

Exceptional Care in the First 1000 Days



Source: boy-sitting-in-park-in fall (n.d.)

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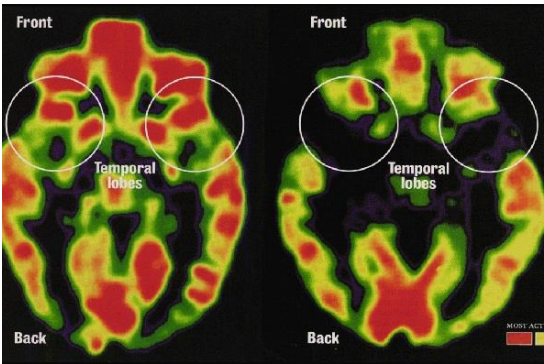
The First 1000 Days

The first 1000 days covers the period from conception up until a child reaches the age of two years old. The initial 1000 days concept was created in 2010, following some scientific research which identified the time from conception up to two years of age, as a vital period of opportunity where nutrition has a great impact on the future health and development of a child. (Thousand Days, no date)

1000 Days began as a partnership to encourage more action and investment towards improving nutrition for women and young children across the world. Five years later, they began to focus on the issues that could affect the nutrition and wellbeing of babies and mothers.

The 1000 days partnership believe that every woman and child deserve a healthy first 1000 days, with every mother having the chance to give their child a good start. Disadvantaged mothers and children should be given priority. Health is seen as a fundamental human right, as is food. Both good health and food are essential for children to flourish. The partnership believe a hunger and poverty free world could be achieved, if investment is made in the first 1000 days. We should seek to do better for women and children, make mothers' voices heard and put them at the heart of every decision made which affects them or their child.

The first 1000 days of a child's life are hugely important as from birth to age two the brain develops and grows rapidly. During the first two years of a child's life, the brain has enormous capacity to take in information and adapt to its surroundings. An adult brain has around 86 billion neurons, most of which are formed in the womb (Herculano-Houzel 2009, Goswami 2015). By the age of one, a child's brain is already 72% of the size of an adult brain and by age two it has grown to 83% of an adult's brain (Knickmeyer et. al. 2008). When a child reaches age two, the connections in their brain happen about twice as fast as in an adult's brain (Stiles & Jernigan 2010).



To the left are the brain scans of two 2 year olds. The child on the left experienced a healthy environment. The child on the right was severely neglected. The white circles define areas of brain architecture and activity. The left brain has developed normally. The brain on the right will remain underdeveloped into adulthood.

Source: Brain Development, Leelanau Early Childhood Development Commission (n.d.)

What is Exceptional Care?

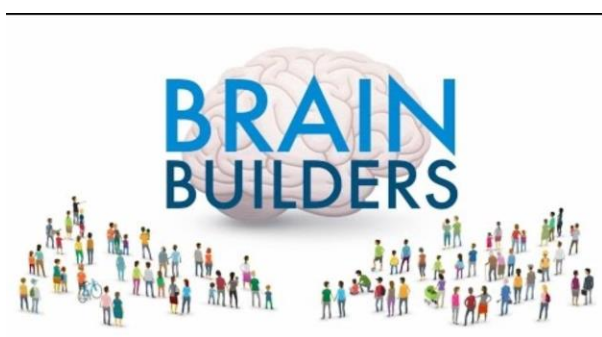
According to TEDx Windhoek (2015), exceptional care includes:

Equality – giving all children the same chance of success, no matter what their needs or where their starting point. Conversations with parents/carers can help to identify children's current abilities, as can close observation (Burnham 2016).

Independence – supporting children to become capable, independent learners, by giving the right support at the right place and time, as per the recent consultation by the Department for Education (2022). The level of scaffolding will vary from child to child, and it is important to gauge what type and how much support each child needs. This view is also supported by Vygotsky (1978) and the zones of proximal development. In addition, Pikler (1902-1984) promotes letting children experience things at their own pace, in a safe, calm and peaceful environment. Pikler talks about providing individual support for children but without interfering with their natural stage of development. This view is supported by Rousseau (1762), who believed education should follow a child's natural growth.

Health – giving children the best nutrition, healthcare and wellbeing support available. 97% of the energy a newborn child takes in, goes towards neural connection. Poor early-life nutrition can have long-lasting effects into adulthood, causing problems with sleep, movement, memory, and learning (Bale et al., 2010; Crossland et al., 2017; Olivares et al., 2023).

Social and emotional opportunities – interaction is vital to support children in making good relationships throughout their lives. Pikler (1902-1984) advocates the benefits of giving full, undivided attention to children, giving them a sense of love, tranquility and focus. This gives children the chance to bond with their caregiver and for both parties to actively participate in activities. When a caregiver interacts with their child, in a 'serve and return' manner, as explained in the following video link, (NSPCC 2017), it helps the child make sense of the world and build stronger brain connections.



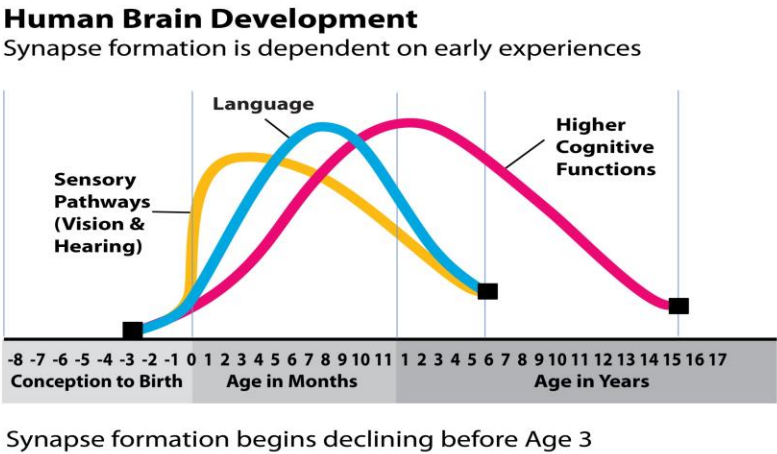
A safe, enabling environment to help the child engage and stimulate brain development. Starting Blocks (2019) states that from the age of 0-3 years there is a period of rapid brain development. This can be nurtured by good relationships with caregivers and supported by exposure to good community environments for children and families.

A relationship built on trust, understanding and good communication. According to the National Library of Medicine (2019) the extent to which children trust in their primary caregiver has a large impact on their development in several areas such as mental health, academic success, social competence, and general health. Bowlby (1969) agrees that if a child does not have a secure attachment to their primary caregiver, they may display behavioural problems. Those with a secure attachment will show higher cognitive ability, as they have the confidence to explore and experiment knowing that their caregiver will return.

Exceptional care in an Early Years setting can supplement the care a child receives in their home environment, ensuring as many areas of development as possible, are covered. A holistic approach to a child's development, where every area of their learning is interwoven with the others, will mean that their physical, emotional, social, intellectual/cognitive, spiritual, mental and kinaesthetic needs are met, and they will achieve the best outcome possible. The Te Whariki (2017) approach used in New Zealand speaks similarly of a 'woven mat' approach, where the principles of empowerment, holistic development, family/community and relationships are intertwined with the curriculum strands of wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration.

According to the House of Commons, Health and Social Care Committee (2019), If a child's body and brain develop well, their life chances will be improved. If they are exposed to adversity or stress however, this can result in a child's development falling behind their peers. If left unaddressed, those affected are more likely to suffer from depression or even attempt suicide.

The diagram below shows how the rate of synapse formation between neurons depends on early experiences. This then leads to higher cognitive function in later years, meaning children will achieve improved standards in secondary education.



Source: Human Brain Development, Vectorstock.com (n.d.)

Current Challenges



Source: The blue Diamond Gallery (n.d.)

Staff ratios - According to University College London (2023), evidence gives no strong indication that ratio changes are likely to worsen children's outcomes. Children may however be indirectly affected due to the change in ratio lowering staff morale. This could lead to higher staff turnover, causing disruption for children.

EAL – The need for time and support to implement EAL strategies is often overlooked. Support from managers, administration teams, teaching support staff and volunteers is essential. Help for Early Years Providers (n.d.) suggests that strategies to consider in practice could be to display images and books which reflect the child's home environment and in their own language, showing that you are being inclusive, and also to take photos of the daily routines, to provide a visual timetable.



Source: Miss Bs resources (n.d.)



Source: Topkit (n,d,)

SEND – The Online Learning College (2023) states that caregivers should take a holistic approach to SEND pupils' learning, rather than just dealing with their physical and medical needs. There may also be communication barriers and the child may need additional support to communicate their needs and enable them to be included in discussions and activities. This could be achieved by use of sign language, picture exchange systems or AAC devices in more severe cases. SEND children may also need additional staff to aid them, which can prove difficult to achieve if staff have inadequate experience.



Source: Picserver (n.d.)

Poverty - In England, nearly one child in four (23%) does not reach the expected level of language development by the age of five. It is more likely that children raised in poverty will fall behind. In fact, one in three (35%) does not have the language skills expected of a five-year-old. This seems a particular problem for boys, 42% of whom do not reach the expected level for a child of five as compared to 28% of girls (Save the Children 2015).

Early action from birth should be taken to improve a child's language development. The bond between parent and child, the way language is used at home and the learning opportunities provided, such as sharing stories, singing rhymes, or playing word games, can help to compensate for the impact of poverty.



Children who live in a home where domestic abuse occurs can suffer from both mental and physical wellbeing issues, as well as displaying unwanted or unusual behaviours (NSPCC n.d.) It is important to liaise and communicate effectively with any outside agencies involved in the children's welfare, to make sure no information goes unnoticed and to effectively safeguard children. (Sidebotham 2016)

Source: 4.bp.blogspot. (n.d.)

Covid – The COVID pandemic has negatively impacted the attainment of all pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Evidence shows that the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their classmates has grown. Teachers have also reported concerns about the effect on pupil wellbeing. There is also emerging evidence that suggests the pandemic has negatively impacted children's mental health.(Education Endowment Foundation 2022)



Source: Ground up (n.d.)

Activity Ideas



Source: Thinkined (n.d.)



Source: Thinkshops for Educators (n.d.)

Loose parts - The 'Loose Parts Theory' was first mentioned by Simon Nicholson in 1971. Providing lots of interesting objects supports children's curiosity, creativity, imagination and invention.

According to Only About Children (2024), loose parts play increases children's physical activity, enhances cognitive abilities, increases focus and engagement in play and boosts their already natural curiosity. Creating their own activities can encourage conversation and working partnerships with peers, and also helps develop better problem solving and critical thinking skills. Pestalozzi (1746-1827) is another supporter of this idea, believing that children should have direct experience of the world and use natural objects for learning.



Source: Little Messy Learners (2024)



Source: NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde (n.d.)



Source: Rainy Day Mum (2023)

Messy Sensory Play - Messy play gives the chance for endless exploration of materials and their physical properties. Children learn cognitive principles and practice their motor, language, and social skills during messy play.

Children engage with messy play at different rates and in different ways, therefore the activity should be left out long enough for children to explore in their own time. Materials that do not require children to get wet or sticky, should be provided, as some children are not keen on these things. Paper, or natural materials can be a good substitute (Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Centre 2022). Both Piaget (1962) and Steiner (1861-1925) show support for a sensory method of learning. Piaget states that from the age of 0-2 years, children develop co-ordination between their senses and motor responses and show sensory curiosity in their surroundings. Steiner believed in a good balance between practical and academic studies, wanting children to experience natural things and learn from their sensory experiences.



Source: Kliddiwinkle Schoolhouse (2024)



Source: Days with Grey (2023)

Water play - Water play can be a calming activity, especially for hyperactive children who enjoy the sensory stimulation it offers. A repetitive activity such as scooping or running their hands through the water can help them relax. It can also help them concentrate more. Alternatively, if children spend time splashing or stamping in water, this can assist them in burning off excess energy (University of Manchester n.d.) Children develop fine motor control, an understanding of volume and weight, as well as improved cooperation and strategic thinking. (Watts 2020). Jugs, containers and strainers will help children develop co-ordination (Isaacs 2007), as per the Montessori Method (1912). The same effect can be gained by using pipettes and scoops. Even if there is no option to provide water play, it is still possible to talk about the rain in the environment. Watts points out that you can discuss the clouds, talking about how we know it is going to rain and why we need to dress appropriately. How are rain clothes different to normal clothes? What sounds do the raindrops make on various surfaces? How does the rain taste?



Source: Playspaces (n.d.)



Source: Wright, K (2021)



Source: Book Trust (2024)

Reading Together – Parents/practitioners can help children with their emergent literacy skills, by using wide vocabulary and teaching phonological awareness. Reading with a child, builds vocabulary, introduces story structure, gives print awareness and a general enjoyment of literacy (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Schools may offer reading meetings, where parents are told about the reading schemes used by the school and how they can support their children in reading. Books are often sent home with some sort of record kept on paper or electronically, charting the child's progress (Burnham 2016).

Dialogic reading, encourages parents to let their child be the storyteller. Adults can then expand on the child's comments, by asking 'who', 'what' and 'when' questions, to assess their understanding. A more engaging experience can be had if the children's interests are followed, keeping them more focused on what they are reading. Reading needs to be a fun experience for children (Whitehurst, Arnold, et al., 1994).

A Vygotskian approach puts great importance on a teacher using and developing a wide vocabulary and the use of carefully considered questioning, to determine a child's understanding. It is through the process of questioning and discussing, that the child is able to progress through the zone of proximal development, where they can only succeed with the support of another person.



Source: Bump Birth Baby UK (n.d.)

Singing – Music therapy programmes have been set up, to support attachment behaviours between vulnerable parents and their children. One of the most recognised is the Australian programme *Sing & Grow* (Abad and Edwards [2004](#), [2005](#), [2007](#)). Music therapy can support, develop, and extend parental skills in using chants, lullabies, songs, and rhymes, to enhance the sensitivity and mutual co-regulation between child and caregiver.

According to Margareta Burrell (2011), through engagement in musical activities, a sense of togetherness and closeness emerges and can be observed and supported. As relationships are central to human well- being, music making with the very young and their parents can enhance and strengthen their skills of relating.





Source: Family (2018)

Enabling Environment



Source: Hygge in the Early Years (2019)



Source: Wellness for All (n.d.)

Authentic and Personal Learning - Meaningful experiences that are based in real-life contexts, enabling children to make connections, apply existing knowledge and consolidate their skills (Education Wales, 2022)



Source: Birth to Five Matters (n.d.)

Stimulating, organised and informative surroundings, giving the children lots of chance for exploration. (EYFS, Early Education 2021)

Different areas for maths, literacy, creative...clearly labelled so that children begin to understand that print in the environment has a purpose, Adults can support the children to understand labels, even if they cannot read them independently. (Burnham, 2016)



Source: Portman Church Street Family Hub (n.d.)

A space where risks are minimised and well managed, and children are safe from harm and abuse. (Early Years Alliance n.d.)

Wide range of activities provided, to maintain interest.

Regularly refreshed displays, with a clear purpose and interactive content.

Clear representation of different cultures and subjects, making sure everyone feels included. (Burnham, 2016)

A welcoming environment which gives a sense of belonging. (Early Years Alliance n.d.)

The space is for the children and they should be encouraged to care for it.

Time outdoors benefits children as it offers unique opportunities, not always possible indoors.

Provide plenty of open-ended resources to enable children to combine development and learning (Birth to Five Matters n.d.)

A quiet space for sleeping and resting, or sensory engagement should be provided. Areas which provide familiar experiences and some which are unfamiliar and exciting. This encourages children to explore new things out of their comfort zone (Birth to Five Matters n.d.)

- An area suitably equipped to prepare and provide healthy meals, snacks and drinks (EYFS 2024)

A prepared environment, where teachers provide resources that will maximise independence, with equipment to stimulate all the senses (Montessori)

A Practitioner's Role and Professional Partnerships

Birth to Five Matters (n.d. p.35) states that the role of an adult is to "optimise the development and learning potential of every child". This is supported by Froebel (1782-1852), who uses the phrase "freedom with guidance" - a child should be able to learn from their own activity and reflection.

Observation - Practitioners make concise and relevant observations of children, to determine next steps in a child's learning (Burnham 2016).

Provision of resources – Practitioners should provide stimulating and engaging resources, matching them to children's interests through observation. Resources should be regularly checked for damage or wear and refreshed regularly to keep the children's learning interesting.

Professional Love – This is not a replacement for parental love but a substitute (Emma Davis - Family 2021). A child's emotional needs remain the same, wherever they are. When they fall, they need comforting, if they're missing their parent, kindness and a gentle touch will help reassure them. These needs are mentioned by Maslow (1943), in his Hierarchy of Need triangle. The level of professional love sought, will vary from child to child, as they are all unique. This may also depend on their level of attachment to their primary carer, as mentioned by Bowlby (1969).

Role Model – A practitioner should display/demonstrate the type of behaviour they expect from the children in their care.

Act within the boundaries of school policies – Be aware of the school's policies in relation to safeguarding, first aid, data protection, staff conduct and others and should act within the boundaries of those policies, at all times.

Relationships – Form good relationships with children, colleagues, parents/carers, outside agencies, community organisations and anyone else involved with the children's welfare (see overleaf).

Praise – Give positive reinforcement to children and praise their achievements regularly. Instant reward and praise, making it clear what they are being praised for.

Follow and effectively deliver the EYFS – Identify resources and activities that will help children access all areas of the EYFS, keeping note of any children who you think may have additional needs and tailoring activities to suit each individual child.

Communication – Check emails regularly, to keep abreast of new developments. Ensure that parents are up to date with all current events, by way of noticeboards, newsletters, electronic messaging systems and any other methods accepted by the school.

Provide a positive, friendly atmosphere – Smile, greet children and parents in a friendly manner, have an 'open door' policy or provide guidelines for how and when is the best way to contact you, should they need help.

Promote inclusion – Give children every opportunity to succeed, tailored to their individual needs, no matter what their starting point or background. Discuss with parents/carers, any needs they are aware of and how you can support them.

Be open, approachable, empathetic and respectful when communicating (Burnham 2016)

A child is supported by many different people, in differing ways (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Form good relationships with all of them but always put the child's interest at forefront.

Discuss possible maternal factors that could have affected a child's development. For example, genetic defects, substance abuse during pregnancy, post-natal depression or prolonged recovery following birth, young Mother? Has Mother struggled to bond with child? Determine what agencies are already involved or direct parent/carers to agencies specialising in their area of need and talk about how you can support them and their family through difficult times.

Use different communication methods, verbal, electronic, written, to ensure everyone receives information in a way they understand. Consider EAL, SEND needs of parents and translate where needed.

Respectful care includes primary caregiving, freedom of movement and respect for children's competence (Tops Day Nurseries 2020). Take time to talk to children about what you are doing to them or with them. For example, during nappy changes, say 'Can I change your nappy now?' - talk through the process, giving them a chance to interact as you do so. Provide materials they may need to do jobs themselves, e.g. tissues, so they can access them independently. Let children move when they want to – don't expect them to sit for longer than necessary or restrict them with highchairs. Let babies have 'tummy time' to strengthen their neck and core muscles. Give children choices to make, allowing them to be in control of their decision making.

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