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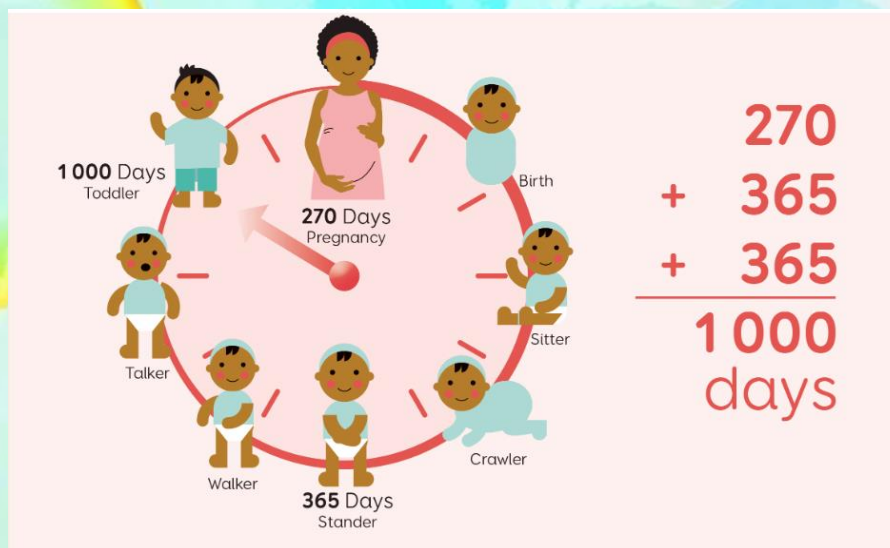
The First Thousand Days

The 'First Thousand Days' refers to the period between conception and a child's second birthday. The importance of this concept has influenced our public health policies and early years education framework. The National Children's Bureau started a 10-year programme called 'A Better Start' (2015-2025) as they see this time a critical window of opportunity to protect and improve the health of children. The review continues to be informed by evidence from the First Thousand days of life in the form of research into brain development and cognition, programming, mental and emotional health, diet and nutrition, speech, language and communication, and economic factors and the roles these play on the development on the foetus, early childhood and beyond. (National Children's Bureau., 2023; Darling *et al.*,2020)

Our understanding of the first thousand days is a subject that is under continual review. What is generally accepted is that this is a time of exponential change, and the growth and plasticity of the brain is unlike any other time in a human's development. Environment, hormones and diet are just some of the factors that drive development as early as conception and throughout the first thousand days. (Kraemer et al.,2018) 'Brain architecture' refers to the needs of a developing brain such as healthy lifestyle, love and nurture. (Garvey, 2023) Pregnant mothers playing music, reading to their unborn baby or talking to their babies may help form bonds before birth. Studies suggest that babies in utero may be able to identify voice patterns. Research carried out during the 1980's found that babies exposed to 'non-nutritive sucking nipples' with microphones playing both their mothers voice and a stranger's voice found that newborns showed a preference for their mother's voice (Morgan, 2017). The evidence from this and similar research with newborn babies suggest that they remember voices they were exposed to in utero and challenges our understanding of early memory, speech perception and theories such as attachment and language acquisition (Kisilevsky et al, 2023).

Pandora Oates – The First Thousand Days

In 2010 the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton launched ‘1,000 Days, Change a life, Change a future’, a global initiative to reduce undernutrition and improve nutrition for children around the world. Nutrition in the first thousand days has been proven to shape a child’s long-term growth, health and development (the Hunger Project, 2010). UNICEF’s work in South Africa found that one third of children under three years were stunted due to chronic malnutrition. Malnourishment in babies can have lifelong impact by weakening their immune system, therefore becoming vulnerable to disease in later life. Babies that have periods of malnourishment are also susceptible to childhood obesity (UNICEF, 2017). There are many organisations across the world working together that recognise the importance of the first 1,000 days and the role of pregnant mothers’ health on development and the of babies. The Hunger Project (2010) is an example of an organisation here in the UK that delivers support through this critical time. If organisations such as these are not accessed within this crucial period, children whose developments fall behind in the first year of life may struggle to catch up; in fact, the gap can widen and often these children are more vulnerable to complex family situations such as mental illness and abuse (Darling, 2020).



(Source, UFS)

Challenges

The cost-of-living crisis has had a huge impact on families with more than 1 in 4 children living in poverty and 1 in 5 parents struggling to provide sufficient food. 72% of children and young people that live in poverty are more likely to be diagnosed with long-term health concerns and children living in poverty are more likely to be of low birth weight, have physical health problems, and be of greater risk of obesity and mental health problems. Abraham Maslow's (1908-1970) hierarchy theory explores how difficult it can be to achieve personal growth such as emotional development if basic physiological and safety needs are not met first (Maslow, 1943). With families struggling to feed themselves, heat homes or sleep in a bed, physiological and safety needs are inconsistent and have immediate impact on mental and physiological health (Barnardo's, 2023 no crib for a bed). This crisis comes off the back of the COVID-19 pandemic; a report from First 1001 Days Movement in 2022 created from national data and research completed by professionals working with families and babies, notes that 94.8% of professionals stated that the pandemic had a long, negative impact on the social and emotional skills of children, and 92.4% claimed the same for speech and language, emotional wellbeing and development. 42.7 % said that 'many' babies were affected by parental stress leading to issues with bonding. 50% said babies had been affected by lack of stimulus and play, and 29% said babies had been exposed or victim of domestic violence, child abuse or neglect (Hog and Mayes 2022; Reed and Parish 2021).

The combination of the cost-of-living crisis and COVID-19 pandemic highlights the challenges faced by families and babies, especially if living in deprived areas. Pregnant mothers and babies need access to social support and might have felt the pandemic restrictions to these services more acutely because of this (Reed and Parish, 2021). It is times like these that shine a light on the vulnerability of babies and infants during the first thousand days as well as the role that adults play as advocates of the child's voice. Data Analysis from between January 2020 and 2021 also show a fall in up-take of funded places from nurseries in deprived areas, with attendance also lower in these areas, highlighting that families of the most need are missing out. Nurseries and other providers are also affected due this unpredictable demand and changes in funding and are having difficulties recruiting and retaining staff.

Caregiving

Health and social care workers including midwives and health visitors can offer unique support to pregnant mothers and new parents (including same-sex couples). Throughout the pregnancy and new parents experience a range of emotions from joy, self-doubt, and frustration. Midwives can guide new parents through this transition into parenthood by listening to concerns and by promoting intuitive caregiving, essential for a baby's neurological and emotional development (RCM, 2019). Social care workers have a responsibility to identify, reduce and prevent domestic abuse including sexual abuse between couples and victims of complex social factors such as trafficking due the impact on mental health on both mother and baby. They can also offer guidance to families that are affected by substance abuse and mental health complications (NICE, 2018). Research has shown that mother and baby are positively impacted when partners are included, antenatal and NCT classes can offer both psychological and practical support for new parents. RCM, 2019. Antenatal classes offer additional support on a range of topics from relaxation techniques to education around breastfeeding (NHS, 2023). The UK still has one of lowest rates of breastfeeding in the world, even though its benefits can be profound on a baby's health by reducing illnesses including ear, chest and gut infection (Everest, 2018).

(Early years practitioner's role in this and the mother's role – Pickler)

The World Health Organisation states that all babies have the right to be safe, warm, fed and to breathe normally (WHO, 2023). Exceptional care is also about remembering that babies and infants is an individual with inner dignity and worth and they have the right to be treated with respect and care. This is the duty of all schools, hospitals, police, the wider community and in their home (UNCRC, 2023).

All mothers should have respectful, sensitive, and personalised maternity care. The implications for pregnant mothers not receiving 'individualised and culturally sensitive care' can lead to dire consequences, in a recent paper by The Royal College of midwives stated that Black women were overrepresented in receiving inadequate care. Disparities have been highlighted between Black,

other minority ethnic women, White women, and women from deprived and affluent areas in the maternity care received, with Black and other minority women receiving care that was neglectful and lacked both dignity and respect (Black Maternal Health, 2023). This paper puts a light on inequalities in care but also highlights that thought better education of staff and through reflective practice future inequality can be prevented.

The Pikler approach to care states that relationships with babies and adults should be based on respect and kindness when, intimate care routines including nappy changing should be done with and not to the child, a calm experience, unhurried and without distraction. She also had strong held ideas about natural motor skill development, free movement when exploring their environment and uninterrupted play. (the Pikler collection, 2012) Pikler stated that the psychological balance is delicate in the first few weeks and months of a child's development and if damaged would be almost impossible to rectify. Calm and peace cannot be restored to the developing child. (Pikler, 1982)

‘High-quality universal newborn health is the right of every newborn everywhere. ‘WHO 2023

Professional Partnerships

The EYFS states that all children must be assigned a key person whose main role is settling in the child, based on Bowlby's attachment theory (Vollans, 2021; Bretherton, 1992). This person supports the child's wellbeing by using tailored care routines and offers consistency for both child and family during the transition starting nursery (EYFS, 2023). Practitioners are aware of the importance of meeting basic needs including food, security, love and warmth, and the impact on development if these are not met. Safeguarding and welfare are also a part our practice as set out in the EYFS, which include meeting the physiological and safety needs as set out by Maslow (Pacey, 2016). Practitioners can help in the development of a children's social skills through modelling skills, such as conversational turn-taking. This might happen on a one-to-one level or in a small group - either way, the practitioner would need to physically come down to the child's level in play and show them good eye contact and listen to what they have to say

with respect by commenting with a meaningful response. Practitioners can also use spontaneous moments to model skills such as kindness, being gentle with our hands, and sharing, by emphasizing how to ask and waiting for your turn (Lindon 2010). As Bandura's (1925-) social learning theory suggests, children learn partly through observation and may imitate behaviours. Practitioners need to be mindful of this as it can have a huge impact on a child's learning and wellbeing (Pacey, 2016).

By using a variety of methods to support a child's learning, our practice can be inclusive to all needs and abilities. The resources we offer in the classroom and outdoor learning environments should provide challenge, stimulation and opportunities for independent learning, where children make their own choices and solve their own problems. Group tasks give children the opportunity to learn from one another through communication and cooperation with our guidance. Practitioners can use observation, prompts and open-ended questions to develop learning, and through sustained shared thinking we can establish what they already know and deepen their understanding (Veazey, 2021). An activity such as snack time can be a great opportunity of learning in the moment; children can share their likes and dislikes, and they may learn how to turn-take and share, as well as manners such as please, thank you, or no thank you.

Each family we work with will have values, personal, and cultural knowledge which is unique to them, that should be respected and embraced to enrich the setting and improve our practice (birth to 5 matters, 2023). It is also important to acknowledge differences in bringing up children and to remain nonjudgemental about these differences, whilst remembering our obligation to safeguarding and child protection (Tower Hamlets, 2017). Parents are experts about their children with many months of observation and knowledge of their child's skills and interests – therefore, connecting with parents is important if they are to feel included in their child's education, especially if they have concerns about their child's wellbeing and development. By working together, we can better understand how a child can access environments that meet their needs, and how to support families in home learning (birth to 5 matters, 2023). Occasionally, practitioners and families might need to work with other agencies such as speech and language therapists, social workers or health visitors. The 'Ages and Stages questionnaire' provided by health visitors is a perfect example of

this and can be completed by either early years practitioners or parents. If the screening picks up a developmental delay, then early intervention can be acted on, but this information needs to be shared with all parties if we are to meet the needs of the child (ages and stages, 2024).

Adverse childhood experiences or 'ACES' can affect a child's sense of safety. A few examples of ACES are growing up in a home with substance misuse, mental health problems, and instability due to parental separation. However, there are other forms of trauma that can impact health and wellbeing, including not having enough food, unstable housing, and experiences of discrimination. In more extreme cases children might have witnessed violence or abuse (CDC, 2023). Bavolek's theory of 'nurturing care' is an empathic approach to support children and families that have suffered such trauma, in which families seek advice and can guide families to 'early help' services such as mental health and wellbeing support, welfare services or parenting support. We can also adopt nurturing practice in our teaching settings (Bavolek, 2014; Bradbury, 2022). Treisman (2023) says 'that every moment or interaction can be an intervention', micro-moments such as a smile or gesture can have a profound effect, as they can both open and close doors. By being aware of our non-verbal cues, positive language, and actively listening, we may help a parent or child feel that they are valued, which is crucial if they are vulnerable and struggling seek help.

International Approaches to the first 1000 days

Te Wha"riki

Te Wha"riki meaning woven mat, weaving together principles, strands, goals and learning outcomes to create a unique curriculum which is gaining attention around the globe. The idea being that children gain a strong idea of their identity, language and culture. The framework has four principles: Empowerment, children feel empowered to learn; Holistic development, this is said to be interwoven with experiences; Relationships, and Family. Wha"nau (meaning community or extended family) and the mentioned four principles are then 'woven', or connected, with five learning strands: Mana atua, wellbeing; Mana tangata, contribution; Mana whenua, belonging; Mana reo, communication; and Mana aot"uroa, exploration (Ministry of education, 2022). Progress is

(source; Tower Hamlets)



communicated on a regular basis and through stories of the child's experiences. Older children are encouraged to write their own stories and collect evidence. Parents and Whānau are also encouraged to contribute observations to the child's story (Barnardose early learning, no date). There has been resistance to adopting a defined early years curriculum as it is felt it both limits teachers and children and opportunities to share learning and independent exploration. Te Whāriki wants to emphasise and acknowledge the importance of sociocultural learning through a Vygotskian framework that is embedded and woven within its principles and strands (Solar and Miller, 2010).



(source tower Hamlets)

Reggio Emilia

Reggio Emilia is very similar to Te Wha"riki with his 'poem of a hundred languages' as a key principle. It explains that there are a hundred ways of thinking, expressing, understanding and experiencing, and that they are all interwoven and are all equally valued and nurtured. The metaphor can be applied to the extraordinary potential of children in how they build their knowledge and their creative processes. Reggio also thinks of children as 'active protagonists' in their learning, as with Te Wha"riki in that the role of community and parental involvement is encouraged as it helps to build a culture of solidarity and inclusion. However, Reggio values documentation and educational research, as documentation helps to give structure and is seen as integral to evidencing theory, practice and recording research. Reggio's approach to on-going research means that pedagogy is able to evolve whilst maintaining high standards (Reggio Emilia approach, no date). Reggio has also resisted following a set curriculum which has come under some criticism, as the approach might be seen as having a lack of accountability. However, advocates of the Reggio approach say that the continual documenting of research means Reggio approaches can be openly scrutinised (Solar and Miller, 2010).

Early Years Foundation Stage Framework – England

In contrast to the Reggio's and Te Whāriki's approach, the Early Years Foundation Stage has a set of standards that schools and childcare providers must meet for the learning and development of children in their care. However, the overarching principles look very familiar to the aforementioned approaches, such as the concept of 'the unique child'. The EYFS states that it hopes to develop children that are resilient, capable and self-assured, and that positive relationships help to build a child's independence. Enabling positive environments with teaching and adult guidance is supported by "the characteristics of effective teaching and learning", as it



is acknowledged that children learn and develop at different rates. 'Develop Matters' is the government curriculum guidance for the

EYFS and supports schools and childcare deliver the EYFS requirements (EYFS, 2024). Solar and Miller (2010) posits that the EYFS curriculum is meant to be inclusive and meet the needs of all children regardless of academic ability - nevertheless, the emphasis is on reaching early learning goals and attainment targets instead of accessibility for all.



(source, tower hamlets)

Play and Activities

During the first 1000 days there are many ways parents and practitioners can have play and explore.

Serve and return moments will be a baby's first experiences of play, peekaboo or babbling and making funny faces. This activity is important for language development, cognitive and social skills.(NSPCC, 2021)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WspJdih_ljk

(source; NSPCC, 2021)

Froebelian settings believe that music and singing helps to enhance relationships between practitioners and children and supports emotional development and well-being. Songs that use fingers can also help to strengthen fingers and dexterity. However action songs are enhance many areas of development including memory, communication and language development, gross motor and coordinated movement. (Dyke, 2017; Bruce and Spratt 2011, 101)

Sensory play is another way to engage young babies and young children, scented slim, shaving foam, mud pies, fishing in puddles, Strawberry picking in the summer would be great sensory experience as the child's visual and tactile senses would also be stimulated along with their olfactory and taste senses. Jean Piaget stated that children need environment experiences to guide the cognitive development. (only about children, 2024)

Tummy time is said to be key for developing 'retained primitive reflexes' movement skills, sensory processing and strengthens the neck muscles key needed for feeding and breathing. (NCT, 2071)



(source, tower hamlets)

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