



Exceptional Care in the First 1000 Days

The First 1000 days

The first 1000 days refers to a child's life from birth to two years old. This period of time is very significant and unique. The foundations of ideal growth, health and neurodevelopment are established in this stage of life. Many factors contribute to establishing these foundations and if these foundations are not built to its optimum, a child may fail to meet their developmental

potential. Even though the brain is constantly developing and changing throughout life, during the last trimester pregnancy and the first two years of life, the brain is at its period of highest plasticity. (Cusick and Georgieff, 2013).

This is supported by CDC (2022) as they state that the brain grows rapidly during the early years of a child's life. They go on to state that the factors which impact brain development include, nutrition starting in the womb, exposure to toxins or infections and the child's experiences.

Ultimately, parents and practitioners play a huge role in supporting a child's brain development. These relationships affect all aspects of their development and it is their responsibility to ensure they are giving the child exceptional care. This includes enabling environments and experiences, supporting holistic development and meeting the child's basic needs. This is supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of needs theory.



1 - (Source: Gov, 2016)

Environments



According to Early years matter (N,D), A child's environment is crucial for supporting and extending their development and learning. As stated by Bruce (2010. Pg. 64), the physical environment needs to appeal to children's channel of learning as well as be carefully designed for comfort and ease of movement. The environment shouldn't be too overwhelming. It is significant to take the following points into consideration; noise levels, fresh air and colour. The environment should allow children to have a variety of materials and sufficient resources. Enabling environments allows children to feel safe, relaxed and comfortable. In a setting there are multiple ways practitioners can adapt the environment to encourage this feeling of safety. For instance, children are affirmed when they see images of themselves and their families. Practitioners could dedicate a display board to these images (Bruce, 2010, p. 61).

Practitioners could also create a safe space for all babies and children to go to if they feel overwhelmed such as a tented area with plenty of cushions and blankets (Mainstone-Cotton, 2019). As a result, children are able to explore their surroundings.

Giving children this opportunity is essential for their development. Through exploring, children use all of their senses.

Particularly in the first few weeks of a baby's life, they begin to learn through explorative play (NHS N,D).

Exploratory play is a form of Heuristic Play. This involves giving children a range of everyday objects and giving them the opportunity to explore whatever they like without rules or restrictions. Using everyday objects as opposed to toys gives babies and children more of a sensory experience (Twinkl, ND).

Exploratory play has a range of benefits and plays a major role in a child's development including their fine motor skills, creativity and concentration.

The intention of exploratory play is to create a curiosity in the children to reach out and discover new things (TheNewAgeParents, ND). This is supported by the Montessori method that suggests that children learn best in a child-centred, learning environment that promotes freedom for children to explore materials of their choice (Lopez, N,D).

Practitioners should also ensure that they create these enabling environments outside as well as inside.

According to Cohen (2021), Many researchers argue that children who play outside are happier and less anxious compared to the children that spend more time indoors.

Bruce (2010, pg. 64) also emphasises that children often prefer to play outside.

Being outdoors supports children's natural means of learning. Being outdoors provides multiple sensory experiences as well as gives opportunities to see nature and insects in their natural habitat (Bruce, 2010, pg. 62). Natural resources are available which gives children the opportunity to do activities that strengthen development like building dens. Large outdoor areas challenge children to be a lot more active through running or riding bikes. Practitioners could get resources like items for gardening, mud kitchens or equipment for being mini bug detectives (Bruce, 2010, pg. 65).

Even though there are many benefits to enabling these environments, practitioners may face challenges such as funding and lack of space. With lack of funds, Practitioners could supplement expensive materials with found materials such as cardboard boxes and tubes (Bruce, 2010, pg. 64).

Other challenges practitioners face when caring for babies and young children can include children who do not settle and feel comfortable in the setting. These children may have separation anxiety and struggle to completely be at ease. This prohibits learning as they will spend the majority of their time in the setting being unsettled and upset.

Activity ideas



2 - Treasure Baskets

Treasure baskets are an easy way to encourage explorative and heuristic play in children. As previously mentioned, explorative play involves children using their senses to explore everyday

items and natural materials. Treasure baskets would include these items. Children are encouraged to explore these baskets completely freely.

Within the treasure basket there should be around 15-20 clean items that are safe for babies to explore with their mouths. Every day or week, the items in the basket may be changed (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 127).

Physical Development

Through exploring the basket, hand-eye coordination is encouraged.

Babies will also strengthen their muscles through sitting for a long time and holding all of the interesting objects.

Additionally, Babies will usually interact with objects with their mouths which activates their smell and taste.

Finally, with their curiosity heightened, children spend a lot of time examining the objects which in turn, helps their eye focus (Early Impact, 2020).

Cognitive Development

There are multiple cognitive benefits in using treasure baskets. With the fascination of them, children's concentration levels are high. Children will learn how to focus and sustain attention. They also use trial and error to have a better idea on what each item can and cannot be used for. Additionally, children are processing different shapes, sizes and textures (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 128) .

Emotional and Social Development

Treasure baskets are all child based. Adults do not intervene and the child has complete control over their own play. As a result, they learn independence. Children may often feel frustrated as activities are mostly adult directed.

Also, Children often feel a sense of accomplishment when discovering things on their own (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 128).



Nursery rhymes and songs are very popular. They date as far back as the 17th century and will no doubt continue to be popular in many years (BBC, ND). Singing Rhymes and songs have multiple developmental benefits and is the easiest activity to plan for children with little to no challenges. It takes no preparation and can take place at any time (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Physical Development

Some nursery rhymes are action songs. The more children become familiar with these actions, the more they learn. For example, 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes' requires children to use their motions. Adults can help babies do the movements. With this practice they will soon perform them by themselves (BBC, ND). They can also encourage small fine movements such as clapping or grasping fingers ((Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Cognitive Development

Nursery songs and rhymes help children notice patterns and sounds. They also develop memory and concentration skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129). Additionally, some nursery rhymes teach basic maths like counting (BBC, ND).

Language Development

Through songs and rhymes, children are exposed to new words and sounds. They also learn about intonation and expression (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 129).

Emotional and Social Development

Songs can make children feel at ease which is why adults usually sing to babies to help calm them. Songs also make children aware of different emotions such as 'If you're happy and you know it'. Children emotionally connect with adults and other children during singing (BBC, ND).



4 - Sensory activities

There are an endless amount of sensory activity ideas using all sorts of foods and materials to further help children explore textures. Sensory activities are beneficial for all ages and are inclusive of all children including those with ALN and disorders. Sensory activities can be done indoors or outdoors and tend to be messy.

Water

Practitioners can provide water buckets and create multiple different water activities such as colour mixing water play, ice cubes play, sponge water bombs or counting / singing the alphabet with foam cut outs (MessyLittleMonster, 2020). All which encourage development in different ways such as, hand-eye coordination and motor skills (BusyBees, 2020).

Cooked foods

Cooked foods such as pasta and rice are great for sensory experiences. Practitioners can colour them with food colouring or put them in juices and water. As babies tend to explore with their mouths, this is a safe way to do so.

Practitioners can also mix cornflour and water to form a thick paste that changes textures when touched (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 130).

Sand and Mud

These natural materials are a good resource to use in sensory play and can be used in several ways. Providing tools like buckets, spades and shovels encourages fine motor skills. Sand and mud play also builds creativity and imagination. Both can be moulded into different shapes or used in small world play (Baby Sparks, 2019).

Physical Development

Sensory activities promote fine motor movements and hand-eye coordination.

Cognitive Development

Through sensory play the brain is constantly stimulated. Children learn about all different textures and materials. Additionally, it encourages 'scientific thinking' and problem solving (Good Start 2018).

Social and Emotional Development

Sensory activities give children a lot of freedom which makes them feel in control. Sensory activities are especially good for children with autism or other learning needs as it engages with all areas of a child's brain and can be very relaxing in times where the child is overwhelmed or frustrated (TheFCA, N,D).



5 - Catching, Throwing and kicking games

Games involving throwing, catching or kicking a ball improves development all around. It involves constant repetition and practice and can be done socially or individually.

Physical Development

Simple activities involving throwing, kicking, catching and dropping all encourage a child's gross and locomotor skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 135). It is also good for muscle development, balance, hand-eye coordination and fitness (Raising Children, 2020).

Cognitive Development

Children quickly learn and gain more spatial awareness during ball activities. They also learn the concept in which objects move in the air and drop to the floor. Ultimately, enhancing their knowledge on cause and effect (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136).

Language Development

Generally when playing these types of games, children are playing with another adult or child. This interaction will help children understand language and also encourage vocalisation (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136). This is supported by Vygotsky who argues that language is improved with social interactions (Erbil, 2020).

Emotional and Social Development

These types of activities help children understand the importance of turn taking. They also learn play skills (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 136).

Being Inclusive



As stated by the Welsh Government (N,D), A practice needs to be inclusive. This means that the practice recognises values and promotes the diversity of children and families, giving everyone equal opportunities and respect. Children should feel like they belong.

Children are heavily influenced by their environment and learn from their environments and experiences. Practitioners should ensure the environment is well organised to ensure accessibility for all. This includes making the necessary adaptations to cater for all. Additionally, resources that include images and text should be diverse and not gender specific. Practitioners should also Celebrate festivals throughout the setting including all events that are relevant to the children present (The Wishing Tree, N,D). This is also supported in Article 2 of the Un convention; non-discrimination (Unicef, N,D).

Some children in settings have unique abilities and special needs. It is important for a setting to be inclusive of these children; however, according to Hoque (N,D), there are various challenges in inclusive education. Hoque (N,D) emphasises that there is a lack of awareness, positive attitude and sensitivity in settings. There is also a lack of trained teachers. Additionally, in larger settings with larger numbers of children, it is difficult to give individual attention to every child. Lack of funding for adaptations and learning aids also make it difficult to be completely inclusive.

Professional Partnerships and Relationships



As stated by the UN Convention on the rights of the child, Article 3, the best interests of the child must be a top priority (Unicef, N,D).

Within practice both practitioners, parents and other professionals are expected to work together to give the child the best opportunity in reaching their full potential.

Practitioners should be understanding, empathetic and respectful towards parents. As well as be honest and listen (Dunlop, N,D).

Parents should do the same as well as communicate. There should be clear communication between all adults.

According to Sheriden (2018), Establishing positive and healthy relationships with practitioners have been shown to improve children's academic, social and emotional development. When working together with clear communication, both adults can support the child's learning and behaviours. This is suggested by Bronfrenbrenner in his theoretical framework when he argues that relationships affect the individual (SCU, N,D).

Inevitably, there are challenges when trying to build this healthy relationship. Firstly, work commitments and busy lifestyles may prevent parents from being able to effectively communicate with practitioners. This includes being unable to attend any parents and progress meetings. Simply dropping the child off at practice is an opportunity to communicate with the practitioner. This is difficult for some parents. Secondly, There could be language barriers between parents and practitioners. Interacting with the school can be scary for parents who have English as an additional language. Additionally, A lot of practitioners use apps to communicate with parents, if parents have a limited access to technology they will be disadvantaged (ParentPay, 2022).

Respectful Care and Meaningful Learning

Babies and toddlers have different play needs to other children. One main difference is that babies need more interaction and adult support within their play. Children who are older generally learn to

play independently or with other children and so until the child reaches this point, the adult interaction and support is important. This role is crucial in encouraging development and there are a range of things adults can do to support this. Babies and toddlers need consistent emotional care, repeated activities and routines, physical contact and interaction.

One of the most important is interaction. Constant interaction with babies and toddlers encourages language, communication and social skills.

Some activities and routines that give good opportunities for interacting and contact include nappy changing times (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 120).

It is important for adults to be constantly communicating and interacting with the child before and during a nappy change in order for the child to gain the most from the experience. Engaging with the child before taking them for a nappy change helps them learn. This can be done by singing a song or rhyme as they get taken to the nappy changing area. Nappy changes encourage their development. Their physical development is encouraged when a baby is laying on the floor as they tend to roll or reach for their toes. These movements increase muscle strength. Children will also learn more about their bodies during this time.

Nappy changing also provides the opportunity to encourage the child's language development through the one to one interaction. This routined interaction helps the child to understand the routine as well as becoming familiar with clothing items (Tassoni and Hucker, 2005, pg. 122).

International Approaches



Generally, all frameworks and approaches across the world follow the same values and principles. However, there are notable differences between approaches.

In Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, practitioners teach their children outdoors in the woodlands. They promote the same development as the Welsh curriculum however, they teach through play and hands-on exercises (BBC, N,D).

The forest school is a holistic way of learning and focuses on connecting children with their outdoor environment and giving them the freedom to explore, play and discover (Nest in the woods, N,D).

Even though this way of learning is spreading throughout the world, some countries face obvious challenges. For example, In Singapore, although they promote forest schools, they can only offer them in early mornings or late at night due to mosquitoes, heat and other animals that take shelter during the day (BBC, N,D).

Another notable approach which differs from the Welsh curriculum is Te Whariki in New Zealand. New Zealand focuses on their bicultural framing that encourages their children to grow as competent and confident learners who are strong in their identity, language and culture. Most New Zealand children attend an early learning service for a sustained period of time that begins in the first year of life (New Zealand Government, N,D).

This compares to Wales as children start in a setting at the age of 3. Any children who start younger would generally be through paid childcare and nurseries.

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