The First 1,000 Days

What is the first 1,000 days?

The first 1,000 days is the period of time between initial conception and the infant's 2nd birthday (Parliament, 2019). This is a crucial period when the foundations of a person's life begin to develop and grow emotionally, cognitively, and physically (Pedro, A *et al*., 2021) Though it is believed a baby is incapable of storing memory from this period of their lives, it is now recognised that early memories from the first 2 years are retained within the nervous system (Hammond, 2021).

***Why* is it important?**Research shows during this pivotal time the brain is developing faster than any other time during a person's life, it is estimated that over 1 million neural connections are being made every second before the age of 3 (London School of Childcare Studies, 2020)

1 - Furthermore, as a foetus develops prior to birth the neurons being passed around the brain are creating information that prepares the foetus for life as a newborn, developing functions that are necessary for a baby to survive, such as breathing and sucking to consume milk (Macblain, 2021). It is believed that how a baby is nurtured in the first 1000 days determines the future quality of health, behaviour and success of an individual (Cusick, S.E. and Georgieff, M.K., 2016). This includes prenatal care, how the mother cares for herself is important. For example, the foetus relies on the food mum consumes to nourish the baby whilst she is pregnant, the quality of nutrition consumed impacts the overall growth and development of the foetus. It is recommended that mum consumes a healthier diet to ensure baby reaches these developmental milestones (NHS, 2023).

2 - Additionally, a healthy diet is encouraged post-natal, it is recommended that mum exclusively breastfeed the baby for a minimum of 6 months if she can (World Health Organization, 2011). At the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that not all parents have a choice as to how they feed their baby and as such it is recommended that parents nourish their baby with breastmilk, formula, or a combination of both depending on what is possible for each unique family (Segrave-Daly, 2024). Gradually introducing solid nutrient rich foods from 6 months onwards, combined with a choice of formula and or breastmilk (NHS 2020).

3 - Montessori (2013) believes that during the early days, children can unconsciously retain information from the world around them, whether good or bad. Therefore, getting it right from the beginning is critical, a positive start to life influences how children perceive themselves and this determines how they will parent in the future, essentially primary caregivers are setting an example for future generations (Public Health Wales, 2021).

Exceptional Caregiving

What is exceptional caregiving?

Studies have shown that people's outcomes are not just determined by their genes but by how they are supported during their early stages of life (Babies, 2020). Likewise, Ebbeck,

Warrier and Goh (2018) say that babies' brains develop because of their experiences and intelligence is not fixed from birth. As a result, practitioners are responsible for providing stimulating and inclusive environments that support and develop each child as a whole being, cognitively, intellectually, physically, socially and emotionally (Solvason and Webb, 2023). It is therefore essential that infants have adult carers around them to provide the quality care and support they need not only to survive but to thrive in the early years and beyond (GOV.UK, 2021)

4 - When humans are born, they already have the ability to call for attention in the form of crying, babies cry as a way of communicating they have needs that need to be satisfied (Macblain, 2021). Adults have a responsibility to respond to their needs with care and respect. The Pikler approach is an advocate for promoting affectionate, supportive and attentive relationships all while allowing the infant freedom and time to be curious, move and discover the world around them thus encouraging infants to take the lead with their own learning (Marlen, 2017). Caregivers need to respond to babies' by handling them with care and speaking to them using a calm tone of voice with a gentle and loving touch. Often, a baby might just need a close cuddle to feel safe and loved. Making eye contact is particularly powerful, as babies know they have their carers attention and feel connected to their adult carer (Gerhardt, 2015).

5 - Birth to 5 Matters (2021) describes how practitioners can engage in "professional love" within their setting, meaning practitioners can build a loving professional relationship inclusive of nurture and care. Page (2018) believes all children are deserving of love and it is part of the professional's role to make certain that the children they work with know and understand that they are deserving of love. Purcell (2024) agrees that there is a place for "professional love" between the child and practitioner and working this way puts emphasis on the ethics of care. Bowlby (2005) says that children begin to form attachments with primary care givers from birth, these early attachments will impact how the person forms relationships and interacts socially with others in the future, therefore it is important the initial relationships formed are optimistic and worthwhile, because infants are easily influenced by the adults around them and it sets an example of how they should expect to be treated and how they in turn will treat others. It also impacts emotional development; secure attachments promote self-confidence and resilience. Resilience is a significant life skill that when informed, will allow children to feel safe and secure during unfamiliar times. For example; allowing children room to make mistakes so that they can learn from their mistakes without the worry of being told off. Another example is when plans are unexpectedly altered, having a resilient mindset means children can cope better with disappointment or change (Mann, no date).

6 - All children are unique individuals and reach developmental milestones at different rates. Many factors contribute to development delays, such as disruptions in homelife for instance, moving home or parent separation and sometimes delays may indicate that a child has additional learning needs, it is necessary that practitioners are trained to recognize these needs promptly so that support can be provided to the child and their immediate family meaning the individual can continue to progress with support to achieve the best outcomes possible (Department for education, 2015). Vygotsky (1987) agrees that adult input and the environment are both contributing factors to the development of a child. The Welsh Government (2024) identifies the environment as being an emotional space as well as a physical space, meaning adults need to work respectfully in partnership with each other as these relationships have a direct impact on children's outcomes.

Professional partnerships

*7 - **What is the role of an early years practitioner in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days? And the importance of effective partnership***

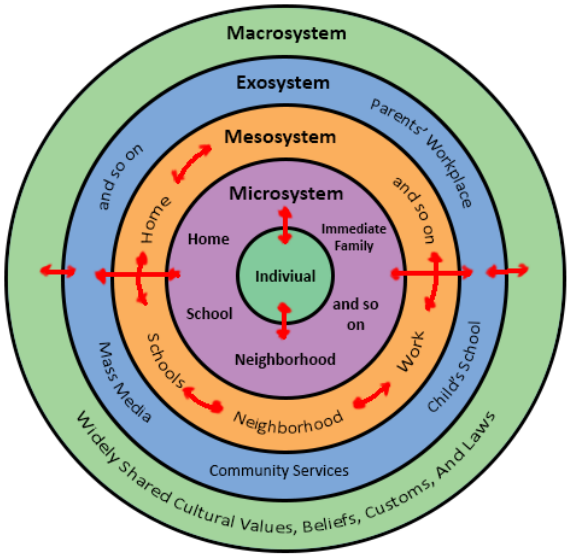
Professional partnerships in the early years are the relationships that consist between practitioners, families of the children and other professionals supporting the families such as social services (Rouse, 2012). It is crucial that the connections between practitioners and parents are well established and maintained to provide the best childcare possible for each unique family, ensuring that the bridge between homelife and early years settings are fluid and inclusive (Wilson, 2016). There is nothing more important than the well-being and safety of children. It is the responsibility of the practitioner

to ensure the highest quality of care available is maintained and should the need for support arise, intervention measures must be put in place at the earliest time (HM Government, 2018). Babies are especially vulnerable due to their age, resulting in lack of resilience, it is vital that babies and infant's basic needs are met and that they are kept safe and well (Buckler, 2023) This is backed by the government legislation act, children and social work act 2017 (GOV.UK, 2017).

8 - One way to ensure fluency is to appoint a key person (worker), this is when one person from the setting is appointed to be the lead liaison for that child, this way of working helps important information provided by parents to be remembered and used effectively, a key worker system ensures consistency in communication (Burnham, 2016). Furthermore, the Department for Education (2021) promotes the involvement of a key person and suggests inviting primary carers to chat daily with the child's key person. Additionally, they believe it would be beneficial to include the parents or carers on trips and arrange home visits to stay connected. Bronfenbrenner (1986) created a model called the Ecological System. This model shows how the child is always at the centre of focus; it then expands out naming people in order of influence who is likely involved in their life. The community of people surrounding the child all play a pivotal role in contributing towards shaping the person they will become and influencing their development and characteristics. To illustrate this point, one might refer to the importance of parental involvement, parents are the child's first educators and practitioners should recognize the importance of engaging with parents to better understand and ensure the child's needs are fulfilled fluently with home (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021) This is backed by the Department for Education (2024) who agrees that children benefit from quality professional partnerships between their primary care givers and practitioners, the relationships help to support the child's overall development and learning.

9 - Furthermore, there are some instances whereby families may require assistance or care from more than one professional or organisation. In such instances communication needs to be clear and concise between all parties to ensure where

necessary the correct interventions are placed quickly and efficiently to secure safeguarding and welfare of the child involved (Welsh Government, 2014). Maternal factors like post-natal depression can negatively impact babies' development, including language skills. Research shows mothers who experience post-natal depression compromise the quality of care they provide baby, due to low mood and irritability (Stein, et al., 2007). Public Health England (2021) says that post-natal depression can effect both male and female parents and that it is vital that early year's educators and other professionals (for instance health visitors) have a close working partnership to communicate concerns as early as possible, so that early intervention support can be provided.



Current Challenges

*10 - **What are the current challenges in providing high quality care?***

Public Health Wales (2021) recognizes that every child deserves the best possible start to life. Establishing solid ground from early on within the family unit is the most effective way to reduce the effects of disadvantages. There are many disadvantages that can effect families, for instance, family income, if a family is living with a particularly low income, it is thought that maintaining a healthier lifestyle and having money to expand opportunities to further child development is compromised (Bronfenbrenner,1986). Moreover, Public Health Wales (2020) and BMC Public Health (2024) recognizes how poverty can interfere with children's health, as parents and carers are finding it increasingly difficult to be able to afford to heat their homes and buy healthy food. This is especially prominent during the current cost of living crisis, as different levels of poverty have hit families some of whom were once considered to be in a stable financial situation (Hick and Collins, 2024). UNCRC (2019) have policies in place (article 26 and 27) that state children are entitled to adequate living that supports their holistic needs, and the government has a duty to provide financial support when needed. However, one cannot ignore the fact that there are still families living among us in extreme poverty and despite government obligations there seems to be little effort to tackle the problem Rae and Carruthers (2022).

11 - Maternity & Early Years Strategy for West Wales (2022) acknowledges that life with small children can be difficult to manage sometimes and that not every family has the support network around them needed to navigate parenthood. A study conducted by Dalimonte-Merckling, and Brophy-Herb (2019) has shown how parenting styles can also effect children's development and in turn makes consistency between home and childcare difficult, the study implies that children with a more challenging temperament have parents who typically feel more stressed than those parents whose children are mostly contented, this strain causes parents and carers to parent more harshly and feel less sympathetic towards their children in times of need. Gray and Macblain (2015) agree that children influence their parents' behaviors and responses. Parenting stay and play groups are available in most local areas in the UK, these groups are free to attend and promote conversations with other parents in similar situations, addressing isolation and reminding parents they are not

alone in parenting, all while their children play. There is also opportunities for parents to speak to practitioners who are available to offer advice and provide information on parenting (Action for Children, 2023).

12 - Educators who work with children and families who speak English as an additional language might question how to provide the best care for children and their families who are unable to verbally communicate their needs. Some ways caregivers can best adapt their work to support and include non-anglophone children and their families is by providing visual prompts to help the child transition in their new environment, use gestures and or internet translation tools (Birth to 5 Matters, no date). It is also important to respect and embrace different cultures, one way this can be done is by including ethnically diverse props in the role play area and a variety of books that relate to different cultures furthermore an educator may wish to fully embrace different cultures and become a "bicultural teacher" this is a person who fully immerses themselves in understanding of different cultural characteristics and perspectives (Devarakonda, 2020, p. 86). The Reggio Emilia 100 languages exhibition suggests language barriers in early years areinapt as there are so many other ways in which a child can communicate effectively (Malaguzzi, 2022).

Activity Ideas

13 - Early childhood education relies on adults to provide activities that shape children in a multitude of ways , including cognitively and physically, it is beneficial that play based activities provided are a combination of child initiated and adult-led and that these activities promote infants to investigate, experiment, discover and make sense of the world around them, in an environment that supports age appropriate learning and that supports individual interests, all of which are essential to nurture growth and holistic development (Forrester et al.*, 2021, Birth to 5 Matters, 2021) National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013) says that play must be purposeful, when play is purposeful it maximizes learning and builds a strong foundation for future development. There are a variety of ways that purposeful play can be achieved from a newborn and beyond as in the following examples. Casey (2016) recognizes how quickly babies' brains can develop in the first year of life and how contrast colours can provide a stimulating visual activity for baby. It is thought that newborns are only able to differentiate between light and dark contrasts. As such contrast colour cards are an ideal first game to play with baby, helping to mature their eyesight.*

14 - Communication is a vital skill for life, and it is a skill that babies are born with, nurturing communication through various activities strengthens the ability to connect NHS (2023) this can be achieved by talking and singing to baby, lots of adult verbal repetition helps infants to develop language and communication skills. Making eye contact and getting close to babies' faces allows them to become familiar with the voices they hear and inquisitive about the world around them. Likewise reading provides a multitude of benefits for children of all ages as well as language and communication it also promotes social bonding, cuddling up close reading stories signals emotional connection that promotes feelings of safety and love (Clinic, 2020). Bruce (2011) identifies the significance of touch; baby massage is an ideal activity to build maternal connection and is also a sensory experience for babies as carers use warm oil to gently massage their baby it triggers two-way communication, babies respond to the touch by moving their bodies, making eye contact and depending on their age muttering noises in response to the massage.

15 - As infants grow to be able to sit independently, with adult supervision they can be introduced to new activities like treasure baskets. Treasure baskets are a combination of low-cost learning materials that can be found around one's home, items like kitchen utensils and sponges including natural materials such as pinecones. They provide a hands-on learning experience that babies can explore providing a multi-sensory exposure to colour, textures, sometimes smells and sounds (Bruce, 2011, Daly and Beloglovsky, 2015). Similarly, loose parts play involves everyday objects, some natural, some recycled. Examples of these include cardboard boxes, clean straws, bottle tops, wooden blocks, sand and pebbles. Unlike purpose made toys that have specific play instructions, loose parts produce unlimited opportunities for creativity. Empowering infants to experiment with materials and manipulate them however they choose, possibly connecting and disconnecting thus promoting independence, collaboration, curiosity and creativity (Daly and Beloglovsky, 2014, EYR Team, 2020, Zeng and Ng, 2024). Furthermore, international approaches such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia base their approaches around developing many of the skills discussed above. Here is a comparison of both approaches and examples of how they offer the opportunity to advance and mature children. Both Montessori and Reggio Emilia are popular educational approaches whose pedagogy is built on a child centered, hands on approaches, that provoke curiosity and holistic, self-directed learning, where children are highly respected individuals and whose parents are highly valued participators in their child's education. With both approaches children are encouraged to choose activities that most interest them and their developmental needs. Both approaches place strong emphasis on ascetically pleasing and child friendly level environments. What sets these provisions apart is that Montessori educators facilitate and prepare the environment in advance based on observations of the children whereas Reggio Emilia see's the educator as an active collaborator meaning, someone who does not provide focused activities but responds to the child's interests and provides materials based on children's lead in the moment.

Reggio Emilia places emphasies on the importance of relationships and collaboration. Montessori focuses more on the child's place in the world guiding children recognise they are capable members of society. Montessori and Reggio Emilia educators genuinely respect the children in their care (Edwards, 2003, Sue, 2019, Main, 2024, Kids Who Play, 2024).

16 - Development including physical development can be achieved indoors, however there is no greater environment for range of movement than the outdoors it is recommended that infants including babies are provided with time out in the fresh air everyday (GOV.UK, 2012, NHS, 2019). Research suggests that children benefit from being physically and emotionally connected to the natural world, making it increasingly important to provide them with opportunities to play outdoors (Watts, 2020). Outdoor learning increases engagement and promotes movement and exercise, it is a sustainable opportunity that can be enjoyed without cost for the whole family to enjoy. Spending time outdoors encourages healthy habits and allows for a range of skills to be matured, for instance physical skills like balance and strength, as well as cognitive skills like resilience and imagination (Knight, 2013).

17 - Loose parts

18 - Messy play

19 - Outdoor play

20 - Story time

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