



Exceptional Care: The first 1000 days

What is the first 1000 days?



In order to provide exceptional care to children within a childcare setting it is vital to fully understand the importance of the first 1000 days of an infant's life and how the experiences, care and understanding provided by care givers influences and greatly impacts the development of the child.

The first 1000 days is from conception until 2 years old, Pregnancy, birth and Baby (2022) suggest that there is profound growth within the immune system, brain and body. These developments can be impacted during pregnancy if stressors, lack of nutrition and poor health is a factor. "baby's brain develops more quickly during the first 1,000 days than at any other time of life. The way their brain adapts to its environment contributes to the sort of person they will grow into". Pregnancy, birth & baby (2022).

Within the womb the processing of information is already taking place within a baby's brain, these developments formed within cells called neurons. It is during infancy and the first 1000 days that these neurons become stronger and further connections are established. For the continuation of these connections to be strengthened and advanced the experiences a baby and infant receives is key. (University of Wales Trinity St David, 2022).

The first 1000 days in the life of a child as stated in Thousand Days (No Date) identifies that it is during this period that rapid brain development is taking place, the way within which an infant is cared for and nurtured has a significant impact on the child's development.

<https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/> First things first (2018)

According to Pregnancy, birth & baby (2022) in order for connections to be developed and for the infant to thrive the following is need:

- Safety
- Healthy food (Nutrition)
- Love and nurturing relationships
- Security
- A healthy environment
- Opportunities to play and explore
- Providing a loving environment
- Support and interactions

These needs are also demonstrated in Maslow's Hierarchy of needs (1943).

Help Children live better (2022) states that Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory suggests that when the basic needs of a person are provided for, such as physiological a human is able to move onto the next stage of the hierarchy pyramid.

Mental Models Academy (2021) <https://youtu.be/fcj1f0yASCQ>

Maslow (University of Reading, No Date) determined that we all have 5 distinctive needs within the hierarchy.

The first is **Physiological** – the need to feed, drink, and having time to sleep, these needs are provided for within settings by creating sleeping times/areas for infants, and by providing food and drink throughout the day. This may be bottle feeding for young babies or mealtimes for older infants.

The second is **Safety** - settings have many safety provisions including safety gates in certain areas, locked external doors/gates, register of children, food and intolerance diaries for children with dietary requirements.

The third is **Love and Belonging** – providing a child with the love and sense of belonging within a setting and building meaningful relationships with the child and family according to Page (2017) should be at the core of practitioners. Parents and carers rely on the caregivers to administer a safe, caring, comforting, and secure environment both physically and emotionally.

The fourth is **Esteem** - encouraging and praising when a child has achieved something. This may be for using a potty, drinking from a cup with no lid, or standing on their own.

The fifth is **Self-Actualisation** - where a child fulfils their potential, or accomplishes a task. This realisation of abilities and potential is only progressed to when the other hierarchy needs are met. Blandford and Knowles (2016).



When working within a childcare setting it is important that these needs are met in order to help facilitate the growth and development of the child as well as providing opportunities to engage in meaningful learning experiences. These serve and return experiences can be formed during many daily activities such as the ones below. Serve and return is the process of response between the caregiver and baby/infant. Talking, making eye contact, facial expression, touch or hugging when a child has made a sound or gesture further supports and develops the connections within the brain promoting social and communication skills. Harvard University (No Date).

- Feeding
- Changing
- Comforting to sleep or when upset
- Nurturing
- Patience
- Compassion

- Hugs/Touch
- Consistency
- Talking and interacting
- Smiling
- Providing security

These are but a few examples of how practitioners can provide a holistic approach to caring for a child.

The EYRA (Early Years Regional Alliance) 2016 facilitated by the ISSA (International Step by Step Association) cited in Cousins and Cunnah (2018) developed a manifesto based upon the principles that Children have the right to thrive within a stimulating, safe and nurturing environment. Meaningful interactions, positive experiences, responsive, inclusive and quality support is provided.

‘Love and respectful interactions, reading and play are essential for development and must be valued and embedded in every child’s daily life: at home, in preschools and schools’.

(Cousins and Cunnah, 2018, p.4)



1 - Meaningful learning opportunities - Serve and return.



unicef 

Challenges in caring for a child.



When providing care for a child there are always challenges. One particular challenge that has been prevalent within the last three years is COVID-19.

A study by Knight and Borrás (2021) for the Welsh Government stated that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic there were approximately 155,000 children under 5 attending early childhood education and care setting, this is 77% of the population of children in a form of childcare provision. Between March and June 2021 settings restricted availability to key workers children and vulnerable. The study, included 75 participants from academic, national/regional organisations, and expert practitioners. A survey was also completed by 378 early childhood education and care settings.

The results found that it was the consensus of experts that under 5's social and emotional development would be most affected by the pandemic, then speech and language, physical development, health and cognitive development.

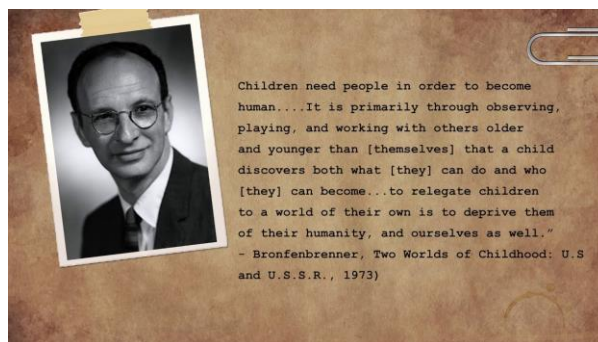
The findings of this study are however based on expert opinions and there is no evidence yet to prove exactly how much of an impact COVID -19 has had on children.

The challenges posed to practitioners during and after Covid-19's prevalence if experts are to be believed would be the lack of social and emotional connections during the absence from a childcare setting. Walton (2021) suggested that the role of key person within a setting was severely disrupted which has had an emotional impact on the security of the child.



Another challenge which directly impacts the quality of care that is provided to a child/children within a setting is the cost of living and staffing ratio's. Savage (2022) states that the government attempting to tackle the cost of living by increasing the number of children a setting can care for in order to cut costs for parents is will not ensure the saving is received by the families and the quality of the care provisions will inevitably suffer. Its is also stated that a 2013 study concluded that if more children per staff member ratio were allowed there would be a poor quality provisions and quality reduction. When working within a setting giving attention and quality of care is paramount.

All about Children (No date) states that the responsibility of an early years practitioner is to develop close attachments, monitor progress, nurture and support. Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory suggests that within the microsystem the nurturing and encouragement of immediate relationships to the child develops and effects future interactions and treatment of themselves and others. This quality of support and nurture within a setting requires time spent with each child to develop and influence the formation of positive relationships. (The Early Years & Childcare Service, 2021).



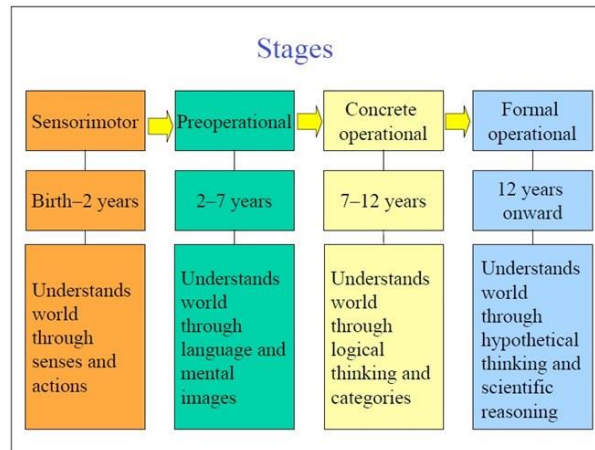
2 - Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory.

Promoting Development through play



In order to develop connections within the brain and enhance a child's skills and learning it is important to recognise that play and interactions with others are key. Cousins and Cunnah (2018) state that as adults we should encourage creativity, that children learn through using their senses and emotions alongside those around them and that infants and children thrive when high levels care is provided. Play is also recognised under article 31 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989. It states that a child has the right to, "rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts" it also states that adults should promote and respect the rights of the child to participate, encouraging the inclusive and equal opportunities. Casey (2010).

Theorist J. Piaget suggested that infants development and thinking progresses through stages. He determined that in order to move to another stage the child must achieve that stage before. Piaget believed that children learn through using their senses, discovering through touch, smell, taste, sounds, and movement. He called this, 'concrete learning'. Many of Piaget's theories regarding a child's development can be seen in practice today. For example, providing the infant with sensory activities to stimulate the senses, we use sand and water trays so the child can touch and feel the different textures. A study from the Institute of Learning and Brain Science that identified that after babies listened to music prefrontal and auditory cortexes changed due to the emotional, speech and language regions of the brain being stimulated. Brain Matters (No Date). Within practice, the use of many sensory activities and materials are used to stimulate the cognitive function and increase motor skills.



Ibrahim Baltagi cited in Unicef (No Date) states that music during pregnancy can not only calm a pregnant mother but that is also has an effect on the baby. At 16-18 weeks the baby can hear its first sound and at 24 can recognise voices and sounds. Building on these senses when a baby is born and into infancy as suggested in Brain Matters (No Date) listening to music reduces stress, improves mood and due to the release and stimulation of dopamine and oxytocin within the brain infant are more likely to feel happy, satisfied and motivated.



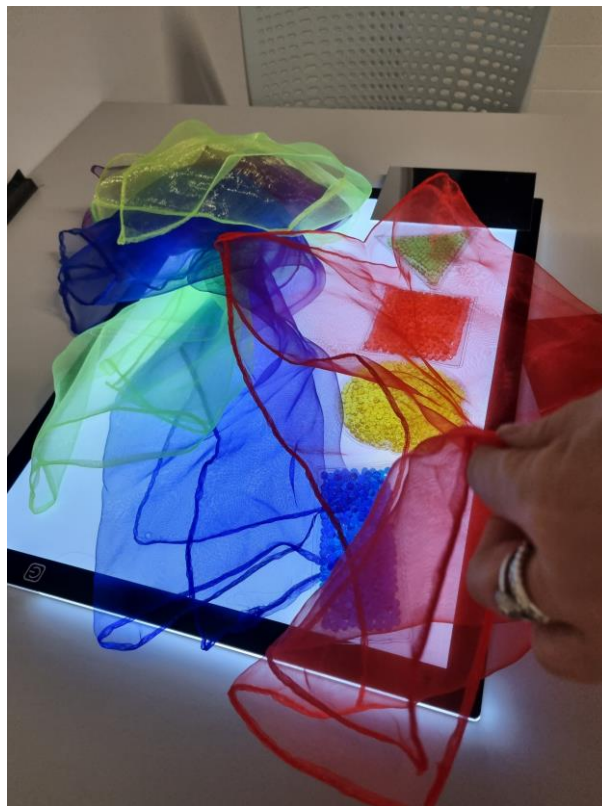
3 - Is your baby getting enough music?

When providing care, activities and play for infants there are key themes involved (University of Wales Trinity Saint David, No Date) These are:

Development - Within practice practitioners can support these in various ways. Developmentally, activities are implemented and encouraged to enhance the development of the child. Activities that promote the use of their senses and actions during birth to 2 years. (Piaget). The use of Eleanor Goldschmied's idea of treasure baskets within a setting encourages heuristic play, it encourages exploration through the use of a number of objects for the child to connect with and discover for themselves. Items may include: pots, pans, spoons, boxes, wooden rolling pin, sponge, shells, leaves, and fabric. Casey (2010).



4 - Treasure Basket (Source: University of Wales Trinity Saint David lecture, 2023)



5 - Sensory: light box, fabric colours and coloured beads (Source: University of Wales Trinity Saint David lecture, 2023)



6 - Cereal (Source: University of Wales Trinity Saint David lecture, 2023)

Environment – Key theorist Maria Montessori believed in environments which were child centred. Activities and play materials should be real world and accessible (University of Trinity Saint David, No Date). Wellie walks, forest schools, and outdoor play all encompass real world play, they also encourage the use of a child's senses. Touching leaves, splashing in water, listening to the trees and the wind. Montessori also encouraged hands on learning, independent choice with a non-directive approach to learning. Outdoor play as stated within the Welsh Curriculum (2022) is an important key feature, creating a space that is exciting, engaging and authentic for children to develop meaningful experiences relevant to the child's interest and focusing on the developmental pathway for promoting physical development, well-being, communication exploration and belonging. Outdoor space according to Bottrill (2018) should provide the child with opportunities to play with others, zones with various purposes, areas to run around freely and exploration sections, these may include sand and water, mud kitchens, gravel and digging pits.



7 - Messy play - Mud kitchen



8 - Outdoor Enviroments to explore (Source: Blaenbaglan Primary School, 2023).



9 - Stimulating outdoor activites (Source: Blaenbaglan Primary School, 2023).



Relationships – Theorist Vygotsky as discussed is Blanford and Knowles (2016) determined that children learn through the world around them and by experiencing. These experiences are advanced further if supported by an adult able to assist and advise. He also believed that when these interactions took place cognitive function and further understandings were enriched. Within practice practitioners support and aid the child by talking through tasks, encouraging and forming positive relationships based on trust. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development suggested that with the guidance of others, assistance when required and one to one conversations learning is enhanced. As discussed earlier Bronfenbrenner also identifies the positive influence of interactions between the child and the care giver and also how they react and interact with each other. This was termed reciprocal interaction and can be seen within a setting when we speak to other members of the team with respect and in a kind manner, this interaction fosters a role model behaviour. Aussie childcare network (2022).



10 - Vygotsky Learning Theory

Stimulation – Lucich (2002) states that as a baby connections and synapses are constantly forming. The amount of stimulus a child receives strengthens and enhances these. Repetition and consistency of these stimuli protect the connections from being lost. Stimulation and repetition within practice is done through song and rhyme sessions, reading, interacting to cues, talking, touching and reacting, playing music, providing an environment safe to explore with sensory materials to discover freely.

The Welsh Government (2022) states that children should have opportunities for multi-sensory experiences, the ability to make choices to express themselves creatively with a range of equipment in order to actively encourage the development of problem solving and critical thinking. Exploring the world around them, discovering and becoming aware of their surroundings can be implemented through the use of role play areas, quiet zones and sensory rooms which all have a purpose to provide opportunities for the child to experience developing skills. The department for Children, Lifelong Learning and Skills (2008: 4) cited in Beauchamp and Purcell (2016, p.57) states that, "Indoor and outdoor environments that are fun, exciting, stimulating and safe promote children's development and natural curiosity to explore and learn through first-hand experiences".



11 - Quiet Area (Source: Good 2 Know Network, 2022).



12 - Role play area (Source: TTS, 2018).



13 - Sensory room

Nutrition – The development of a child’s brain must also be provided with nourishment and nutrients. According to Zero to three (2014) if a child’s brain is malnourished during the period of mid gestation and two years old the brain is smaller. This poor brain growth is then prominent with cognitive and behavioural defects, lower IQ, slower motor and language development. Due to the need of adequate nutrients for brain growth settings have policies and procedures in place when

looking after infants. The Welsh Government (2019) provided a best practice guide for childcare setting stating that settings play an important role in the introduction of foods, continuation of health eating habits, nutrition based food and balanced meals. The guide provides menu planning, 3 week example meals, food and nutrition standards, feeding infants guidance, food hygiene and safety. Settings are expected to encourage positive food choices, in order for children to develop and protect against illness. Within settings practitioner will encourage healthy snack, such as fruit and vegetable sticks this is often done with the use of a funny face fruit platter.



14 - (Source: Eat Well Guide, 2018)



15 - Fruit ideas

Awareness of needs – Being aware of a child’s needs as a practitioner is an integral part of the role. It helps us identify those that require our comfort or assistance. Every child has different needs and requirements. Understanding these is the role of the practitioner.

“It is crucial that settings spend time with their children to really get to know them – how they learn, what they enjoy, what they might struggle with, where they may need more support in to secure

their learning. This all helps to build strong and solid foundations for their future growth development". Department for Education (No Date). Practitioners may be aware of the likes/dislikes of certain children in their care, settings may have a form to complete prior to acceptance within a setting providing information relating to the child's feeding times, home life, a favourite comforter or toy, names of family members, and dietary requirements.



Dear Parent,

Please help me help your child through orientation by completing this form.

Child's Name _____

Please list your child's favorite...

Breakfast food _____

Lunch food _____

Snack food _____

Song _____

Books _____

Videos _____

Toy or stuffed animal _____

Cartoon character _____

Game _____

Inside activity _____

Outside activity _____

If my child has trouble falling asleep I usually: _____

My child is afraid of: _____

Other people who have regular contact and are involved with my child's care (grandparents, step parents, siblings, friends, etc.)...

Name _____	Relationship _____
Name _____	Relationship _____
Name _____	Relationship _____
Name _____	Relationship _____

Anything else you would like to share about your child to help him/her feel more comfortable (especially in the first week when we are brand new to each other)...

16 - Parent form for the needs of the child. (Source: Pinterest, No Date).

Positive Relationships



Working alongside others within a setting and promoting a positive and respectful professional relationship between all parties including the child and the practitioner according to Serow and Solomon, 1979; Prawat and Nickerson, 1985 cited in Blandford and Knowles (2016) provides an example of a positive role model as well as developing and influencing emotional development, attitudes and behaviours that are positive due to the positive experience received.

The NSPCC (2022) state that, "Healthy relationships can help a child feel secure and supported, but unhealthy relationships can have a long-lasting negative impact."

When maintaining a positive professional relationship with families and multi-disciplinary members practitioners according to Mullin (No Date) should maintain an open dialogue, supporting and encouraging discussions regarding the child's achievements or concerns, and provide verbal and non-verbal respect.

Mullin (No Date) states that it "is the knowledge, wisdom, and support of our parents/carers. It is important that we work collaboratively so that we can maximise the academic and pastoral outcomes of children and young people. Nobody knows a child better than their loved ones; we need to listen and learn from parents, encouraging open and honest conversations which allow everyone to work together in the best interests of the child"

Inclusivity and diversity within Practice



Inclusivity and diversity within a childcare setting should recognise and respect the values of families and the children cared for ensuring they receive, "equitable treatment, representation, opportunities and respect". The Welsh Government (2022).

According to the Welsh Government (2022) a setting should provide:

- Resources that reflect diversity and not specific to gender. This may be through the use of tools for all to play with, or dolls that are of different ethnicities.
- Images and representations within the setting should be diverse. Using pictures and books with a range of cultural backgrounds for example.
- Organised access to resources for all.

Farrell (2012) cited in Devarakonda and Powlay (2016) suggests that inclusive practice involves four outcomes.

Presence – Integration and attendance.

Acceptance – Accepting all children, regardless of ethnicity, background or ability.

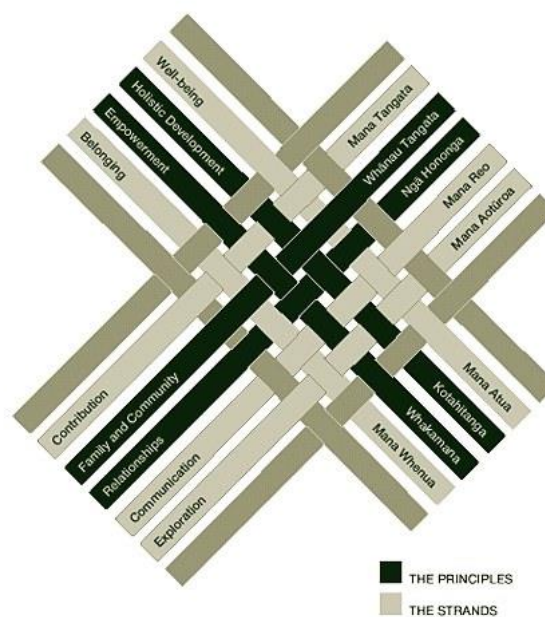
Participation – All children are given opportunities to participate in activities.

Achievement – Children are encouraged to achieve goals.



17 - Inclusion in Early Childhood

International Approaches: Te Whāriki



Te Whāriki as stated within The Ministry of Education (No Date) is a New Zealand based curriculum and pedagogy with four main principles. These are:

Empowerment – To grow and learn through the curriculum. Recognising their potential, being respected and valued. Care giver encourages and supports participation and opportunities for growth.

Relationships – Interactions and responses between people, objects and environments. Working together, collaborating, and engaging with others, access to materials and environments that facilitate participation with various resources.

Holistic Development – How children grown and learn through a rich holistic curriculum, an awareness of different cultures, connections to all aspects of learning.

Family and community - Family and the wider world. Help and encouragement from family and cultures, values placed on traditions and beliefs. Celebrating events that relate to culture and enhancing learning through the wider community.

From here there are 5 interwoven strands which can be compared to that of the Welsh Governments Curriculum for non-maintained nursery settings developmental pathways (2022).

Te Whāriki	Welsh Government
Well-being	Well-being
Belonging	Belonging
Communication	Communication
Exploration	Exploration
Contribution	Physical development

18 - Comparisons between Te Whārik and The Welsh Governements Developmental pathways (2022).



19 - Te Whārik learning through play.

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