

A pregnant woman is shown from the waist down, wearing a vibrant, multi-colored floral dress. Her hands are gently resting on her pregnant belly, with her fingers slightly curled. She is wearing a silver ring on her left ring finger. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light green and white, suggesting an outdoor setting. In the top left corner, there is a solid orange rectangular bar.

The First 1000 Days!

The "first 1000 days" refers to the period from conception to a child's second birthday. This period is widely recognised as a critical window of opportunity for ensuring healthy growth and development in children. During these early years, the brain undergoes rapid development, forming neural connections that lay the foundation for various cognitive, emotional, and social skills (Public Health Wales 2023a).



Key aspects of the first 1000 days include:

Prenatal Development: This phase begins at conception and continues through pregnancy. It is crucial for ensuring that the fetus receives adequate nutrition and care for healthy growth and development. Brandon *et al* (2009) discuss how Bowlby's theory has been applied to the pregnancy experience. Their research links the maternal fetal attachment to health behaviours, and the postpartum mother-infant relationship. This attachment, according to Bowlby (1965), is a reciprocal behavioural process initiated by the newborn to ensure survival. This process can begin before the baby is in arms through various pre-birth interactions and experiences. For instance, during pregnancy, the fetus can perceive and respond to the mother's voice, heartbeat, and movements, laying the foundation for early attachment. Therefore, attachment can commence before birth, as it encompasses the complex factors that shape the parent-child relationship.



A close-up photograph of a baby's face and upper chest. The baby has light skin and blue eyes, looking upwards and to the right with an open mouth. Their face and chest are covered with green, chunky food, likely pureed vegetables. The baby is sitting in a white bowl. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

Infant Nutrition: Proper nutrition during infancy, including breastfeeding or appropriate formula feeding, is vital for supporting healthy growth, brain development, and immune function. As discussed by The First 1000 days.org (no date) throughout the initial 1000 days, the brain experiences its most rapid growth compared to any other period in an individual's lifespan, requiring appropriate nourishment for optimal development. These crucial stages encompass pregnancy, infancy, and toddlerhood.

Responsive Care: Responsive caregiving, which includes interactions such as feeding, soothing, and playing, promotes secure attachment between the child and their caregivers. Vygotsky's theory of social development asserts that a child's cognitive growth and learning capabilities are influenced and facilitated by their social interactions. This attachment forms the basis for healthy social and emotional development (Wertsch 1979).

Stimulation and Learning: Providing a stimulating environment with opportunities for exploration, play, and interaction supports the development of cognitive, language, and motor skills. Dr. Pikler's approach contends that babies, when provided with ample space, time, and the opportunity to explore in a nurturing environment, can independently entertain themselves (Ari *et al* 2022).

Healthcare: Access to healthcare services, including regular check-ups and immunisations, is essential for monitoring growth and addressing any health concerns that may arise during this critical period. The First 1000 Days program, led by Public Health Wales, focuses on health improvement. It was created in response to compelling evidence indicating that the time spanning from pregnancy to a child's second birthday presents the most significant opportunity for enhancing outcomes and lessening disparities (NHS Wales, 2023).



Investing in the first 1000 days of a child's life is important for setting the stage for their long-term health, well-being, and success. Interventions and support during this period can have lasting effects on physical and mental health outcomes later in life.



What is exceptional care in the first 1000 days?

Exceptional care in childcare refers to providing high-quality, nurturing, appropriate and responsive support to young children up to the child's second birthday. This type of care is influenced by many theorists and practitioners who shared their ideas over many years, (gov.uk 2021).

Nutrition

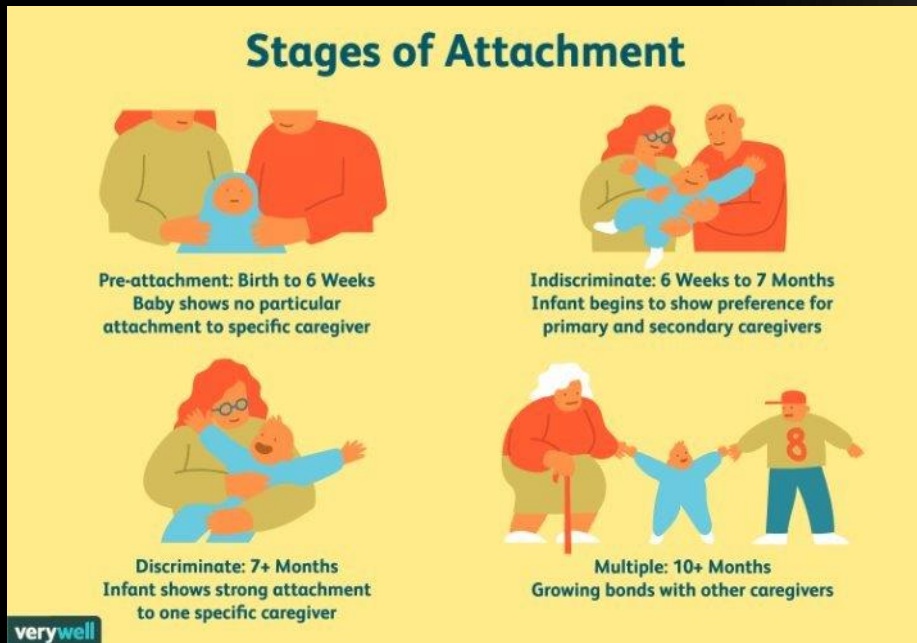
Childcare facilities must provide nutritious meals and snacks tailored to the dietary needs of infants and young children. Proper nutrition is essential for brain development, immune function, and overall health during the critical initial 1000 days of life, when the brain undergoes its most rapid growth. Nutrition significantly fuels early brain development, with options such as breast milk or formula for infants and a variety of healthy foods for toddlers. Effective nutrition involves engaging in a feeding process that promotes healthy growth and development beyond simply providing food (Evans, Meyers, and Ilfeld 2000).



Responsive Caregiving

Responding promptly and sensitively to a child's needs, such as feeding and comforting, fosters a secure attachment between the child and caregivers. This attachment is crucial for healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development, establishing a sense of security and trust. John Bowlby (1979) pioneered attachment theory, describing it as a "lasting psychological bond between individuals," focusing on understanding the anxiety and distress children experience when separated from primary caregivers (Holmes 2014).

Creating a nurturing and supportive environment is crucial for promoting a child's emotional well-being and resilience. Providing comfort, reassurance, and positive interactions builds trust and security in the child's relationships with caregivers. Marjorie Boxall (2002) introduced nurture groups to support children facing challenges in classroom settings. However, as Lindon and Brodie (2016) emphasise, failing to recognize the importance of continued nurture sessions can lead to ongoing struggles in school, adding economic strain to society.





Stimulating and Learning

Providing a stimulating environment for infants and young children supports the development of cognitive, language, and motor skills through exploration, play, and interaction. Engaging in activities that encourage learning and discovery is crucial for acquiring essential skills.

Childcare settings should offer safe, clean, and stimulating environments with age-appropriate toys and activities. Pickler (1972) emphasised children's self-initiated acquisition of gross motor skills, advocating for environments conducive to free exploration, leading to superior progress (Ari et al 2022). A rich environment engages all senses without being overwhelmed with excessive stimuli. Skilled practitioners in such environments maximize each child's developmental potential (Birth to 5 Matters, no date).

Healthcare

Access to regular healthcare services, including prenatal and postnatal care and health visitor support, is crucial for monitoring growth, addressing health concerns, and ensuring early detection and intervention for any developmental delays or health issues. Regular health screenings and monitoring of children's growth and development are essential for healthy development, as nurturing care is anticipated and relied upon by the infant's brain (World Health Organization 2022).





Communication

Open and ongoing communication with families and outside agencies is vital for offering consistent and individualised care for each child. Childcare providers should collaborate with parents to grasp their child's needs, preferences, and developmental milestones, sharing information about daily activities and progress. Atherton and Nutbrown (2013) stress the significance of open communication, especially when investigating the schematic behaviour of young children. They discovered that fostering an environment of openness and mutual discovery deepened the understanding of the child.



Effective Partnership working

The role of early years practitioners in supporting children and their families during the first 1000 days is multifaceted and crucial for laying the foundation for healthy development. The practitioner is involved with

- Feeding/changing
- Caring for basic needs
- Scaffolding and resourcing
- Safeguarding
- Communicating with other professionals and parents.

The practitioner collaborates with personnel involved in the child's health and development and liaises with parents, recognising that the term "parent" encompasses any primary caregiver (PHW 2023). In Wales, acknowledging diversity is crucial when working with families, understanding that parenting roles extend beyond traditional definitions. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner's theory, which highlights the intricate interplay between individuals and their environments, with the child at the core. Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny (2022) emphasise Bronfenbrenner's model, which positions the child in a complex network of familial, social, and cultural influences, underscoring their active participation and impact on interactions within and among these contexts.

The child shapes their learning through continuous engagement with the environment, interacting with peers, adults, and objects present. Pedagogical approaches to young children's learning have evolved over centuries, influenced by prevailing values and beliefs across diverse cultures.





Bronfenbrenner advocates for a holistic approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness of a child's environment. Effective support for children entails addressing their individual needs and the broader systems impacting their lives, such as family dynamics, community resources, and cultural factors. Empowering families with resources, services, and interventions is crucial for effective support, enabling them to nurture and care for their children.

Aubrey and Riley (2022) discuss how this approach aligns with other theorists like Bowlby and Ainsworth, who highlight the importance of early attachments in shaping a child's ability to form secure bonds and maintain relationships later in life. Insecure attachments during this critical period can lead to challenges with trust, intimacy, and emotional regulation in future relationships, undermining healthy social and emotional development.

Recognising the influence of cultural values and beliefs on child development, Bronfenbrenner stresses the need for culturally sensitive approaches to support children and families. Interventions should be tailored to accommodate the diverse backgrounds and needs of families from various cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

This holistic approach to the environment underscores the significance of effective partnership working. Collaborative efforts between the setting and practitioners allow for greater achievements, as ideas are shared, decision-making is enhanced, and mutual learning takes place.

Aubrey and Riley (2022) also highlight that Bronfenbrenner's work resonates with the ideas put forth by Albert Bandura. Bandura identifies three key factors that influence how children shape their behaviour: influence, reward, and self-efficacy. These factors play crucial roles in determining how children learn and adapt their behaviours based on their observations and experiences. Both perspectives underscore the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments in the learning process, highlighting the role of modeling, reinforcement, and self-perception in shaping behaviour and development.

Maternal factors significantly influence child development during pregnancy and early childhood. The term maternal in this instance could be considered the primary caregiver, who is often the first engaging adult the child encounters, which follows Vygotsky's theory of development from social interactions. The Family's physical and mental health can profoundly impact fetal development and later child outcomes. Support may include access to prenatal care, nutrition education, and mental health services for conditions like depression or anxiety. Adequate maternal nutrition, with essential nutrients like folic acid, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids, is crucial for fetal brain development and overall health. As set out by the Welsh Government (2022) in their Healthy Child programme support may involve access to nutritious foods, prenatal vitamins, and nutrition counseling.

Maternal substance use, including alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs, can harm fetal development and increase the risk of developmental delays and health issues in children. Support could entail substance abuse treatment, counselling, and resources for quitting. Familial stress, trauma, and adverse experiences can affect mental health and parenting, impacting child development. Improvements in mental health services, trauma-informed care, and stress reduction interventions to promote resilience are ongoing to support families (Welsh Government 2022).



Primary caregiving practices, like attachment style and responsiveness, influence a child's socio-emotional development. Providing parent education, home visits, and support groups to enhance parenting skills and relationships may contribute to support here. The family's socioeconomic status, including income and education, affects child development through access to healthcare, nutrition, and early education. Involving social services, financial assistance, and community resources to address disparities may help with this. Bowlby's (1953) Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis posited that a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with a mother figure is essential for fostering healthy psychological and emotional development. He likened the significance of motherly affection during infancy and childhood to the importance of vitamins and proteins for physical health, emphasising its critical role in promoting mental well-being (Ainsworth 1962).

Exposure to domestic violence within a family harms mental health and parenting, impacting children's well-being. Promoting access to shelters, counseling, and legal assistance for safety would help with this by providing options for those in need. Overall, providing comprehensive support addressing family factors is crucial for positive child and whole family outcomes. Support should be holistic, addressing physical, mental, emotional, and social needs from prenatal to early childhood stages (WG 2022).



Challenges

Providing high-quality early years care presents unique challenges due to the critical developmental stage of children and the importance of early interventions, resulting in a complex interplay between theory, practice, and policy.

Theory - Children develop at different rates and have diverse needs, which can make it challenging to apply theoretical frameworks universally. Piaget (1976) suggested that children's intelligence undergoes changes as they develop and mature. Early years care often requires input from various fields such as psychology, education, and healthcare. Integrating theories and practices from these disciplines can be complex and reinforces Bronfenbrenner's theories. While being mindful of cultural sensitivity as theories of child development may not always consider the cultural contexts in which children grow, necessitating culturally sensitive approaches to early years care. This was highlighted by the Welsh Government in their Public Health Wales paper supporting parents (2023b).

Practice - The early years setting is responsible for ensuring that practitioners have appropriate qualifications, training, and receive ongoing professional development to implement evidence-based practices but can be challenging due to budget and time restraints, staff turnover and diversity of the workforce, access to training, academic resources and support as the setting stays updated with the evolving regulations (WG2022). The setting must maintain appropriate ratios as managing group sizes is essential for providing individualised attention and fostering healthy development as influenced by John Dewey (1913) as shared by Aubrey and Riley (2022) but can be difficult to achieve, especially in settings with limited resources. It is necessary to foster an inclusive ethos by supporting children with diverse needs, including those with disabilities, additional learning needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds. This requires specialised knowledge and resources that may not always be readily available and can involve further training.



Policy - Adequate funding and resources are necessary to support high-quality early years care, including staff salaries, facilities, materials, and access to professional development opportunities. However, funding constraints can limit the availability and quality of services. Developing and enforcing regulations that ensure the safety, well-being, and quality of early years care while allowing for flexibility and innovation can be challenging as consideration must be taken to be diverse and provide opportunities for exploration and learning while balancing safety and risk (WG 2015).

Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that involves collaboration between policymakers, practitioners, educators, researchers, and families. Investing in professional development, promoting evidence-based practices, advocating for supportive policies, and prioritising early intervention and support for all children can help improve the quality of early years care. As Gasper (2010) concludes one challenge hindering the advancement of partnership working in the Early Years and broader contexts is the interconnectedness of new ideas with historical contexts, organisational systems, established practices, and relationships among various groups and individuals. These historical factors contribute to the complexity of partnership development and must be acknowledged and addressed for progress to occur. Failure to recognise these complexities risks undermining emerging partnerships. Considering the level of integration within multi-agency teams and the diversity of professional backgrounds involved is crucial. Recognising this complexity and devising strategies to effectively lead and manage such diversity underscores the need for skilled, trained, and visionary leaders in this field.

Activities and International approaches

When planning activities for children, Early Years practitioners can draw inspiration from the Pikler approach, highlighted by Ari et al. (2022), which emphasises freedom of movement. This approach encourages caregivers to create safe environments that facilitate unrestricted movement and exploration, often achieved through providing open-ended toys and materials. Such activities can have numerous developmental benefits, including:

Play-based Learning: Imaginative, constructive (blocks), and cooperative (board games with peers)—are crucial for children's holistic development.

- Benefits: fosters creativity, imagination, problem-solving skills, and social interaction and is inclusive.
- Meaningful learning: provides opportunities for children to learn and grow.

As discussed by Page, Clare, and Nutbrown (2013), this type of play could include Heuristic play, as pioneered by Goldsmied (1987), which involves providing young children with a diverse array of objects and containers, allowing them to engage in unstructured play without adult interference. This approach nurtures the child's natural inclination to investigate and explore their environment.



STEM Activities: STEM involves Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics and early introduction will hopefully promote a love of learning.

Benefits: activities engage children in hands-on exploration and inquiry-based learning, with activities such as building with blocks, experimenting with simple machines, exploring nature, and conducting science experiments, which can be differentiated to promote inclusivity.

Meaningful learning: promotes critical thinking, problem-solving, and curiosity about the world.

This type of activity could be connected to Donaldson (1979) as shared by Karmiloff-Smith (1980) who suggested that children's mistakes often stem not from a failure to follow instructions, but rather from their attempt to grasp the meaning behind an activity. She posits that children strive to make sense of situations aligned with human understanding, so through S.T.E.M. activities this investigation process can be introduced.





Messy Play: (e.g., finger painting, sensory bins with various materials) using a range of materials messy play stimulates the senses and promote sensory exploration and integration:

- Benefits: Stimulates tactile senses, hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills, encourages creativity and self-expression, language skills, and emotional regulation while enhancing sensory exploration and curiosity.
- Meaningful Learning: opportunities for children to experiment with different textures, colours, and materials, fostering inclusive sensory processing and cognitive development through hands-on exploration with calming and therapeutic benefits.

Messy play aligns with the Reggio Emilia principles of respecting children's autonomy, fostering creativity, and valuing the process of exploration and discovery (Lindon and Brodie 2016). There are so many options with messy play that all children's needs can usually be accommodated.



Outdoor Nature Exploration: Outdoor play provides numerous benefits for physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development in an inclusive environment.

- **Benefits:** Stimulates multiple senses, promotes physical activity and gross motor skills development, spatial awareness, and sensory development, enhances observation skills and scientific inquiry, and fosters a connection with nature.
- **Meaningful Learning:** children explore the natural world fostering curiosity, wonder, and appreciation for the environment, promoting risk-taking, problem-solving, and social interaction. Inclusive activities like nature walks, gardening, and scavenger hunts enhance curiosity, observation skills, and environmental awareness.

Sensory Walks (e.g., barefoot on different textures):

- Benefits: proprioceptive input and tactile stimulation, supports sensory integration and body awareness, balance, and coordination, encourages mindfulness.
- Meaningful Learning: develops sensory awareness and mindfulness as they focus on the sensations experienced while walking on various textures, fostering a deeper connection with their bodies and the environment.

Froebel advocated for outdoor learning, particularly through activities like nature walks and gardening, believing that children benefit from ample space and exposure to natural light for effective learning (Tovey, 2016). His emphasis on direct engagement and hands-on experiences aligns with the Forest School approach, originating in Scandinavia. Forest Schools prioritize learning and playing in natural outdoor settings, emphasizing child-led exploration, risk-taking, and hands-on learning. These outdoor experiences nurture holistic development, resilience, and a deep connection with the natural world (Lindon and Brodie, 2016).

Music and Movement Activities: (e.g., dancing to different rhythms, playing instruments) Singing, dancing, playing musical instruments, and rhythmic games, can also be used as an inclusive sensory activity.

- **Benefits:** Engages auditory and kinesthetic senses, promotes coordination and rhythm, language development and communication skills, enhances emotional expression and regulation
- **Meaningful Learning:** opportunities for children to explore sound, rhythm, and movement, fostering self-expression, creativity, and social interaction while developing auditory discrimination and motor coordination skills.

Froebel, Tovey (2016) informs us, also introduced “Mother Songs” or family songs, he developed 50 finger rhymes, action songs, and games designed for families to engage with babies, young children, and their communities. Each song was thoughtfully designed to support important learning experiences (Joshi, The Froebel Trust 2022).





The Reggio Emilia approach emphasizes hands-on, inquiry-based learning to nurture children's creativity, critical thinking, and social-emotional growth. It creates supportive environments where children explore, inquire, and collaborate meaningfully with educators, fostering their fullest potential. Maria Montessori similarly prioritized hands-on learning and sensory experiences in her approach, believing that direct interaction with the environment, including tactile exploration and sensory-rich activities, optimizes children's learning.

In summary, well-designed activities offer inclusive learning experiences that resonate with children's natural desire to explore and understand the world through their senses. Drawing from various theorists and approaches enriches childcare settings with a focus on holistic child development. These activities serve as a foundation, yet there are numerous ways to support children's development through engaging, age-appropriate activities tailored to their interests, abilities, and developmental stages. Crucially, creating a nurturing environment that encourages exploration, creativity, and joyful learning is key.

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