



first 1000 days

The First 1000 Days

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What is the first 1000 days and why is it important?

The first 1000 days start during pregnancy up to the child's second birthday. A baby's experiences in their first 1000 days can have a life-long effect on their health and well-being as well as their growth and development. As suggested by EFCNI (2018) the first 1000 days are a unique opportunity to support a child's long term health.

The first 1000 days can be explained through a timeline starting with pregnancy.

During pregnancy optimum nutrition is very important as the mother's diet is the only source of nutrition for the baby growing in the womb. The correct care and a healthy, balanced diet during pregnancy directly effects the baby's growth and development.

Prenatal care is essential during the first 1000 days. It involves frequent check ups with the doctor, nurse or midwife to ensure both the health of the mother and the baby. The goal is to decrease risks during pregnancy and allow for a healthy delivery. Prenatal care is very important as it catches potential concerns early, promotes a healthy birth and helps monitor the baby's development (Healthline 2015).

During infancy, a child will experience rapid growth and begin to meet significant development milestones. Babies will begin to develop motor skills, explore the world around them and form emotional bonds with their caregivers. It is important to provide a safe, nurturing environment with plenty of love, stimulation and attention in order to help infants thrive and set the stage for healthy growth and learning in later stages of life (Waiting Room 2024).

The toddler stage is the time for fast growth in physical, mental and social skills. Toddlers hit many milestones and go through many different developmental stages, they get better at moving, talking, solving problems and handling their feelings. They love to explore and be independent as they learn new skills through play. Watching these milestones helps parents see how their child is doing and how to help them grow (Bump Journey 2024).



Caregiving

What is exceptional caregiving?

Being an exceptional caregiver means showing dedication, compassion and commitment. These traits are crucial in making a positive impact on the lives of those being cared for.

Understanding caregiving

Maslow proposed the idea in 1943 that when basic needs such as food, water and shelter are not met we lack the capacity to meet higher needs (Therapistaid 2025). Ensuring good health as a caregiver means meeting the child's physiological, emotional and mental needs. Things like safe and secure environments and the use of health services are equally as important as providing a balanced diet for mother and baby and monitoring their physical needs. Being responsive and providing opportunities for learning is crucial for a child's development as it helps build a secure foundation for emotional and social growth. By noticing, understanding and responding to the child's needs it builds trust in their relationship and allows them to build a secure attachment. Providing opportunities for learning as a caregiver allows for the child to develop their cognitive and motor skills. Singing, reading and talking to the child, effective body language and providing enabling environments are a few examples of ways caregivers can ensure they are promoting social interaction, supporting emotional well-being and encouraging learning and development (St Jude's Children's Research Hospital 2023). Bowlby believed that the earliest bonds formed by children with caregivers have a tremendous impact that continues throughout life. According to Saul McLeod (2024) Bowlby suggested that there is a crucial period for developing attachment and if it doesn't happen in this period then it may not happen at all. He also argues that a child forms many attachments throughout their life however one of these is qualitatively different, this is what he called the primary attachment. This shows that understanding attachment as a caregiver is crucial as it provides children with a sense of security and lays the foundation for their emotional well-being.

Why is it important?

Exceptional caregiving is important for language and brain development, emotional security and physical growth. It is believed by Bronfenbrenner that child development is influenced by the quality of their environments. An enabling environment is one that provides children with appropriate challenges, allows them to explore freely and has plenty of sensory stimulation.

"Perhaps the most important feature of any learning environment is that is welcoming – not only a space where children feel a sense of security and belonging, but also a dynamic and stimulating space that offers children an invitation to explore and discover" (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017, p. 93).

These conditions support growth and well-being children and offer children security, comfort, choice, engagement and opportunity allowing their needs to be met and ensuring they reach their full potential.

Professional Partnership

Supporting children and families as an early year's practitioner

The role of an early years practitioner is to provide meaningful learning experiences in safe and secure environments while also being responsive and meeting the individual needs of each child in their care. They support the physical, emotional, mental, social and educational development of young children (Twinkl, no date).

Pikler emphasises the importance of positive relationships, believing that all children deserve respect. Pikler believes all babies should be able to move freely without interference or rushing. This links to Kinaesthesia which is when you can tell where a part of the body is without looking or with your eyes closed (Verywellmind 2023). Kinaesthesia is laid in the first 1000 days and having an understanding of it as a caregiver helps to support a babies growth, learning and development.



(Maternity and Early Years strategy for West Wales, 2024)

Early years practitioners should work closely with parents and carers, it is central to the early years foundation stage (EYFS). This might begin by inviting parents/carers to visit the setting and begin building relationships with them by finding out about their families, community culture and personal histories. This builds trust between the practitioner and the parent/carer which is then reflected onto the child and shows them that they can trust the practitioner too. Practitioners should value parents and carers and allow them the opportunity to contribute to their child's journey at the setting (Department for Education 2021).

Supporting families – what this looks like

Supporting families as an early years practitioner is a key part of the role. Building a support network helps parents and carers navigate the complexities of early childhood and has positive outcomes for both parents and the children. Tailoring guidance towards each individual parent/carer and offering emotional support allows for them to do well no matter their background. By building strong, trusting relationships with families it becomes easier to speak to them and find out if they need help and support and then offer the correct advice to benefit them as well as the children. Parenting groups and community resources can be an excellent way of supporting parents/carers. They can help parents connect with each other and build stronger bonds with their children as well as teaching parents that they are not alone and self care is important too (getparentingtips.com no date). It is also important that the early years practitioner themselves provides care and support for the parent as sometimes the one on one support can be more beneficial to them. Being a good listener and offering guidance is crucial for an early years practitioner. Sometimes parents need to just express their concerns and feelings without judgement, by offering a safe space where they feel listened to and where the practitioner offers guidance, and support can help parents feel a lot more confident. Offering strategies and tips on behaviour management or child development and informing them of different services who might also be beneficial to them as well as the practitioner informing the relevant service if necessary, ensures the parents/carers are receiving the correct support and therefore leads to a positive outcome for them as well as the child (Care learning 2024).

The importance of effective partnership working

As suggested by Care learning (2024) working in partnership as an early years practitioner is the cornerstone of nurturing and supporting children's development.

Holistic development

One of the reasons for partnership working is to support children's holistic development. By collaborating with other professionals, practitioners are ensuring that every aspect of the child's growth and development is supported, and their basic needs are met. For example, working with health professionals can result in better physical care routines and early identification of any developmental issues (Care learning 2024).

Knowledge and expertise

By working together with other professionals, insight, knowledge and different skills can be shared throughout to help benefit the growth, development and well-being of the children. Speech and language therapists, families, health workers, early years practitioners and midwives all share different knowledge about what is best for the child and how best to support them through their learning journey. By working together, it ensures the best possible outcome for the child (Care learning 2024).

Early intervention

All children deserve the best possible start in life and early intervention allows parents, families and children to receive the correct support and care in order to achieve this and reach their full potential. Emotional well-being and self-esteem in childhood are strongly associated with good mental health in adulthood. Children's social skills, self-regulation and self-efficacy also appear to be important to adult mental health and well-being (Early Interventions foundation 2023). When practitioners, parents, families and specialists work together it makes spotting signs that will require extra attention and support easier, and they are able to be caught a lot earlier on in the child's life (Care learning 2024).

Enhancing professional development

Partnership working also benefits professionals as it provides opportunities for continuous professional development and to learn from colleagues from various roles. Regular interactions from other professionals can allow practitioners to gain new knowledge and insight which can then be used in practice. This has positive outcomes for the children in the care of the practitioner as it ensures they are receiving the best possible and up-to-date care and all their needs are being met. (Care learning 2024).

Supporting inclusive practice

According to Thomas K (2024), inclusive practice in early years and childcare settings is a method of ensuring everyone feels like they belong there. It recognises that everyone works at a different pace, learns in different ways, and has varying abilities. Early years practitioners working in partnership with professionals such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators means that collaborative planning and support can take place and therefore allows each child to be given equal opportunities (Care learning 2024).

The importance of effective partnership working

Consistency and continuity

Working in partnership with different professionals ensures continuity of care and education even though there are other adults involved. This is important because children in the early years are known to thrive on consistency and routine (Care learning 2024). Transitioning is a big step for children whether that be from home to a setting or from one early years setting to another, however smooth transitioning and keeping things consistent can create a sense of security and reduce anxiety for the children. When working in partnerships, it is beneficial if all professionals can come to the same conclusion about what is best for the child's needs whether that is regarding behavioural strategies or learning goals. This helps to provide consistency for the child and reinforces learning and development (Care learning 2024).

Building stronger relationships

As an early year's practitioner an important part of the role is to build strong, positive relationships with families and the children. Building relationships with other professionals also strengthens the relationship between the practitioner and the family. These trusting relationships are foundational to effective communication and collaboration. Engaged parents are more likely to share important information, by the practitioner working in partnerships, they are able to share this important information with each other which therefore benefits the health, learning and development of the child (Care learning 2024).

Effective use of resources

Resources are important in early years as they help to provide the best possible care and support for the children. When working in partnership, agencies and other professionals can pool resources together in order to provide a richer, more beneficial learning environment for the children. Collaboration with other professionals also prevents the duplication of resources ensuring that the support is targeted where it is most needed and important information isn't missed out on (Care learning 2024).

Challenges

Challenges in providing high quality care

Many of the early years sector continue to face several challenges that make it significantly more difficult to provide high quality care. Financial struggles being a main challenge that many early years settings face. The lack of funding nursery settings receive means the more difficult it is for them to provide the resources necessary for high quality care. Other challenges such as stress and burnout, lack of staffing, lack of support and understanding, lifestyle and health issues are all contributing factors that make it difficult for the early years sector to provide high quality care.

Online Training courses

Regular staff training is important in the early years sector for many reasons. Overcoming challenges is a lot less difficult when staff are up to date on the most effective and important training so they can put this knowledge into practice and relieve stress. Online training courses are much more flexible for staff who are unable to attend in person training as it can be done from home or from the nursery setting allowing staff to enhance their professional development and provide high quality care and learning for the children. Training courses such as food hygiene, first aid and behaviour management also allow staff to create a safe, secure and caring environment for the children (Early years careers 2016).

Recognising and addressing these challenges

It is important to address these factors and find solutions in order to be able to provide high quality care.

Build partnerships

As previously mentioned, building partnerships can be extremely beneficial to to children, families and the early years practitioner. Building partnerships with organisations that offer assistance help early years settings face certain challenges as organisations such as food banks can help provide children and struggling families with free meals and offer support to low-income families (O'Sullivan J 2023).

There are also lots of other solutions to challenges faced in the early years sector such as health and well-being support for staff, working as a team and flexible staff arrangements.



Activities

Treasure baskets

Treasure baskets are something that children love and get engrossed which also stimulate their curiosity and encourage independence. Having all natural, everyday objects in the baskets and stepping back to let the child lead the activity and explore at their own rate is so beneficial for their growth and development. It encourages decision making and enhances their gross motor skills as well as allowing them to learn through their senses and encourage brain development (Early impact, no date).



Sensory play

Sensory play has major positive impacts on a child's learning and development and is important that all children get to experience messy/sensory play. It has benefits such as foster cognitive growth, promoting exploration, creativity, problem-solving and curiosity, it helps to develop language skills and motor skills, engages their senses and encourages social interactions (Cleveland Clinic. No date). There are a wide range of activities that children can do for sensory play, ranging from finger painting and sand and water play to making shapes with cooked pasta, creating tuff trays with cereal, shaving foam and rice and making sensory bottles with oil, water, glitter and food colouring. Each other these activities has benefits that help children learn and develop and help them reach their full potential.



Activities

Singing and story time

Singing and story time is a great activity to do with children. It is engaging and a lot of children love taking part. By early practitioners taking 30 minutes out of every day to take part in singing and story time with the children it helps build them up into a routine and encourage them to learn through play. Letting children lead the activity by choosing which book they would like to read or which song they would like to sing creates a sense of independence and control for the child. Singing can also include things such as puppets to make it more interesting for the children and to teach them to place objects to words. Story time can also include story sacks which are a great way of getting the children involved and it becomes more interactive. Singing and story time also has many positive outcomes for their learning and development. It helps children to learn new words, boost fine and gross motor skills and build emotional awareness (BBC no date).

Meaningful learning

Meaningful learning is When learned information is completely understood and can now be used to make connections with other previously known knowledge aiding in further understanding. This can be achieved in childcare by following children's interests and fascinations. Doing child led activities as well as allowing children the space to make connections while they are playing encourages them to have independence and use their thinking skills. It is important to empower children to become confident, inquisitive and motivated learners and help to set them on a path of life-long success and fulfilment (Cambridge assessment international education 2016).



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