

# Exceptional Care in the First 1000 Days

**Understanding the Critical Importance of Early Years Childhood Development.**



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## **First 1000 Days Matter**



The First 1000 Days refers to the period from conception to a child's second birthday, covering critical stages of early development. During this time, the baby's brain, body, and immune system undergo rapid growth and development, laying the foundation for lifelong

health, learning, and emotional well-being (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2021, p1).

This period is widely recognised as the most crucial stage in a child's life. The experiences and care provided during these early days have a profound and lasting impact, shaping a child's physical, cognitive, and social outcomes well into adulthood (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, p13).

Recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the right nutrition and care during this time not only determine whether a child will survive but also enable them to thrive (UNICEF, 2017).

Adequate nutrition in the first 1000 days is essential for a child's growth and development, supporting them to reach their full potential and lead healthy, productive lives (WHO, 2019). It also helps to build the foundations necessary to grow, learn, and break the cycle of poverty (UNICEF, 2017).

Conversely, a lack of proper nutrition during this critical phase can result in serious and often irreversible consequences, such as increased vulnerability to illnesses, stunted growth, developmental delays, and, in extreme cases, death (WHO, 2019). This period provides parents and caregivers with a unique opportunity to shape their child's future through attentive and nurturing care (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, p14).

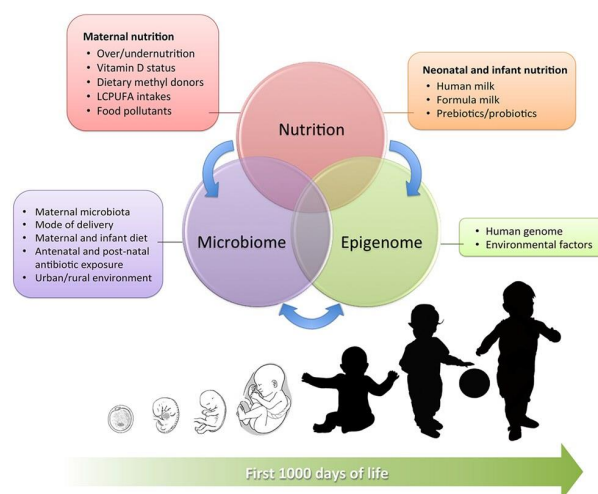
## Why the First 1000 Days Are the Most Critical



The first 1000 days are a crucial period in a child's development, during which the brain and body experience rapid and extraordinary growth. This time offers a unique chance to positively shape a child's future potential. Providing quality care and proper nutrition to both the mother and child during this phase supports the brain's remarkable development, with up to 1,000 new neural connections forming every second. This foundation plays a vital role in enhancing a child's ability to grow, learn, and thrive physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Likhar & Patil, 2022).

Scientific research highlights the importance of this period, showing how the foundations for brain architecture are established even before birth (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021 p16). During these critical days, the basic architecture of the brain begins to form, even before birth. By the time a baby reaches their first year, over a million neural connections are being formed every second. Sensory pathways, such as vision and hearing, are the first to develop, followed by early language skills and higher cognitive functions. This makes the first 1000 days the peak period for brain development, with experiences during this time having long-lasting effects (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021 p16).

When a child's body and brain develop well during this phase, their life chances improve significantly. Children who experience adequate care and nutrition during this time are more likely to reach their full potential and enjoy improved life outcomes (House of Commons, 2019, p3). However, while this phase holds immense potential, it also comes with significant risks. Exposure to stress, adversity, such as abuse, conflict, or parental difficulties can lead to delayed development, stunted growth, or emotional and cognitive difficulties. If left unresolved such experiences can have lasting consequences, potentially affecting the child throughout their life and even passing negative impacts on to future generations (House of Commons, 2019, p3). By understanding the critical importance of the first 1000 days, parents, caregivers, and policymakers have an unparalleled opportunity to support children in building a strong foundation for a healthy, thriving future (House of Commons, 2019, p3).



## What Exceptional Caregiving Looks Like



It is vital that babies, children, and expectant mothers receive exceptional care during the initial 1,000 days, a critical period in a child's growth and development. During this time, from foetus to toddler, they are extremely vulnerable, depending entirely on their mother and caregivers for the essential nutrients and care needed to support rapid brain and physical growth (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021, p.13).

From conception to about 10 days after birth, midwives and doctors play a crucial role in ensuring the health and well-being of both the pregnant mother and baby (NHS, 2020).

As the child grows, their dependency on caregivers expands beyond nutrition and safety to include social interaction, cognitive stimulation, emotional regulation, and comfort. Effective caregiving involves recognising and responding appropriately to a child's cues, such as providing comfort, maintaining eye contact, or engaging in reciprocal interactions like turn-taking in communication. These actions lay the foundation for early learning and contribute significantly to healthy brain development (WHO, 2018, p. 14).

Sensitive, responsive, and loving caregiving is essential for fostering a child's social and emotional well-being. By promoting secure attachments and creating a nurturing environment, caregivers support a child's ability to thrive physically, cognitively, and

emotionally (WHO, 2018, p. 14). This exceptional care during the first 1,000 days requires the combined efforts of parents, family members, and professional health and childcare workers, who collectively play pivotal roles in shaping a child's development (Finnegan, 2016, p. 9).



## Exceptional Care in the Early Years: Enabling Environments & Inclusive Practice



Exceptional care recognises how a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive growth are interconnected. Early years practitioners need to consistently provide understanding and responsive care. This support builds strong, secure attachments, crucial for helping children

manage their emotions and build resilience (Bowlby, 1988). These attachments are foundational for children to develop stable relationships and effectively handle life's challenges (Brodie, 2024).

When caregivers promptly and sensitively respond to an infant's distress—by holding them and providing reassurance—it builds the child's trust and a sense of security. This consistent and loving reaction teaches infants that their expressions of discomfort will reliably bring comfort, helping them to develop organised, secure strategies for managing distress. They learn to seek and maintain closeness with their caregiver until they feel safe again (Benoit, 2004, p. 4).

Similarly, Emmi Pikler emphasised the importance of these secure attachments, particularly through everyday care routines like nappy changing, bathing, and dressing. Pikler's approach underlines that these are not just routine tasks but crucial interactions that form the building blocks of trust and security between the child and caregiver. By ensuring that these activities are conducted with full attention and respect for the child, Pikler believed that it was possible to foster a child's physical and mental health from an early age (Learning Journals, 2021).

What sets Pikler's method apart is the **distinct** emphasis on the quality of attention during these routines. According to Pikler, the caregiver's undivided attention during these moments communicates to the child that they are valued and important. This dedicated engagement not only reinforces the child's sense of safety but also enhances their self-image and emotional well-being, as these formative experiences influence their overall development (Learning Journals, 2021).

Both Benoit, and Pikler's methodologies advocate for a nurturing holistic environment where the infant's needs are met with sensitivity and respect. This forms a foundational ethos where secure attachments are seen not just as beneficial but essential for healthy development, thereby ensuring that children grow up feeling respected and valued.

Furthermore, Early Years Practitioners can enhance a child's learning and development by creating enabling environments, as outlined by the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DFE, 2021). These environments, should be diverse and stimulating, providing children with the confidence to explore and learn in spaces that are both safe and intellectually challenging, whether indoors or outdoors (Bartleton, 2021). Engaging activities such as sensory play, storytelling, and exercises that develop motor skills are crucial for stimulating brain connections, which are especially vital during the first two years of a child's life (Cleveland Clinic, 2022).

Additionally, working closely with parents is essential to ensure consistent and supportive care that extends into the home, reinforcing beneficial practices and contributing to a continuous learning experience (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). This collaborative approach mirrors Bronfenbrenner's microsystem theory, highlighting the importance of interactions within

immediate environments like the home and classroom. Here, children and adults influence each other in a bidirectional manner, shaping and being shaped by their interactions. This dynamic helps build a foundation where children learn early rules of behaviour and social norms, emphasizing the significance of nurturing relationships within these settings to support holistic development (Aubrey and Riley, 2019, p, 153)

## The Role of Early Years Professional Practitioners



Early Years Professional Practitioners play a vital role during the crucial first 1000 days of a child's life, due to their specialised knowledge about early development. They are acutely aware of how negative conditions such as substance abuse, domestic violence, poverty, and insufficient understanding of child development can deeply impact a child's future well-being. Their expertise is invaluable not only in caring for and educating young children but also in providing essential support to families during this significant period. These Early Years Professional Practitioners can skilfully guide families through the early years of their child's growth and development, blending their understanding of developmental milestones with an awareness of the broader social and economic challenges that families might face. They also champion policies that encourage healthy child development and actively work within communities to foster better environments for children to grow and thrive (Limegreentangerine, 2025).

Research demonstrates that when Early Years Practitioners engage actively with parents and caregivers in their child's education, it significantly enhances the child's prospects for success, irrespective of their background. This collaborative partnership starts when parents first visit your setting, a critical component of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). These initial

meetings are essential for helping the child transition smoothly to the new environment (Department for Education, 2024).

It's important for practitioners to encourage parents and caregivers to share information about their family life, cultural backgrounds, and what they expect from the educational setting. Recognising parents and caregivers as the child's primary educators enhances their involvement and allows them to contribute significantly to their child's educational path. Moreover, having parents involved during the initial settling-in period helps build trust in your approach to care and allows for a learning experience that is tailored to the child's specific needs. This collaborative relationship is essential for understanding the child's interests and developing effective strategies to support their learning. Such partnerships are foundational for the child's development and learning journey (Limegreentangerine, 2025).

## **Supporting Maternal Factors Affecting Development:**



Maternal factors such as mental health, substance use, and socioeconomic challenges significantly impact a child's development. Professionals like midwives, health visitors, and social workers provide comprehensive support, addressing physical health needs and offering counselling and referrals for mental health issues. Social workers and family support workers also provide day-to-day assistance and parenting advice, ensuring that families receive the social and economic support they need (Public Health England, 2021)

The combined efforts of diverse professionals provide comprehensive care for children and their families during the foundational years. This team-based approach not only nurtures the child's physical and mental development but also reinforces the stability of the family environment, creating ideal conditions for growth. The model of integrated care underscores the critical role of early and ongoing interventions, ensuring that developmental progress is closely monitored, and any challenges are addressed swiftly (Public Health England, 2021).

### **Timeline and Roles of Key Professionals:**

#### **1. Pre-Birth to Birth:**

- a. **Midwives:** They are instrumental from pregnancy to birth, advising on nutrition and lifestyle, preparing parents for birth, and delivering postnatal care (NHS, 2020a).

#### **2. Birth to 6 Weeks:**

- a. **Health Visitors:** They start their engagement by visiting the home after birth, providing guidance on breastfeeding, nutrition, and the early health and development of the infant (NHS, 2020c).

#### **3. 6 Weeks to 1 Year:**

- a. **Paediatricians and General Practitioners (GPs):** These professionals conduct regular health check-ups, ensure developmental milestones are met, and manage vaccinations (NHS, 2020c).
- b. **Breastfeeding Consultants:** They provide specialised support if there are breastfeeding challenges, ensuring the infant's nutritional needs are met (NHS, 2020c).

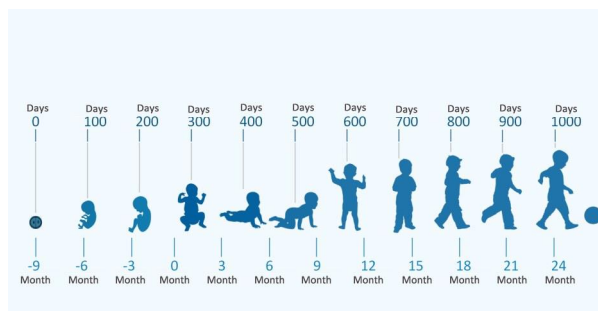
#### **4. 1 Year to 3 Years:**

- a. **Early Years Practitioners (Nursery Staff):** As children begin nursery, these practitioners play a critical role in developing speech, motor skills, and cognitive abilities through structured play and educational activities. They monitor developmental milestones and coordinate with parents and healthcare professionals as needed (Ofsted, 2023).

- b. **Speech and Language Therapists:** These specialists provide interventions to support and enhance speech and language development (NHS, 2019).

#### 5. Throughout the First 1000 Days:

- a. **Social Workers and Family Support Workers:** They assist families facing social, emotional, or economic challenges, helping them access necessary services and supports.
- b. **Dietitians and Nutritionists:** They advise on nutritional needs and dietary concerns to ensure proper growth and development, especially important for children with health concerns like allergies or nutritional deficiencies.



1 - (Photo credit: iDSMED)

## Challenges



Providing exceptional care in the first 1000 days does not come without its challenges particularly under the current economic strains in Wales (Roberts, Morgan and Petchey, 2023). The cost-of-living crisis and ongoing funding cuts significantly affect both families and the services designed to support them. These economic pressures not only reduce the quality and availability of care but also deepen existing social inequalities, impacting children's health and developmental progressions (Roberts, Morgan and Petchey, 2023).

Another challenge is retaining qualified staff, during the first 1000 days of care this can presents significant challenges. Some key issues in the workforce include low salaries, demanding job conditions, limited chances for professional growth, a lack of necessary qualifications among staff, ineffective leadership, and poor staff well-being. Some of these

problems, like the quality of staff qualifications, are deeply ingrained in the system and may be out of immediate control (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024).

To tackle these issues, a strategic plan is essential to enhance working conditions and increase job satisfaction. For example, investing in leadership training can improve management practices, which in turn may boost staff morale and decrease turnover rates. Additionally, focusing on staff well-being through support programs or professional development initiatives can help keep skilled staff and elevate the quality of childcare provided. Concentrating on these controllable factors can help early years settings foster a more supportive and enduring work environment (Owston, Jones and Stanley, 2024).

Unprecedented situations like the COVID-19 pandemic from 2019-2022 significantly impacted the crucial first 1000 days of a child's life. Reduced healthcare services, school closures, lockdowns, and financial stress from job losses all contributed to these challenges. The lack of access to nutrition and adequate prenatal and postnatal care hindered children's growth and development. Furthermore, reduced social interactions affected children's social skills and attachment development, while limited access to educational settings impeded cognitive and language growth. The reduction in preventive services, such as social services, meant less safeguarding for children, leaving more at risk due to decreased visibility in schools, communities, and nurseries (Mrudula et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on early childhood development, significantly disrupting education, community services, and family dynamics. The lack of social interaction and outdoor play has threatened children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development, with the hidden impact of domestic violence emerging as a serious concern. However, the crisis has also fostered a greater appreciation for childcare's role in society and highlighted the need for integrated family support. Moving forward, enhancing early childhood development awareness within COVID-19 response programs could prove crucial in addressing these challenges and promoting the well-being and responsive caregiving necessary for children to thrive (Mrudula et al., 2021).

## Activities and Approaches



During the initial 1000 days from conception to a child's second birthday, shaping environments and activities is crucial for their long-term health, growth, and brain development. This phase crucially influences a child's future health and cognitive abilities (Swiddle D'Cunha, 2020).

**Sensory-Rich Activities:** It's vital to immerse infants in environments filled with diverse sensory experiences. Studies show that early sensory interactions can significantly enhance cognitive abilities, as activities involving various textures, sounds, and visuals foster neural connection development (Stead, 2024).



2 - <https://youtu.be/82U0DZlf2fi?si=U3J9DBH1nIOYnMOz>

**Movement and Physical Development:** Allowing infants the freedom to move is essential. Such physical activity supports not only motor development but also cognitive and psychological growth. Spaces that promote movement contribute to advancing a child's psychological functions and overall brain development (Stead, 2024).



3 - Mini Movers <https://youtu.be/UrydFrL3id4?si=jTFEtTuuDZUBeFsX>

**Nutritional Impact:** Nutrition is fundamentally important throughout the first 1000 days. Ensuring optimal nutrition during pregnancy, breastfeeding, and early childhood is crucial for proper brain development and to prevent future health issues (Swiddle D'Cunha, 2020).

**Language and Social Interaction:** Environments rich in language and social interaction are necessary. Engaging children in continuous dialogue, reading, and interactive verbal communication fosters both linguistic and cognitive growth. Social play also aids in developing emotional and social intelligence (Stead, 2024).

## International Approaches



**Reggio Emilia Approach:** This method focuses on child-led exploration within a stimulating environment, advocating for children to express themselves in "hundred languages" such as art and play, supporting comprehensive development during the critical first 1000 days (Reggio Emilia Approach, 2019).

### Benefits of a Reggio Emilia approach to early years education



**Forest School:** Known for its emphasis on regular interaction with nature, this approach enhances physical and mental health, builds resilience, and supports a practical learning style. Exposure to natural surroundings is especially beneficial for cognitive and emotional

growth, corroborated by research showing that nature enhances cognitive outcomes (Bullard, 2022).



## [What is Forest School | Outdoor, Child-lead, Free play | Childhood in Nature](#)



These approaches, highlighting natural interactions and child-led learning, can greatly enrich early developmental activities, each bringing distinct benefits that help maximize developmental potential during early years.

In conclusion, while the Reggio Emilia approach focuses on artistic expression and community involvement, the Forest School promotes a deep connection with nature and outdoor activities. Both provide unique educational experiences that support different learning preferences and educational goals, depending on the resources and philosophies of the educators and parents involved (Paques Dias, 2023).

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