

The first 1000 days

Global Paediatrics (2023) defines The First 1000 Days as the period between a child's conception and age two. During these days, there are fundamental stages of development that occur. These include conception, all trimesters of pregnancy, labour and birth, and the months that follow, leading into a child's second birthday. During these rapid stages of brain development, influencing factors mould the developing brain and create the foundations for future health, wellbeing, and learning (Public Health Wales, 2023).

The first stage of development is the formation and growth of the organs, specifically the brain. It is during this stage that exposing factors, negative or positive, have an influence on the developing organs (Global Paediatrics, 2023). This heightened vulnerability makes the first 1000 days a critical period in which the parent could have the opportunity to positively or negatively influence their child's wellbeing.

Positive and negative influences include the parent's physical and mental health, relationships, education, and choices made for the child's health, such as whether they choose to breastfeed and give their child immunisations. The style in which a child is interacted with and parented also has an impact. It is important to remember that genetics is also a vital aspect of the child's development (parliament, 2019).

Positive factors and being raised in an optimal environment from conception to second birthday are vital for physical and emotional health and social and cognitive development. In contrast, risk factors and a hostile environment could significantly impair development (Capitani *et al.*, 2023).

During the first 1000 days of life, 1000 neural connections are made in the child's brain every second (Likhar, 2022). Therefore, it could be argued that these crucial early days hold vast possibilities and fragility for a child's start in life, and what happens during them determines a child's course of life.

Malnutrition is just one aspect that profoundly affects the developing brain. A poorly fed and cared for mother would significantly impact a child's ability to thrive, develop and learn, which could result in obesity, impaired growth, and mental health (Likhar, 2022). The World Health Organization Child Growth Standards also believe that for growth, development and long-term adulthood health, there must be adequate nutrition during these early days (Karakochuk, *et al.*, 2017).

Therefore, investing in this period is an excellent opportunity and the most effective way to help eliminate poverty and inequality.

This can be accomplished by providing positive, nurturing, engaging interactions such as singing and hugging the child. The interactions help build and reinforce the neural

connections in the developing brain (Stead, 2024) and promote positive social and emotional development. In turn, we can expect better physical and mental health when they reach adulthood.

Social support is another area of importance in those early days. A recent study (Capitani, et al., 2023) supported this theory. The study aimed to understand how social support affected pregnancy and motherhood and concluded that an enabling environment with adequate social support strongly influenced parents. Stating that 'The outcomes of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood are strongly influenced and conditioned by the social context in which they occur' (Capitani et al., 2023).

UNICEF (2024) suggests that exceptional early childhood education and care are vital for ensuring a child has the best start in life.

Care is fundamental within the child's microsystem and mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977 cited in Lopez, 2021). Exceptional care is provided through the secure attachments with the child's primary caregivers. When children form these secure bonds with the caregivers that are in their microsystems, they feel secure and safe, thus creating a strong foundation to help develop the child's emotional and physical health and wellbeing, and cognitive abilities (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021).

Exceptional care first begins with the mother. Gerhardt (2015) suggests that if a caregiver struggles with their own sensory and emotional regulation, then they are unlikely to be able to support a child in regulating theirs. Essentially, the serve and return of emotions and facial expressions would not be possible. How can a baby be expected to regulate and adjust emotions and behaviours if they have not been shown how to?

However, positive serve and return experiences could profoundly impact an infant's brain development for the better (Harvard University, 2019). Through serve and return, patterns emerge, and infants are more susceptible to noticing signals from their caregivers (Gerhardt, 2015). These patterns were often described as 'internal working models' (Bowlby, 1969 cited in Holmes, 2014).

This is supported by Emmie Pikler (1946), a paediatrician who, post World War, set up a home for orphaned children (Hargreaves, 2020). Pikler's theory was based around the trust and respect between an infant and the caregiver, who understands and responds to their needs. She also enforced the idea of self-initiated activity and the importance of the child being involved with their own routines.

Pikler emphasised the importance of attachment between the consistent caregiver and infant and how these positive attachments, teamed with delivering exceptional care, can produce opportunities to explore, play, learn and communicate within the context of a safe and secure relationship (Hargreaves, 2020).

Nappy changing, dressing, and feeding all fall under respectful care. These experiences can be harmful and have a detrimental effect on the child if they are not carried out with respect from the caregiver and trust from the child (NDNA, 2022). Intimate care routines often require one-to-one interactions. It is during these interactions that the opportunity to deepen bonds occurs. Simple narration of the tasks delivered can help make the child feel secure and less anxious (Tassoni, 2018).

In an early years setting, an enabling environment would be the first step in achieving exceptional care. Enabling environments allow children to explore safely and be cared for effectively, allowing them to develop in all seven areas of learning (Department for Education, 2024).

Enabling environments consist of differentiating zones, with numerous resources for the infants to play and explore, which also contain new and familiar experiences. It is important that settings are well-managed, as well as safe and accessible. With these aspects in place, children have ample opportunity to thrive and become the best versions of themselves (Twinkle, ND).

Meaningful activities can only be provided if the environment in which they take place is welcoming and purposely engineered for play (Stead, 2024). Practitioners must be aware of a child's developing needs and ensure they provide activities that facilitate, rather than hinder, their cognitive development (Stead, 2024). Simple activities like blowing bubbles encourage communication, support social and emotional development and are a sensory-rich experience (Department for Education, 2022). Practitioners must also ensure they are providing infants with autonomy over their play and ensure plentiful opportunities for free-play (Sagastui, et al, 2021).

Practitioners can support an infant's emotional and social development in a variety of ways, one of which is by ensuring language is used throughout all activities. Simpler tasks like narrating what you are doing when changing their nappy or setting up an activity, can provide them with the social development they crave and need (Stead, 2024). Although a particular key person for a child is vital in any care setting, it allows the child to build supportive and strong relationships, aiding in their cognitive development and helping them develop an understanding of their own emotions (Department for Education, ND).

By providing adequate nutritional snacks and meals, practitioners can ensure they are helping to close the gap in inequalities in children's health (Department for Education, ND). Also, with more than a third of children aged 2 – 15 overweight, it helps ensure children build positive relationships with food, helping reduce the chances of childhood obesity. Thus, it reduces the risk of obesity related illnesses in adulthood (Department for Health and Social Care, 2017). Karakochuk (2017), highlights the importance of good

nutrition within the first 1000 days. She suggests that meeting the nutritional needs of infants can help avoid child mortality and illnesses like type 2 diabetes.

There are 'many cogs to the wheel' when working with children, so for the partnerships to work effectively, they must work together and support one another. Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC, 2022), outlines the importance of families and professional agencies working together to achieve the best for the child. However, when partnerships are not working in harmony, issues could occur, and often stresses arise.

Everyone has what is often referred to as a 'stress bucket'. The stress bucket outlines the importance of helping and alleviating stress to effectively manage everyday life (Liggins, 2021). If a parent's stress bucket is particularly full, due to the stresses of their child's education or not knowing where to turn to help, practitioners could help alleviate this by signposting families in the right direction. In contrast, parents could help practitioners by simply keeping lines of communication open and honest. Public Health Wales (2023) also outlines the importance of support between partnerships. Suggesting that social support can 'act as a buffer', against the impact of parental stress on the child.

New Zealand's Te Whariki curriculum is a positive example of effective partnership working. It focuses heavily on wellbeing, learning and development. Highlighting the importance of responsive and reciprocal partnerships for this to be achieved (Hargraves, 2021). The Welsh Curriculum also supports this with The Four Purposes (Welsh Government, ND), ensuring that the concept of effective and positive partnerships is a principle that is embedded at the core of the framework.

During the first 1000 days, a child is vastly provided experiences by the parents; this is why maternal factors such as stress, anxiety and depression have a profound effect within this crucial period (Public Health Wales, 2023). Studies have shown that elevated levels of maternal stress have impacted foetal brain development and contributed to behavioural and mental health issues in infants (Van Den Heuvel, 2022).

The public health model of parenting support identifies the need for societies, parents, and local communities to collaborate effectively to give children the best start in life. When parents have adequate support, are well educated on the importance of routines and nutrition, and are signposted to further agencies for help and advice, they are more likely to thrive in their role (Public Health Wales, 2023).

However, an article by Likhar (2022) 'Importance of Maternal Nutrition in the First 1000 Days of Life and its Effects on Child Development', stresses the importance of proper maternal nutrition and suggests that without it, a child's immune system, metabolism and organ development are at risk of adverse effects.

Support for parents should begin at the start with pre-natal care. The NHS' antenatal services provide services that monitor pregnancy, offer screenings and blood tests and signpost to other agencies when further support is needed for the mother (NHS, 2023).

This care is then passed over to a Health Visitor who will monitor and advise until age three. Health Visitors work with numerous agencies from government departments, including social, education and health care and help provide a sound infrastructure of knowledge and support (Institute of Health Visiting, ND).

The early years sector is continuously experiencing challenges with the quality of care it can provide. Amongst those challenges are staff retention issues, funding, the lasting effects of covid-19 and inequalities between settings (Ofsted, 2024). Below two will be explored further.

Lack of funding

A blog published by the Department for Education (2022) expressed ways in which they plan to 'drive down' costs within childcare. It proposed changes to staff ratios and support more people in becoming childminders, as they are a cheaper alternative to nurseries.

However, in 2024, the Department for Education (DfE) published a report that revealed that just under half of childcare providers did not have sufficient funding to cover their outgoings (Department for Education, 2024). The report highlighted the fact that providers did not feel that it was worth offering additional places to children, as they could not justify the extra staff with the current funding they were receiving.

Therefore, providers are having to use their imagination when it comes to saving on costs. Many nurseries have started to use apps to document and assess learning, as opposed to paper. As well as using technology for admin duties, thus saving on printing costs too (Brook, ND).

Other ways nurseries are reducing costs is by making the most of what the local communities have to offer, whether it be charity shops, donations or by simply using the outdoors as a learning resource (Brook, ND).

Big organisations, the likes of ASDA (2024), have made loyalty programmes to help raise funds for local schools. Utilising these approaches is a great way to bring in extra income, with many of the smaller local supermarkets also doing their part by donating food that is too good to go. This not only supports the settings but the provider's families, too.

A report by Ofsted (2020) expressed concerns over the impact of COVID-19 within the education sector.

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