outdoors, which has led to poor mental health, including feelings of anxiety and depression. This is supported by the UK Parliament (2021) who suggests that infants who have had lack of access to early years settings are showing a lack of emotional and behavioural development.



13 - (Source: Family Tree Doula Services, 2021)



14 - Video on speech delays caused by the pandemic

Activities that provide meaningful learning



15 - (Source: Early Impact, 2024)

Treasure Baskets

Elinor Goldschmied was a teacher who worked in an institution for single mothers and babies, where she developed the idea of heuristic play (Murphy, 2022). Through this,

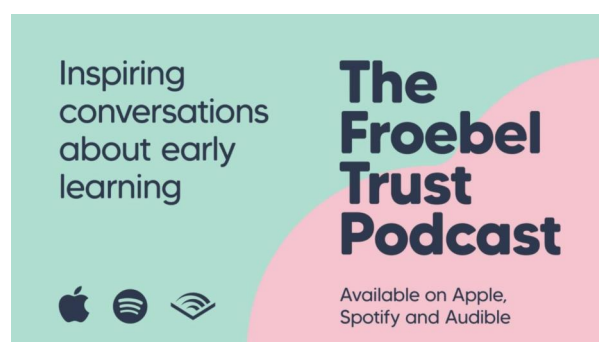
Goldschmied introduced sensory learning to babies through her idea of treasure baskets (Murphy, 2022). Treasure baskets are a collection of around 100 natural household and recycled objects placed in a wicker basket (Froebel Trust, 2024).

Objects can include:

- Loofah
- Keys
- Pegs
- Brush
- Spatulas
- Shells

(Goldschmied and Jackson, 1994)

Infants can gain sensory experiences from the simplest of things, such as the different textures of household objects (Stead, 2024). This is supported by Goldschmied and Jackson (1994) state that treasure baskets help support brain development as they provide a vast variety of everyday items which cater to different sensory needs. NHS Borders (n.d.) state that a baby's brain is growing faster than at any other time in life and they start absorbing the senses around them as soon as they are born. Treasure baskets allow babies to develop their cognitive skills through problem-solving, memory and reasoning. This is because babies can choose whether to play with an item, how long they interact with the treasure basket and how they explore it, by using their mouth or hands (Forbes, 2004). This is why it is important during the first 1000 days for an infant to be provided with a rich sensory experience.





17 - (Source: EYR, 2020)

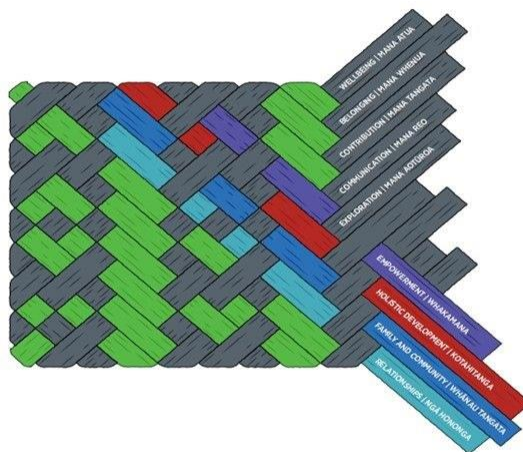


18 - Video on Loose Parts

Loose Parts

According to Play Wales (2017), children need to be in environments where they can manipulate, invent and develop their own ideas through play. This can be done through loose parts. Loose parts was created by Simon Nicholson in 1971 through his paper called 'The Theory of Loose Parts' (Play Wales, 2017). The list of loose parts that can be used are limitless, but can include natural items such as pinecones, sticks, shells and stones (Play Wales, 2017). Loose parts can also be scrap materials such as tyres, guttering, crates and planks of wood (Play Wales, 2017). Loose parts is an open-ended type of play which offers limitless possibilities (Play Wales, 2017). For example, a stick becomes a magic wand, a walking stick or can be put in water to float. Loose parts support a child's cognitive development. This is because loose parts enable a child's creativity, curiosity and imagination (Play Scotland, n.d.) Loose parts also provides children with meaningful learning. This is because it offers children independence and opportunities to think, plan and make decisions (Welsh Government, 2022a).

International Approaches



19 - (Source: Sightlines Initiative, 2024)



20 - Video about Te Whāriki turning twenty

Te Whāriki is the early years curriculum in New Zealand. The curriculum has four principles which are entwined with five strands (Ministry of Education, 2017). These four principles are empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships (Ministry of Education, 2017). Te Whāriki covers the education of children from birth to five years old (Ministry of Education, 2017). While the Welsh government recognises that development is rapid from birth to age five, the Welsh curriculum is aimed for ages three to four (Education Wales, 2022).

Te Whāriki recognises that each child is on a unique journey in life (Ministry of Education, 2017). This is similar to the Welsh curriculum, which acknowledges that all children come from unique backgrounds (Welsh Government, 2022a). Te Whāriki is presented in both English and Māori, which shows that New Zealand is proud of their culture (Ministry of Education, 2017). In fact, the curriculum states that children will learn Māori, the indigenous

language of New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 2024). Similarly, the Welsh curriculum is proud of Wales' identity as the curriculum values the Welsh language and states that the language should be taught in all settings (Wales Government, 2022a).

Te Whāriki has a strong emphasis on the relationships between teachers and families. This is supported by Te Mahau (2024) who state that responsive relationships between teachers and parents support all aspects of a child's learning, and that the children's understanding of themselves and their relationships with others in the early years are crucial for positive life outcomes. Similarly, the Welsh Government (2022a) recommend that settings work collaboratively with parents as this will provide positive experiences. Therefore, Te Whāriki and the Welsh curriculum are alike, and both provide exceptional care to children.

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