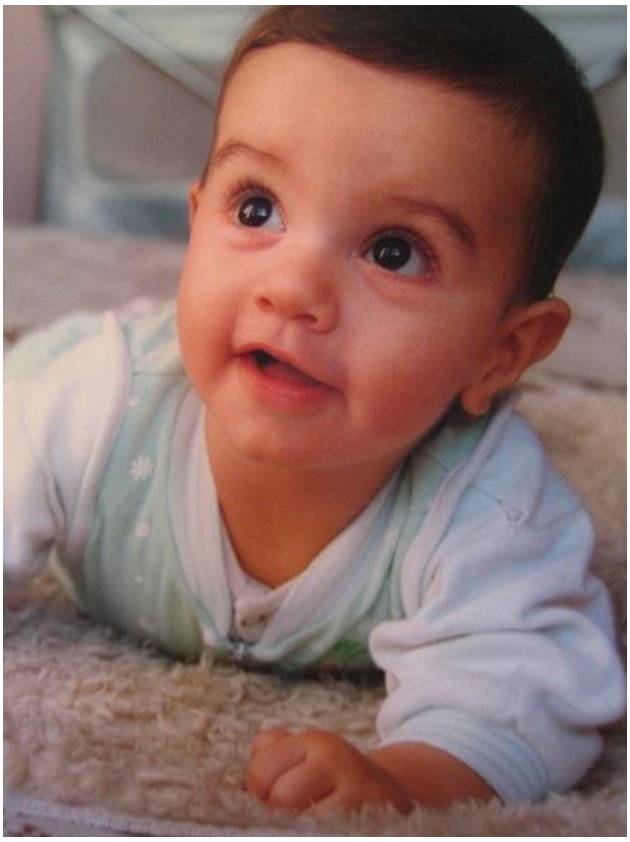

The First 1000 days

What is the First 1000 days?

The first 1000 days in a child's life describe the period between conception and the age of two. This is a period of rapid and intense development. The first 1000 days is significant to the development of a child and there are many factors which can influence it. As practitioners, we try to ensure that we provide an enabling environment to support the pregnant mother before the birth of the child, and the child and family after birth. The term holistic care marries well to the care of babies under the age of two as at this stage of development, care and learning are inseparable (Brodie, 2018).

1 - Life before birth (Naked Science, 2015)

The baby begins to learn while in the womb, this carries on after birth where the baby has a powerful motivation and ability to learn.

While in the womb the embryo collaborates with the mother and between them, they construct the placenta which will serve both as a filter to stop anything toxic from reaching baby and as a nutrient rich hub. This system of protection works efficiently given the mother already has a healthy lifestyle but can fail to protect baby if the mother is using drugs or alcohol or is heavily dependent on nicotine. Similarly, the unborn foetus can respond to a whole range of biochemical signals from his mother, demonstrating to him information about the world outside. The food the mother ingests, along with stresses in her life all have an effect on the developing foetus (Gerhardt, 2015).

Babies brains begin making connections from birth and some of the most important connections are made in the first 1000 days. A young child's brain is rapidly developing, and the responses received by them promote this development. Babies are born with a blueprint for development. They search or seek out interactions with their parents and carers and model or mirror these interactions. All of these experiences shape who the baby is and how they feel about themselves. We should therefore try to ensure these interactions are positive (Queensland Government, 2023).

Activities and Play

Frederick Froebel believed that “play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child’s soul.” (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014) He expressed that using play children form their understanding of the world and his theories have influenced other important theorists such as Maria Montessori and Rudolph Steiner. Froebel considered the child important in his/her entirety, and believed that environment, mental and physical health, emotional well-being, and spiritual aspects of development were equally as important. As practitioners it is important that children should be given what they require to learn at their point of development and should be encouraged to build confidence through their learning (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, no date).

Page, Clare & Nutbrown (2013) acknowledge this when they say that Play is the work of children and needs to be recognised as important and a vital tool for the child’s learning.

It should be noted that for babies and particularly young children, play opportunities are in direct control of the adults providing care. The adults are required to provide both the resources and to ensure that the environment is sufficient to support the play experience. Play is an evolving experience

between the stages of birth and two years of age. What will start as an adult controlled experience will become a more independent process as development occurs (Brodie, 2018).

*2 - **Sensory Play – Sensory play is any activity that aims to stimulate at least one of a child's senses. This usually refers to hearing, touch, smell or even taste but can sometimes include movement or balance (BBC, 2023).***

*3 - **Imaginary Play – Imaginary Play is any activity where a child will use their imaginations to role-play scenarios they have seen, heard or would like to experience. It is usually open-ended and unstructured with no set goals or rules to inhibit flow (Startearly, 2023).***

Treasure Baskets

Treasure baskets are an excellent way of providing babies with a complete sensory play experience. A well-considered treasure basket can stimulate all the senses and will incorporate smell, touch, sight and sound and where appropriate, taste. Treasure baskets are normally made up of natural resources which can be adapted to safely let young babies experience new sensations. Textures should be considered, and the sensory experience provided needs to be properly contemplated. Babies should be encouraged to explore the items with care and with full support of the parents or practitioners. Babies will generally explore the items at their own pace, choosing and investigating pieces independently when encouraged to do so (Brodie, 2018).

Treasure baskets provide an excellent opportunity to observe babies as they discover and play, it is possible to discover patterns of behaviour as we observe. The practitioner can use the knowledge gleaned at these play sessions to develop more play opportunities based on the choices and interests shown (Nutbrown, 2011).

Heuristic Play

Exploratory play or heuristic play is an excellent method for older babies and toddlers. This form of play encourages investigation and experimentation and problem-solving skills. Heuristic play can involve a wide range of items that may be familiar to the children, items that they may find around their homes, varying in size and shape colour and texture and natural materials collected by the children in their

home lives. Children can begin to think about size and capacity when discovering which items fit inside one another and exploring sets, shapes, sound and texture (Brodie, 2018). Heuristic play can take many forms but can be realised when toddlers are seen to be pushing, pulling, rolling, filling and emptying, banging, piling and slotting different objects with their counterparts. The play possibilities are endless and are only limited to the imaginations of the child and the practitioner (Hughes, 2009, p.27).

The Pikler Approach

The Pikler Approach was founded by Dr Emmi Pikler and is based on nurturing a kind and respectful relationship between the adult and the child, measured by naturally based motor development, caring moments, free movement, and uninterrupted play (The Pikler Collection, 2012). It is important that the environment supports full autonomy for the children, putting the power of play totally within their hands, such as within Pikler nurseries. Children who set their own goals and challenges and who are not challenged by practitioners who wish to push them past their current abilities. They should be encouraged to explore the environment around them with excitement and enthusiasm (Sagastui, Herron, Angura, 2021).

Benefits of play

The benefits of several types of play to children is great. Children will acquire and build on language skills and social skills through play. Theorists such as Jean Piaget discuss the importance of the development of language to the development of the child. Piaget indicated that there were four developmental stages which he said ranged from birth to adulthood. Piaget saw learning as a whole process which evolves as a direct result of children interacting with their environments (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014). Piaget argued that a child must understand a concept before they can express that concept and verbalise it.

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky also put a large emphasis on the concept of language development. Vygotsky proposed that social interactions in a child's life will lead to changes in their thoughts and behaviours. He believed that the pace and quality of a child's development will depend strongly on the interactions that they experience, the people who they experience them with and the culture that they are from (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky noticed the tendency of young children to narrate their play to themselves. Piaget referred to this as egocentric speech, believing it to be the result of the child being unable to think from another's perspective. Vygotsky, however, disagreed with this classification, instead believing that the child used this monologue as a means to reflect and regulate their behaviour. A child who talks to themselves is demonstrating that their thoughts are organised and structured (Keenan & Evans, 2009).

Noam Chomsky developed the nativist view of language development. Chomsky argued that language was the product of an unlearned, biologically based, internal mental structure and not a learned behaviour. Chomsky believed that the complex rules and structures that formulated language were too intricate to be acquired by children and therefore must already be part of our biological heritage. Instances where children had not been exposed to language but had subsequently not gone on to acquire language disproved these theories but it is thanks to his work that we now recognise that children have an innate and biologically based ability to learn language (Brodie, 2018).

The Curiosity Approach

The Curiosity approach is inspired by the teachings of theorists such as Reggio Emilia and Maria Montessori. Maria Montessori believed that learning should be based around the instinctive human

tendencies to act, explore and create. Montessori observed that learning happened through repetition, concentration and imagination and that learners needed an independence about their actions, making their own decisions about what they should do and how to control their own behaviours. Montessori's methods were very Froebelian in nature and based learning around immersion in to the subject in an explorative and creative way (Nutbrown & Clough, 2014).

Loris Malaguzzi was an Italian teacher and founder of the Reggio Emilia approach to early education. Malaguzzi believed that children should be at the centre of their learning, that they were powerful individuals and should be encouraged to create their own knowledge. Malaguzzi based his theories upon a deep respect for children, their rights and the development of children as independent learners. His theories evolved from the resolve to provide better futures for the children in his village following years of occupation during the Second World War (Nutbrown, 2011).

The Curiosity Approach Based around these theories the Curiosity Approach was founded by Lindsay Hellyn and Stephanie Barrett and aims to empower and ignite passion in practitioners to create beautiful and stimulating play spaces for children. Focusing attention more to natural resources, loose parts and heuristic play the Curiosity Approach promotes awe and wonder in early Childhood (The Curiosity Approach, 2023).

Environments

The use of creative, interesting and interactive environments can be effective tools for the developing child. As practitioners, we can plan and create an environment which will reflect and satisfy the needs of the babies and children within our care (Page, Clare & Nutbrown, 2013).

As practitioners we need to ensure that we promote enabling environments. In the Reggio Emilia curriculum this is sometimes referred to as the third teacher. Environments should have adequate space, light and resources to facilitate exploration and stimulate challenge. This has been proven to be a useful mechanism when dealing with behaviour management (Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013).

Brodie (2018) suggests that both the emotional and physical environments need to be considered when we think about the use of space. Thought should be directed to equipment, layout and to the flow of the space to satisfy the physical elements and how we feel about the space needs to be considered when we consider the emotional element. It is important that we create an enabling environment which means that we need to facilitate children's learning. Equipment, activities and the space occupied is required to be age appropriate and inclusive. Creativity also needs to be addressed when thinking about the play space. Children need to be able to express themselves during the play session, exploring the

resources, activities and environment. Overall, the space should be a learning environment containing rich and varied resources and activities that support the children's learning, promote confidence within a safe parameter while still managing risk and challenge (Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013).

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is ensuring that all people are valued and treated equally and that every attempt is being made to make sure that settings and activities are accessible to all. To be inclusive, we need to have the view that different needs are recognised as opportunities and not barriers (Gasper, 2010). Inclusive care and education is about everyone participating and removing exclusionary practice from the environment (Nutbrown, 2011).

Every Child Matters (2004) highlighted the need for inclusive policy within the Early Years Sector. The framework aimed to support parents from pregnancy and onwards and to provide ALL children with the best possible start in life. Inclusion is heavily dependent on partnerships between families, practitioners and government agencies. It is about recognising that everyone has an important contribution to make and the value this holds within society. At the heart of Early Years practice there should be a recognition of diversity, difference, contribution and need, driving us forward. Inclusion is important because every child has a right to belong (Page, Clare & Nutbrown, 2013).

Professional Partnerships

Within the role of Early Years Practitioner there is a requirement to work in partnership with many other individuals and organisations. These professional partnerships are important as they ensure that the needs of children and families are identified and that they receive appropriate help from all relevant agencies. It is possible to address issues more efficiently and to give a more comprehensive view of the help required. It is also important that we build and maintain professional partnerships with parents and carers, working together to provide the best care and education for the children who we jointly care for. Through successful partnership and multi-agency working parents can seek advice and support from specialist agencies who can provide assistance with financial matters, health concerns, counselling and support as well as tailored help with issues such as breast feeding and parenting classes (Gasper, 2010).

Bronfenbrenner's 'Human Ecology' theory (1979) supports the interactive nature of the relationship between home and education environments and the clear benefits of a structured and nurturing system (Jarvis, George & Holland, 2013). Bronfenbrenner suggested that children are influenced by a number of social systems and that the child is at the centre of these. He indicated that the microsystem comprising of the direct family and peer group would have the most influence on the child. The mesosystem would provide contact between social structures such as parent and toddler groups. The exosystem would describe aspects which would have an influence on the microsystem for example parents employment, relationships between extended family members. And the macrosystem describing the cultural elements that all these environments exist within for instance language, culture and ethnicity (Brodie, 2018).

Challenges

The development rate of babies is so great that practitioners need to be aware that it will be almost impossible to see from day to day and they should therefore be conscious of the need to continually

assess and adapt their processes to meet the growing needs of the babies and children within their care. It is important to recognise the roles and responsibilities of caring for young babies and children are hard both on the physical and emotional self and in addition to this care, routines can change rapidly due to the development rate of the child (Brodie, 2018).

For successful professional partnerships to occur all professionals and external agencies must have a shared vision. Professional partnerships can be challenging when no ground rules have been established and when lines of communication are not strong. Good communication helps to limit misunderstandings and ensures a more efficient relationship, where the exchange of information is a benefit to all parties involved. There must be a mutual level of respect for the knowledge and information each professional brings to the table. Sharing of information needs to be completed within the restraints of the Data Protection Act 1998 and not seen as a barrier to building close professional relationships and improving the quality of care provided (Gasper 2010).

There are **challenges** within the use of play as a teaching tool. Indeed, Brodie (2018), argues that learning should always be considered an off shoot of the child's play and not the other way around. It is important that the role of the teacher is incorporated into the play to ensure that the child has a valid and rich experience. Teaching is more of an overt behaviour with young children and babies and is undertaken more in their modelling of language, interactions and attitudes.

What is Respectful Care?

The emotional environment that we create within the setting is important not only for the babies and children but for the families and staff. Children who spend the majority of their time at the setting need to be exposed to appropriate emotional experiences so that they can develop solid foundations for their emotional health. Bowlby (1969) explored family bonds and separations and how these attachments and bonds affected children's developmental progress and emotional well-being. It is important that we recognise the need for children to feel safe and secure before they embark on the risk and challenge necessary to aid development. It is valuable that we instill in children a sense of belonging, that they feel respected, valued and cared for (Brodie, 2018).

Constant communication through routine helps create and support bonds. (BBC, 2023).

The practitioner can use important routines such as feeding, changing and napping to connect with the child, constantly communicating and reassuring. The use of routines and talking about the routines supports their individual ability to take control of their day but also helps bond children together in a social group with shared experiences (Brooker, 2008).

Professional Love is a term coined by Dr Jools Page to characterise the depth of feeling that practitioners feel towards the children within their care. Professional Love describes the affectionate and caring practices and behaviours that occur naturally when a practitioner will care for a baby or child even when these tasks are a requirement of your employment (Brodie, 2018).

International Approaches

What is the Te Whariki approach?

Te Whariki is a document which sets out the curriculum policies and frameworks from birth to the age of five in New Zealand. It is a widely acclaimed system and aims to provide children's learning and development within a sociocultural context. Great emphasis is placed on the relationships between teachers, parents and families. Within the Te Whariki principles, children are seen as central to their community and learning is considered a shared experience. Within the framework there are four foundation principles which are;

1. Empowerment – *Whakamana* – Empowering the children to learn and grow
2. Holistic Development – *Kotahitanga* – Reflecting the holistic way that children learn and grow.
3. Family and Community – *Whanau Tangata* – Recognising the family and wider community as integral to the early childhood curriculum.
4. Relationships – *Nga Hononga* – Acknowledging that children learn through responsive and reciprocal relationships with people, places and things.

Within the four principals there run several strands, well-being, belonging, contributing, communicating and exploring which together set a tailored framework for each child in New Zealand (Nutbrown, 2011).

What is the Steiner-Waldorf Approach?

This approach recognises the work of two men, Rudolph Steiner – an Austrian scientist and philosopher and Emil Molt – managing director of the Waldorf Astoria cigarette factory. Steiner and Molt worked

together to establish the Steiner-Waldorf school in 1919 and went on to open kindergartens in 1926. Rudolph Steiner based his teachings around anthroposophy, which is an unique way of looking at ones life in connection with ones spirit. Social issues were the cornerstone of the Steiner-Waldorf school movement which even 80 years after his death is still internationally active and thriving. It offers a socially inclusive and co-educational alternative to state education systems.

working together

Rudolph Steiner believed that an importance should be placed on attachment, protection and nurturing, the role of the adult being one as a model of behaviour and the role of the child to play freely. There is little use of technology within the Steiner-Waldorf model and all toys and equipment are made of natural materials (Nutbrown, 2011).

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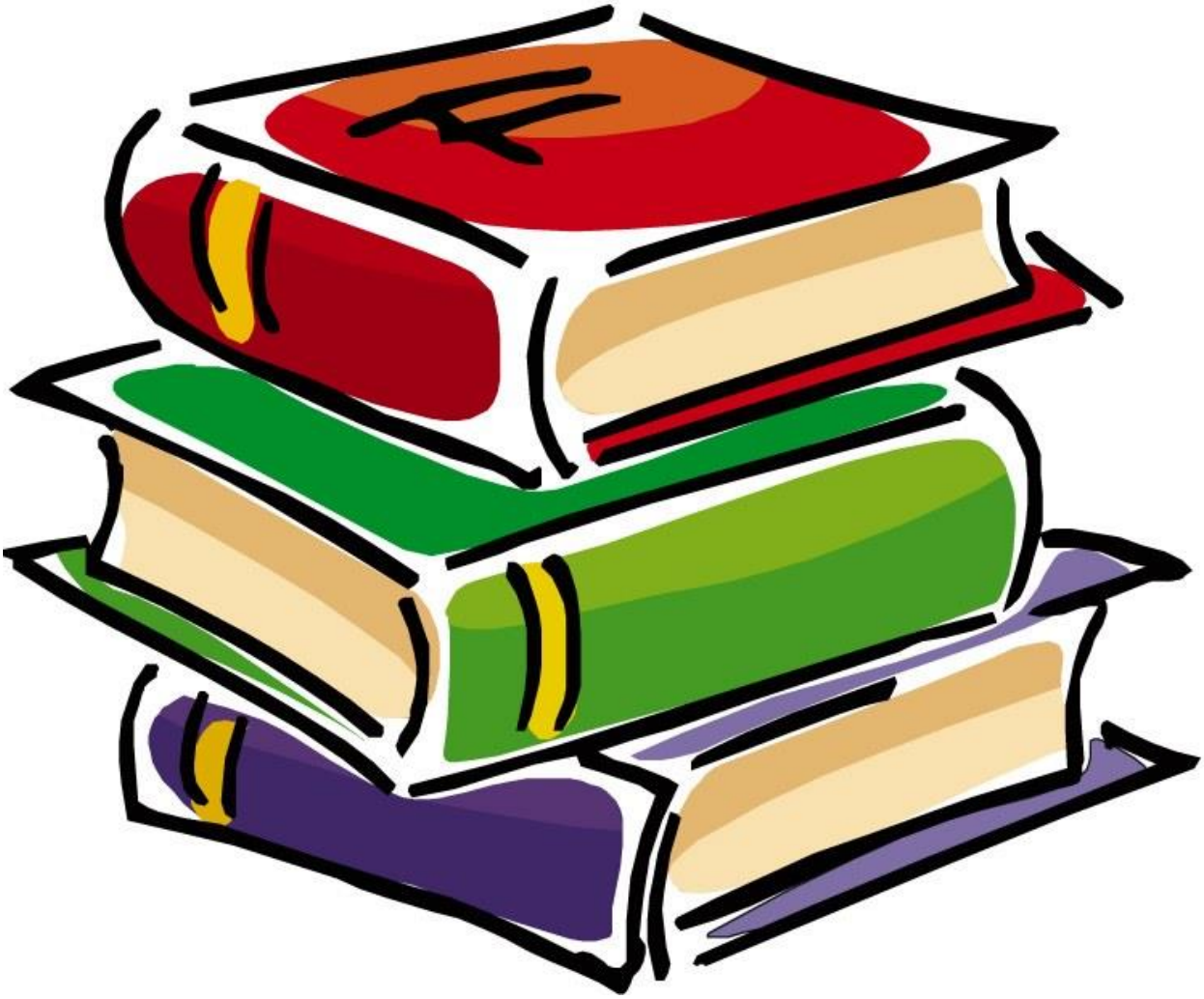

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