

Exceptional Care in the First 1000 Days

"The first 1000 days of life, from conception to age two significantly influence the outcomes for children, parents, and families, throughout the life course and from generation to generation" (John, 2012).

Save the Children (2016) emphasises that in the first 1000 days a child's brain will develop rapidly. The brain is particularly sensitive in the early years which is why it is vital to provide babies/young children with quality environments and experiences to help them to develop holistically in a positive way. They point out the rapid changes that happen to a child in their early years, such as learning to walk and talk. The skills learned in their early years will set the foundation for their learning in later life.

HM Government (2021) points out that the first 1001 days are crucial for child development, but they also acknowledge that it is a time when babies are most vulnerable and need the people around them to care for them and meet their needs effectively. This report states that the first 1000 days begin during pregnancy so it is vital that the mother has a healthy pregnancy which will promote a healthy life for the baby. As Maslow's hierarchy of needs model explains, babies need their basic needs to be met for them to be able to further develop skills. It is the caregiver's responsibility to ensure that the child has food, warmth and shelter to enable them to develop to their full potential (Mcleod, 2022).



Current Challenges

Cusick and Georgieff (2013) discuss the importance of nutrition in early brain development within the first 1000 days. They highlight the challenges faced in developing countries due to poverty and the conditions that the families live in which can cause malnutrition in young children that could potentially reduce brain development. John (2012) also points out that some babies may be disadvantaged before birth and in their early life as their parents could live in a deprived area, suffering from poverty and bad living conditions. She discusses the importance of early interventions for children and their families to help young children to break out of the cycle and reach their full potential.

Within their first 1000 days a child will spend most of their time with their parents but may also attend a childcare setting which will have an impact on their development. In Wales, childcare settings need to ensure that National Minimum Standards are met which means that practitioners working with children under two years will be working to a ratio of one adult: three babies (Welsh

Government, 2016). At times, practitioners will find it challenging to meet each child's individual needs as they work within these ratios. A practitioner will not be able to give their undivided attention to every child due to their responsibility to care for two other children at the same time. Practitioners will also be required to follow the setting's policies and procedures which often means that they need to adhere to a strict routine everyday leaving little room for adapting to meet an individual child's needs.

Another current challenge that could influence the child's brain development is Covid-19 and the effects of lockdown. Tyrie, et.al (2021) identifies that young children's lives were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic as they had very different experiences than children of the same age pre-pandemic. They carried out surveys and discovered that there are many negative factors that have affected young children under five years old and their holistic development has been affected by the pandemic. Tyrie, et.al (2021) explains that practitioners are not expected to help 'covid babies' to 'catch up' with their learning and development but to provide high quality environments and give children time to explore and develop at their own pace.

[Covid Babies - Delphi Study](#) Click here for more information on the study carried out by Welsh Government (2021).

Environments



"The life chances of our children are influenced by the circumstances and experiences they are exposed to from before birth and throughout childhood" (John, 2012).

Brodie (2018) acknowledges that all children are unique and will learn at their own pace but that their learning will be influenced by their environment and experiences. She considers the holistic

development of young children and discusses the points that they are always developing, which emphasises the need for knowledgeable, experienced and high quality staff in Early Years settings. Brodie (2018) discusses the need for quality over quantity when considering equipment and resources needed for a setting and to always consider open-ended resources that will offer many opportunities. She also explains that regardless of the equipment and resources on offer, the practitioner is the best resource to have in any childcare setting as their involvement and interactions will enhance a child's development.

The curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings in Wales considers the vital roles that the child's environment and experiences play in their learning. This curriculum is devised with a child-centred approach allowing for children to choose their own learning and develop curiosity by exploring the environment around them (Welsh Government, 2022). Welsh Government (2022) recognises that a child's environment in the Early Years will play a crucial part in their holistic development. It highlights the need for practitioners to consider children's needs when planning daily activities and environments to ensure that they allow for children to be creative, curious and independent.

The Curiosity Approach is a method used in Early Years to help develop children's skills and independence by encouraging children to explore their environments independently and learn by accessing a variety of open-ended resources. The Curiosity Approach recognises that play is essential for child development and believes that children learn and develop skills by leading their own play. This approach requires practitioners to understand the importance of child-led play and realise the points in which they need to intervene to enhance the child's learning. If a practitioner does not have the knowledge and experience required, they could intervene at the wrong time which could affect the child's learning process and confidence for future learning (The Curiosity Approach, 2019).

Froebel's theory of the importance of play has impacted on today's practice. He explained that children need hands-on experiences to be able to problem solve and express themselves in their own way. Like The Curiosity Approach, Froebel realised that children need to have ownership of their play and to have high standard practitioners around them to facilitate their play and learning (Froebel Trust, no date). Maria Montessori also believed that children learn through play at their own pace. She believed that a child's learning needed a holistic approach and not to focus on one area of development at a time. Montessori acknowledged the importance of teachers to set up a learning rich environment, allowing children to explore in their own way and then observing the children and considering changes to the learning environment to promote the child's development further, (Learning Theories, 2022).

Welsh Government (2022) emphasises the need for an Early Years environment to meet the emotional needs of the children attending, ensuring that the setting is a calm and welcoming environment where the children will feel safe and secure. An Early Years setting should be a place that children feel comfortable and confident to explore and develop at their own pace. The setting also needs to be 'communication rich', ensuring that activities and resources are open-ended which will allow for practitioner involvement.

"During the Early Years, exploration of the environment is a key driver for development. Through exploration of their environment, children begin to develop a sense of belonging and an appreciation of the world around them" (Welsh Government, 2022).



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Activity Ideas



1 - Loose Parts Play



2 - Treasure Basket

Loose parts play is children exploring different materials and playing with them however they choose to - there is no right or wrong way to engage in this play. It can be accessible to all children and is completely child-led (Lifelong Learning Centres, 2020). Pacey (2019) says that by providing resources for loose parts play, practitioners can get involved in the child-led play and enhance their learning. They state that children can develop their confidence and creativity as they conduct their own play and build on their imagination. Loose parts play helps children to develop their communication skills as they communicate verbally and non-verbally with others around them to include them in their play. This type of play encourages children to explore, investigate and learn in their own way. Piaget described young children as little scientists who conduct their own learning by exploring and observing the world around them. He stressed that children require time to explore using their senses allowing them to learn from new experiences and build on previous learning experiences (Cherry, 2022).

Goldschmeid and Jackson (2004) states that babies brains grow rapidly and develop as the baby explores using their senses. They discuss the value of providing young children with a basket of variable items found around the home and allowing the child to choose items and explore in their own way. Treasure baskets are usually used for babies who can sit unaided but are not yet mobile, giving them a basket of items as they sit will encourage them to reach out and explore the objects. Goldschmeid and Jackson (2004) point out the important role that an adult will play whilst a child investigates the treasure basket, encouraging the child to explore the different items in a safe and positive way. They also explain that a treasure basket can be adapted regularly and added to, meeting the individual child's needs and preferences.

Like Piaget, Maria Montessori also believed that children learn through play and hands-on experiences and stressed that children need to be given enough time to play and explore using all their senses. She explained that an adult's role is to provide a stimulating, hands-on learning environment and to observe the child, ensuring not to interrupt their play and learning (Lorina, 2022). Vygotsky agreed that child-led play is crucial and beneficial but emphasised that children require quality interactions from adults or older children to enhance their learning (First Discoverers, 2022).



3 - Storytime

Sharing stories with young children is an essential part of their development and can be shared with even the youngest babies. The importance of storytime is not really what the story is or what it is about but the interactions and connections between the adult and child during this time. Forbes (2004) explains that sharing a story with a young child allows the time for closeness between an adult and child and suggests that the adult should use expression and gestures to keep the child interested. She also advises making and using story sacks for the child's favourite books, collecting items related to the story and then allowing the child to find and hold the items as the story is read, which means the child will be engaged and more involved in the story time session. Forbes (2004) states that if young children are introduced to books and stories regularly, they will begin to make up their own stories as they play and explore their surroundings.

The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings in Wales explains that children who are provided with the opportunity to play and explore in a language rich environment will develop their speech, language and communication skills effectively. Children need to be given time to process information and not expected to speak before they are ready - young children will learn to communicate in many ways before using spoken language. The curriculum also emphasises the need

for children to have access to books regularly and to spend time enjoying stories alongside an adult (Welsh Government, 2022).

Within a childcare setting, story time can sometimes prove to be difficult due to numbers of children in one area or the confidence of practitioners leading the story session. Medicott (2019) advises practitioners to plan for their story session and ensure that they have everything needed. She also discusses the fact that many practitioners find leading a large group time stressful, so suggests working together as a team, telling a story together to the group in order to build confidence for future sessions.



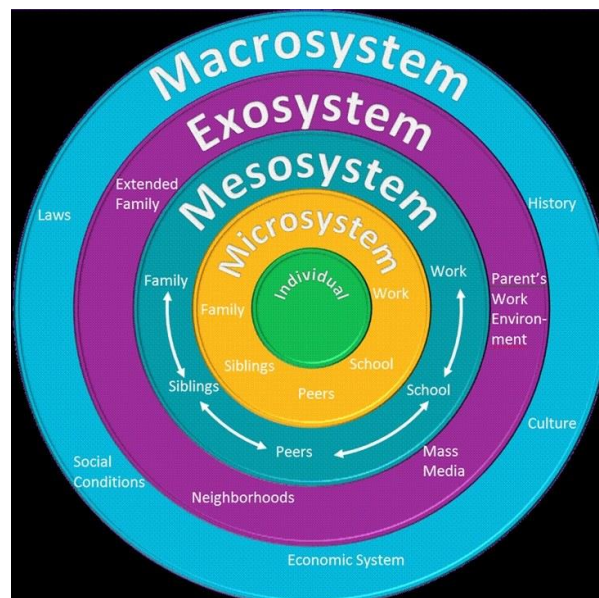
Professional Partnerships

When considering the first 1000 days it is important to consider the relationships and interactions surrounding a young child. Brodie (2015) stresses the need for a positive, effective relationship between a practitioner and a child's parents. The practitioner will need to form a professional relationship with the parents so that they gather all information needed to care for their child. Parents are the only source of information regarding the child's preferences and well-being. Practitioners will also share information with parents about their child's day which helps to keep them informed about the child's learning and development. If these positive relationships are not achieved the child may suffer as the people closest to them are not aware of their needs and how best to support them. Some parents may feel nervous or anxious about leaving their child for the first time, so it is the practitioner's role to support the parent and use valuable communication tools to build a relationship (Welsh Government, 2017).

Early Years Foundation Stage in England states that every child must be allocated a key person who will work closely with that child to meet their individual needs and build a positive relationship with them, helping the child to feel safe and secure at a setting. The key person will also build an effective relationship with parents and other professionals working with the child (Department for Education, 2021). Forbes (2004) says that a practitioner needs to be motivated and excited to find out about their new key child from parents. If they are not, then in her opinion, they are in the wrong job, and this could have an impact on that child and their family when attending a childcare setting. The childcare sector, especially Early Years, requires all staff to be positive and interested in the role that they play.

Some children may have other professionals involved in their care. To ensure that each individual child has all their needs met, it is crucial for all professionals involved to work together and support the child and their family in a holistic fashion (Early Education, 2021). Some children with Additional Learning Needs may already have a diagnosis and help/support from other professionals working with that child, but often at a young age it is the practitioner's role to recognise a child with additional needs and refer them to the correct agency for support. Brodie (2015) points out that practitioners need to be kept up to date with all information regarding agencies to reach out to for support. All practitioners also have a responsibility to always be inclusive, treating every child individually and meeting their needs on a personal level. This can sometimes be challenging if a practitioner is not qualified or experienced in working with children with Additional Learning Needs (Brodie, 2015).

The importance of professional and effective partnerships within Early Years is supported by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner emphasised that a child's development is influenced by all the interactions around them, within their immediate environment and larger environment. He puts the child at the centre of his model and stresses that all interactions taking place around that child (including those between others and not directly involving the child) will have an impact on their learning and development (Guy-Evans, 2020).



Respectful Care and Meaningful Learning



Emmi Pikler was a family paediatrician who completed many experiments to discover precise ideas on how to bring up children. She stressed that children need to be given opportunities to explore their world and learn in their own way and at their own pace. She believed that babies should not be made to sit up or stand until they were ready and could reach these stages of motor development by themselves. She also stated that they should not be confined to a chair or pram but should be allowed to be free on the floor and explore by reaching around them (Vamos, 2015).

"Emmi Pikler saw the importance of healthy attachments for the overall well-being of the child and his physical and emotional (psychic) development. She found the primary caregiving moments of feeding, changing and bathing offered vital opportunities for the infant and carer to build secure trusting relationships", (The Pikler Approach, no date).

Pikler recognised that caregiving plays a vital part in the daily routine, particularly when caring for babies and young children. She discussed the need for babies to feel secure and valued as part of the relationship between a child and their caregiver. Through positive and caring relationships, babies/young children build secure attachments and feel comfortable and respected during care routines. Pikler emphasised the need to include the child in care by giving them a role to play and talking to them, explaining what is happening next (The Pikler Approach, no date).

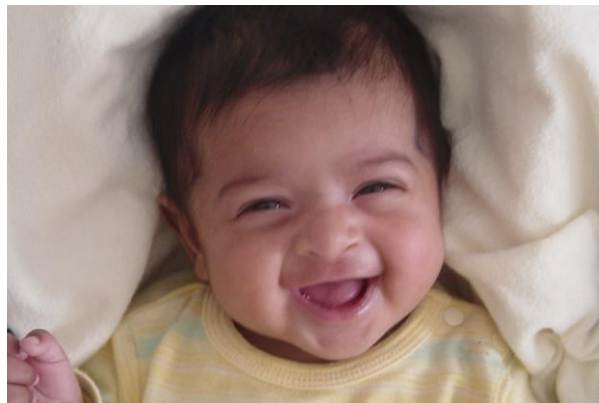
Marlen (2022) describes how an everyday task such as nappy changing can be another learning opportunity for a child. She explains that practitioners should use these times effectively to build

relationships with a child and support their development at the same time. Nappy changing is something that must take place whilst caring for young children but can be treated as a learning experience as well as a task that needs to be completed. She discusses the opportunity for language and communication development at these times as practitioners talk to the child and communicate with them in a positive way based on verbal and non-verbal cues from the child. By giving the child their undivided attention at these times, the practitioner can build a trusting relationship with the child and include them in their care routine. Pikler points out that all aspects of care are carried out with the child's cooperation and not done to the child (Marlen, 2022).

It is crucial for practitioners to use times such as nappy changing or changing a child's clothes effectively as working in a childcare setting does not always allow much time for one-to-one care. As childcare settings work within the National Minimum Standards and follow strict ratios and policies, practitioners are often working with more than one child at a time. Practitioners are able to build relationships and form bonds with small groups of children but they need to be proactive in using their one-to-one time effectively with each individual child (Welsh Government, 2016).

University of Sheffield (2016) explored the term 'professional love' and surveyed childcare practitioners to discover their thoughts and feelings on this. Most practitioners believed that showing love and affection to the children they care for is important but some worry about how their actions are viewed by others. There were many views considered during this study, including whether practitioners should show affection such as hugging/kissing children in their care. This is how Dr Page of University of Sheffield came to the term 'professional love', meaning providing love and affection for children whilst always remaining professional and respecting boundaries (University of Sheffield, 2016).

[Professional Love study by University of Sheffield](#)



International Approaches



4 - Te Whariki

Te Whariki is a curriculum that guides practice in New Zealand and states that children should be *"competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind, body and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society"*. Te Whariki means 'woven mat' and believes that children's learning and development takes place with many different components weaving together to form a holistic approach to development. The curriculum is built around four main principles, (empowerment, holistic development, family and community and relationships) which weave together to meet the child's development needs. This curriculum treats each child as an individual and does not include formal assessments and milestones. Teachers in New Zealand are encouraged to support children and motivate them to reach their individual potential (Veazey, 2020). The new curriculum for Wales has adapted many of the principles from Te Whariki and included them in their own principles and pedagogy (Welsh Government, 2022).

The Reggio Emilia Approach is based on a holistic kind of education where children are seen as unique and learn through their senses with hands-on experiences. Like Te Whariki, there are no assessments taking place in a Reggio-inspired setting. Teachers observe the children regularly and adapt their setting, resources and planning based on children's interests and ways to enhance their learning. The Reggio Emilia Approach focuses on children being curious about the world around them and choosing their own learning from a quality environment set by practitioners. Practitioners provide children with large spaces to play and natural resources to explore (Flavin, 2020). The curriculum for funded non-maintained settings in Wales have also highlighted the importance of engaging experiences, encouraging children's independence and hands-on learning experiences (Welsh Government, 2022).



5 - Forest School

Forest School is another learning process that promotes hands-on learning experiences with the opportunities for children to explore the outdoors and be curious about the world around them. Forest School is a Scandinavian approach that arrived in the UK in 1993 and encouraged many schools and childcare settings to carry out sessions with their children. The process allows opportunity for exploring and risk taking in a suitable space and helps children to develop holistically. *"Forest School helps participants to become healthy, resilient, creative and independent learners"*, (forestschoollassociation, no date). Plymouth Marjon University (2023) says that there can be challenges to overcome when attempting to promote Forest School in a school/setting as all practitioners need to be on board for it to be successful. Teams need to research and discuss the Forest School approach so that everybody understands it and can see the many benefits of the sessions. Some practitioners could clash about the risks children are exposed to whilst exploring a

Forest School but again, they need to research the topic and understand the reasonable risks in place that also aid children's development.

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