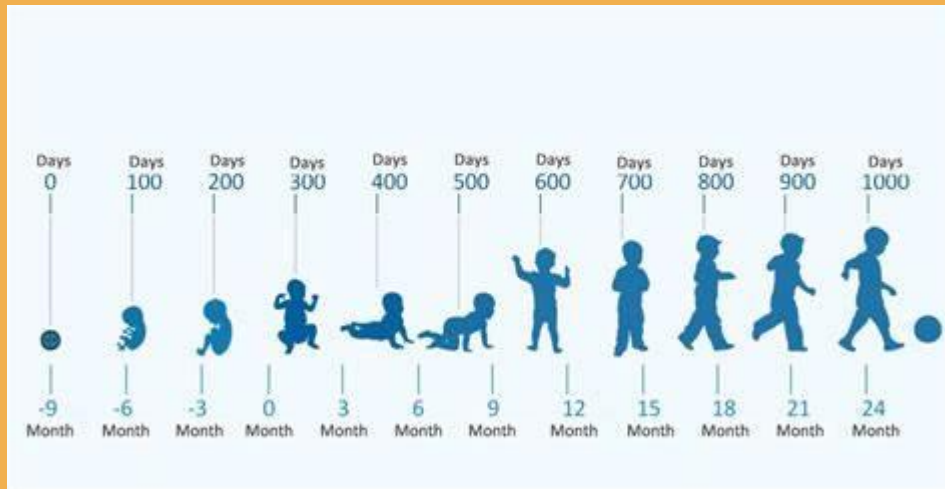




The First 1000 Days

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Introduction

When considering a child's first 1000 days of life this refers to the time period between conception and the child's second birthday. According to Ebbeck, Warriar and Goh, (2017) this period is widely recognised as one of the most important stages in human development. Research shows that 80% of the brain is developed by the time a child reaches the age of 3 years old and 90% by the time a child reaches the age of 5 years old (First Things First, 2018). This indicates that the early stage of a child's life can have a significant impact on their growth, development and future. As already noted, the first 1000 days of life actually starts during the mother's pregnancy as this is when the baby starts to develop and grow in the womb. According to Karakochuk et al. (2018) this time period is considered crucial because during the pregnancy the body, brain and immune system grow and develop significantly, and it contributes to what their future may look like. What happens during this time period can have a lasting impact on a person's life.

Publications.parliament.uk (2019) agrees that the first 1000 days of a child's life is crucial and emphasises that those who have a bad start in the early years will often fall behind and this may cause difficulties later on in their life as well.

Introduction

It is therefore very important that the mother's health and wellbeing are taken care of during pregnancy as it affects the development and growth of the baby. Ensuring the mother is taken good care of will go towards a better chance of a healthy pregnancy and therefore improving the child's physical and mental health development. Thus, it is important to note that a mother's health along with her lifestyle choices have a huge influence on the development of the unborn child. During pregnancy the baby's brain is making nerve connections in this time period enabling it to move around in the womb. It is important because the brain will undergo the most change and growth during this time period.

After birth, the first two years continue to be a critical stage of a child's development. Babies are constantly taking in new information and forming attachments. It is important that babies have a strong loving relationship with their caregiver as this builds trust and can impact how they make secure attachments. Another very important factor to consider is the baby's nutrition. Breastfeeding is promoted by professionals as during this time it ensures on the whole that the baby is able to get all the nutrients needed for growth. However, on reverse of this, if a baby experiences malnutrition during this time, it could have a negative impact on their growth. Another point to consider is the environment a child is surrounded by. It is important that the child is in a safe and nurturing environment where they are able to explore in order for them to learn and develop. Children who grow up in unsafe or stressful environments may experience a delay in their development. Overall, the first 1000 days lays the foundations for all the learning and development that comes later in life. Providing quality care in the first 1000 days of a child's life ensures they have the best possible start in a life.

Caregiving



When looking at exceptional care this means at the very least to provide children with love, support and the guidance that they need to help them grow and develop in all areas of life. According to Sansone (2020) mothers can start to provide this care during pregnancy and this can lead to strong bonds with their child. Providing exceptional care in the first 1000 days of life is particularly important because the parenting or caregiving in this time period will set them up for their future. Research shows that how children are raised in this time period contributes to their social skills, cognitive skills, language and emotional intelligence, amongst other things. The care provided in the early stages of their life can affect how they learn and develop. Caregiving involves meeting many needs including their basic needs such as food, sleep and hygiene but also involves nurturing children and making them feel safe, loved and valued. Babies rely solely on their caregiver, so it is important that the caregivers do everything they possibly can to improve the quality of their lives. Ensuring a baby receives love and care allows them to form secure attachments and encourages their growth and development.

Caregiving

An enabling environment can be described as a safe and nurturing space where children are able to thrive and explore their surroundings. Providing children with enabling environments gives them opportunities to learn through play and explore their fascinations. As well as this it is also offering them opportunities to take risks and give them real life hands on experiences. By ticking children these learning environment it encourages them to engage and respond in different ways . According to Sagastui, Herrán and Anguera (2021) the way an adult or practitioner interacts with a child determines how the child interacts themselves as they are learning and responding to social cues which may shape how they socially develop later on in life. Alongside this health and well being are also particularly important to providing exceptional care, nutrition plays a huge role in the development of a baby's brain, nutrients like folic acid, iron, zinc, iodine as well as protein and fatty acids play a vital role in building the babies brain during pregnancy. Ensuring children receive the right nutrition and have a balanced diet plays a key role in the first 1000 days as well as having a stable routine. According to Knowles (2017) inclusive practice is important for early years practitioners and that they provide the right care for children in practice regardless of a child's background or abilities they have a right to receive exceptional care. This could mean adapting the approach of a practitioner or the environment ensuring their development. Therefore, it is evident that providing exceptional care in the first 1000 days is essential for a child's emotional, social and cognitive growth and development.

Professional Partnerships



An early year's practitioner plays an important role in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days of a child's life. This time period is crucial for brain development, emotional well being and physical growth. Early years practitioners are responsible for providing a safe and nurturing environment and encouraging the children to form positive attachments. An early year's practitioner will observe and assess the development of a child's social, emotional and cognitive development through their environment and be able to identify the progress of whether they are hitting their milestones or not and what support may need to be provided, whether this is with themselves or whether they will need to contact outside agencies to intervene. Effective partnership working is necessary and important as it plays a role in how the child grows and develops and how they interact. Children may copy others whether they are seeing a positive or negative interaction. This links in with Bronfenbrenner's research and beliefs on how the environment a child is surrounded by is what shapes their future (Bradbury, 2022). It is important that early year's practitioners work in partnership with families, offering guidance and support.

Professional Partnerships

The child's caregiver is an essential part of professional partnerships and requires effective communication. Parents may feel anxious when their child goes to an early years setting for the first time so it is important to build positive and healthy relationships. It is important that parents and caregivers are made to feel welcome so that the best care can be provided for their child. If practitioners listen attentively to parents, it shows a mutual respect and that they value their knowledge, skills and experience. This approach encourages both parents and practitioners to ask for the appropriate support and advice when needed. Practitioners work closely with health professionals and social services to ensure that children receive the right support and have the best start in their life. There may be times when parents need support from various service providers and practitioners may be able to help them get the correct advice and support. Ensuring settling in processes is a way in which parents can begin to feel comfortable and start building that trusting relationship with practitioners. According to Brodie (2018) sharing information with parents and working in partnership with them can provide more of an insight into the child's home learning environment and lead to better outcomes. Maternal factors such as nutrition and mental health have a significant impact on the child's development. If a mother's nutrition is poor during pregnancy this could lead to the baby having a low birth weight or a delay in development. Support that can be offered is getting tailored advice about nutrition and the importance of certain vitamins and minerals from midwives, health visitor and dieticians. If mothers struggle to access these, they can be given support on where they might be able to go to a food bank or may be given vouchers. If a mother's mental health is low, they may struggle to form a bond or positive attachment with the child. Many mothers can experience post-natal depression, and they will need support during this time. Some examples of support that can be given is regular check ins with their midwife or health visitor, they can also be shown where they might be able to access parent-baby groups to form connections and feel less isolated.

Challenges

Providing good quality care in the first 1000 days of life is important, but there can often be barriers to this that make it difficult for parents, caregivers and professionals to provide the best support possible. When thinking about challenges in providing high quality care lack of funding, lack of engagement, lifestyle choices and mental health concerns could be an issue. Poor funding can impact the quality of care received. If there is not enough funding it could lead to lack of services, staff and resources. For example, lack of funding could impact the availability of healthcare workers, there may be a lack of health visitors that are able to come out and support mothers during pregnancy and the early stages of parenthood. This could result in a lack of guidance and education and advice for the mother at a time of need and vulnerability leaving them feeling unsupported and unsure about how to care for their baby. Poor funding at a childcare setting could mean not enough well-trained staff and not enough resources to provide a nurturing environment which could mean the child may not receive the attention and stimulation that is needed.

Another challenge that may present itself is parental engagement as in the lack of it as some parents may not be able to spend this time with their babies and may have other influential factors that prevent them from spending this time with them such as financial difficulties and having to go back to work. According to Gradovski, et al. (2019) there is an increase in women returning to the workforce which in turn may lead to a lack of time spent bonding and interacting with their child during the first 1000 days of their life. If a parent is not present enough in a child's life it may affect their emotional and social growth and development.

Challenges

A parents lifestyle choices could also be a challenge and have a significant impact on a child's life. For example, if the mother is a smoker and is unable or chooses not to address this during pregnancy. Smoking can cause harm to the unborn child and increases the chance of low birth weight and possible respiratory distress which will clearly impact on their growth and development. Once born the exposure the baby has to smoke could mean they have an increased chance of developing asthma or respiratory infections. Other lifestyle choices, such as having a poor diet during pregnancy can mean the baby is not getting the right nutrients and it could affect the baby's brain growth.

Another challenge that may arise is the mental health of the mother. It is important to address any mental health concerns as this has an impact on the child both during and after pregnancy. A mother who struggles with their mental health may have difficulty bonding with their baby. There is an increased risk of the baby being anxious if the mother is stressed during pregnancy and depressed mothers may be less responsive to their baby's needs and emotions. Gerhardt (2014) emphasises this and says that mothers who are stressed may lead to having significant impact on their baby. It is important that mental health support is accessible for mothers.

Activities



Activities are an essential part of a child's development and play is one of the most important ways a child can learn and develop during the first 1000 days of their life. When we allow children to use their natural curiosity and their eagerness to learn and explore and provide them with rich learning environments this gives them real life experiences and helps their health and wellbeing because it keeps them curious and keeps them exploring and keeps them interested. Play supports physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. Loose parts play is when opportunities are provided for open ended play so that children can explore and use objects such as natural materials to play with as they wish rather than have a set of instructions to follow. Providing children with loose parts is a common way practitioners enable children to learn through their environment giving them a chance to explore their curiosities and interests. Daly and Beloglovsky, (2015) outline the benefits of playing with loose parts, they suggest that loose parts allow children to use their imagination, and it provides them with various outcomes or possibilities because there is no end result. Providing children with loose parts in practice builds on Froebel's theory of open-ended play which allows children to think symbolically and make decisions (Bradbury, 2019). Suggesting children should be given materials and object that allow them to express themselves freely. This type of play encourages independence and social interaction. Another activity to enhance a child's experience can be messy play. Messy play can include playing with sand, water, mud, etc. This gives children a hands on experience and allows them to explore different textures and materials which can support the development of fine motor skills, sensory exploration and encourages their confidence. Gascoyne (2019) builds on this and emphasises the benefits of messy play and how powerful it can be, indicating that messy play allows children to express their emotions, and it can reveal how a child may be feeling and what their needs may be. Messy play also encourages communication as they may describe what they are doing and may take an interest in what someone else is doing in this activity. Different countries have unique approaches to early childhood play. A widely used approach across several nations is Forest School. Forest School encourages outdoor learning regardless of the weather and focuses on risk taking. There are many benefits to Forest schools including emotional wellbeing, social skills, problem solving skills and environmental awareness. Another approach that is widely used is Reggio Emilia. According to Macblain (2018) this approach encourages creative thinking and problem solving. Whilst both approaches are different, they both encourage child led learning and build on independence.

Conclusion

The first 1000 days of a child's life are a crucial time for their growth and development. The care, love and support they are provided with during this time period can have huge impact on their future, as well as having good nutrition and a stimulating environment. However, challenges such as lack of funding, poor parental engagement, lifestyle choices and mental health can cause great difficulty in providing the best care possible. It is important that children are given the opportunity to learn through meaningful activities such as loose parts play or messy play to holistically develop. Ensuring that exceptional care, professional support and engaging learning opportunities are present in the early years of their development increases their chances of having the best possible start in life.

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