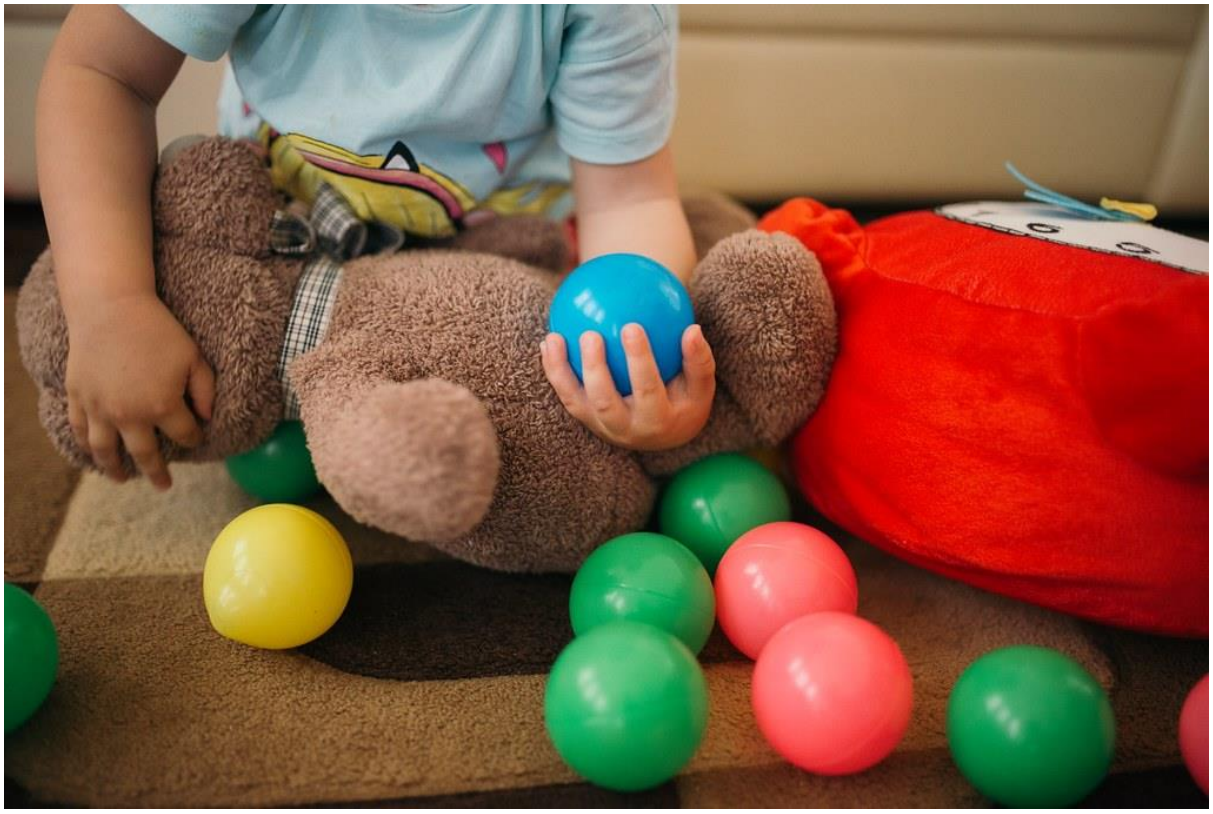
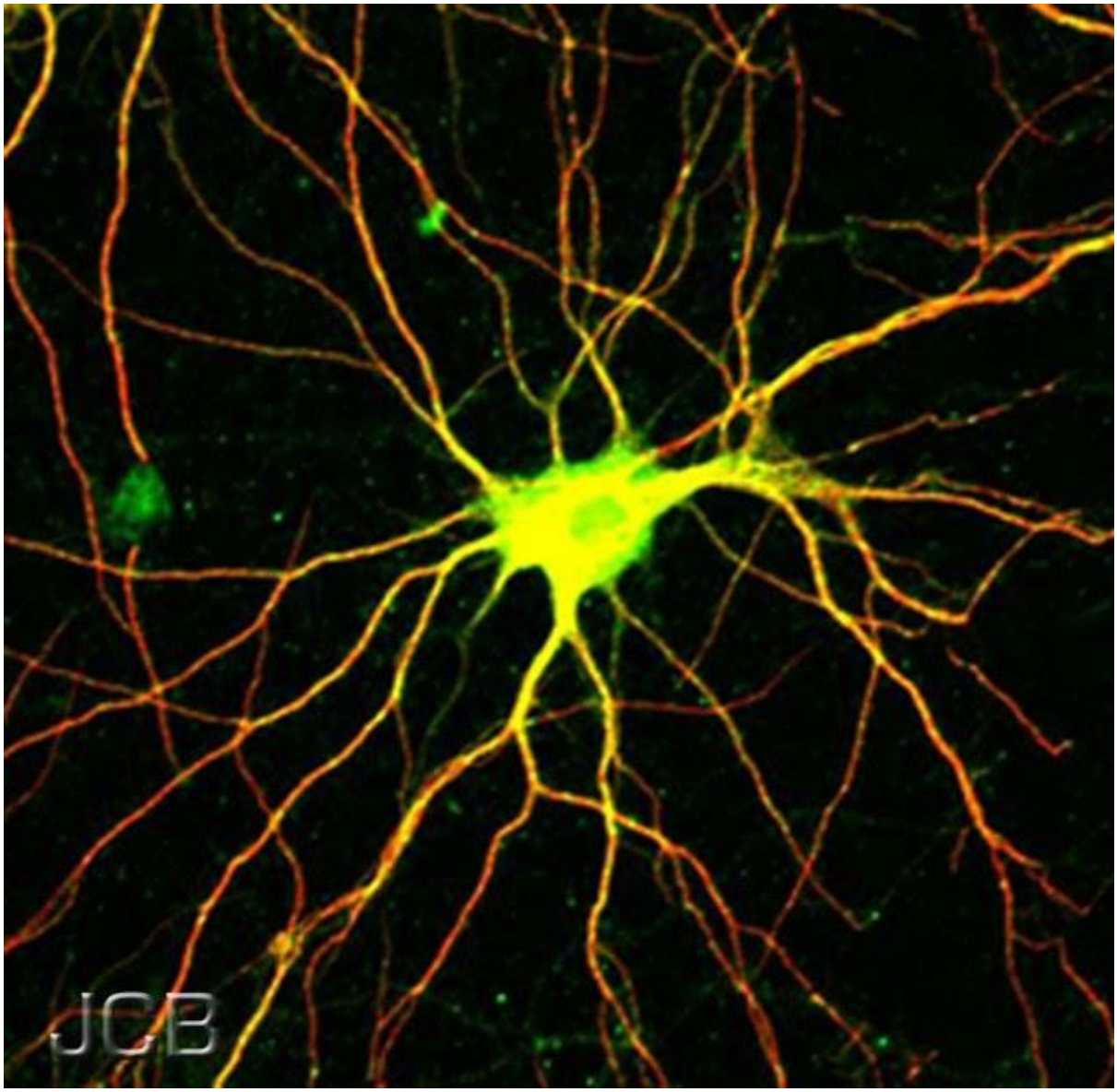


The First 1000 days

What are the first 1000 days?

The First 1000 days begin at Conception and end at approximately two years old. This time is considered by paediatric specialists to be a window of opportunity for children to build the foundations to a healthy and fulfilling life, because their brains, during this period, will grow faster than any other point in a human's life, making the acquisition of skills that form the foundation of future learning, much easier. By recognising this time as a brief, but advantageous period , enabling adults can provide the optimal environment to promote healthy physical and cognitive development. (HM Government, 2021)

Why are the first 1000 days so important?



Green et al (2018) found that during the peak of neuroplasticity during the first 1000 days, if the nutritional needs of expecting parents and their infants are being met, the potential for healthy growth and development of the infant is optimised.

Non- judgmental antenatal support can counter any potential negative effects by building confidence in new parents to make healthy choices to nurture their children in the best possible way, even before the birth.

The Wave trust (2015) maintains this view, in order for parents to understand the symbiotic relationship between they have with their child. Nutritional deficiencies can be their most severe during this vulnerable period (Green et al, 2018) and is reason enough for The United Kingdom's government to make it policy for folic acid to be added to refined flour products as a preventative

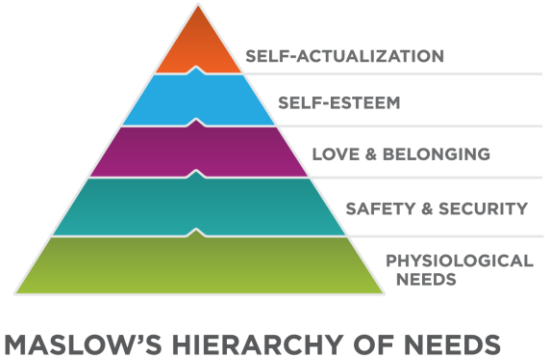
measure, to reduce babies being born with physical impairments or complex health needs. (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021)

The National Health Service also provides information and support on benefits of breastfeeding as part of their Start4Life initiative. (www.nhs.uk, 2019)

Kramer (2010) informs us that the benefits of breastfeeding in regards to helping to prevent infections and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome are well established. There is some criticism to the notion of 'Breast is Best' from Castillo-Hegyi (2022) co-founder of the 'Fed is Best' movement, who recognised there are barriers to breastfeeding, such as low milk supply and birth complications. The 'Fed is best' movement aims to provide peer reviewed, research based information and resources to parents and professionals, to empower them to make the best decision to ensure their child thrives - avoiding complications of insufficient feeding, like dehydration and hypoglycaemia.

Kramer (2010) goes on to say that the evidence of Breastmilk in perceived long term cognitive development is not as strong, However, Early Years professionals may deduce that the bonding that can occur between parent and child during breastfeeding could be the reason for the ongoing cognitive benefits, Bowlby theorised that this bond creates connections that become the foundation of future learning. (Linden, 2012)

Morreau (2016) supports Bowlby's theory of attachment by explaining, if a child receives, "good enough" parenting, through the loving bond developed with a primary figure of attachment., they will acquire the ability to form quality connections, learn to play and tolerate boundaries, which will have a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing, which prepares them for education.



1 - The act of feeding an infant also meets the most basic physiological human needs as defined by Maslow in The Hierarchy of needs. It also meets the needs in the next level, as the act of holding a child close enough to feed them, provides them with a sense of security and warmth. Brodie (2013) regards stable and responsive relationships with adults as a top priority in a child's holistic development.

Exceptional Care

The Building Great Britons report (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2020) found that parents who have experienced adverse childhood experiences themselves are 20% more likely to experience problematic relationships, domestic violence and post-natal depression. These factors can have pernicious effects on children during their first 1000 days.

Empathetic practitioners have a duty to prepare new parents for the intense transition they are undergoing. Resilient parents who understand how to respond to a baby's needs are more likely to provide a safe and nurturing environment that will have a positive influence on the development of the child and their lifelong progress. (Morreau, 2016)

The Early Years Healthy Development Review Report (gov 2020) identifies the roles and responsibility of a carer as the person who provides encouragement and stimulation to help children to develop and who protects the child from exposure to harmful or traumatic experiences.

Rt Hon Andrea Leadsom MP in her introduction to the review makes the claim that the period from conception to the age of two is essential, because it lays the foundation for long-term mental and physical health, therefore, giving it the attention it deserves, serves as the prevention to future ill health and poor social outcomes. (gov 2020) This view is affirmed by research carried out by National Scientific Council on the Developing Child who have found that frequent or prolonged activation of brain systems that react to stress, can increase a child's susceptibility to a variety of behavioural and physiological issues as they grow, such as depression and anxiety, substance abuse disorders and poor cardiovascular health. The World Health Organisation describes these conditions as rising at an accelerated rate in developing countries such as the United Kingdom and also notes that they are largely preventable (World Health Organisation, 2003).

This study also links engagement with a high quality early years education programme as a beneficial tool in reducing adverse childhood effects that can have a negative impact on a person's holistic wellbeing and prevent them from engaging meaningfully with their community.

The New curriculum for Wales has also taken this research into account and made "Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society" one of their four core purposes (Successful Futures, 2015)

The reform in the curriculum is a response to evidence drawn directly from children in Wales, combined with research into child development. The Successful Futures report (2015), also reinforces the idea of the early years being the foundation of a happy and healthy life, which can be achieved through a radical reform of the current Welsh curriculum.

To realise Professor Donaldson's vision, there must be a workforce of early years professionals who understand the principles of child development have the skills to apply a child led approach to their practice in order to plan to meet the needs of each child in their care. The curriculum for non-maintained nurseries makes references to 'teachable moments' as a way in which a practitioner can capitalise on the child led learning that will be taking place within a well-planned setting. Knowledgeable Early Years Workers will recognise Vygotsky's scaffolding Theory as the possible reason for stressing Teachable moments in the report, and will understand that this means to model and support children in making autonomous decisions about their own play to extend their learning during a child led activity (McLeod, S. A. 2019)

New Curriculum for Wales

The New Curriculum for Wales lays out Five developmental Pathways;

Exploration as a Developmental pathway can be provided through environments designed to support children in their preferred method of learning, Play.

Children have an innate ability to play, it is how they construct meaning of their world and recognised as invaluable by the Welsh government, who made a policy to provide play opportunities for children in Wales. (Welsh government).

Play Wales uses the following definition of Play "Freely chosen, personally directed and Intrinsically motivated" (Play education, 1982) Early Years Practitioners should use their knowledge of child development theories to develop a child led practice that allows opportunities for children to explore the learning environment through play.

Even very young babies can benefit from play, sensory play in particular, is extremely beneficial at this stage because although babies cannot move around unaided, their skin is packed with sensory receptors, able to detect information from the environment around them. Each time a sensory stimulus is experienced, neural pathways are established allowing neurons to communicate information to the brain. Repeated exposure to a rich sensory environment will provide experiences which create stronger connections that allow for deeper knowledge to develop (Gascoyne, 2011)

The curriculum guidance has brought attention to the idea of 'Cynefin' as a way to encourage a sense of **belonging**, that is so important to a child's holistic wellbeing. 'Cynefin' is a Welsh expression which explains a place that feels familiar and promotes a sense of belonging through recognisable sights and sounds that reflect our cultural and social experiences. If practitioners consider the Serve

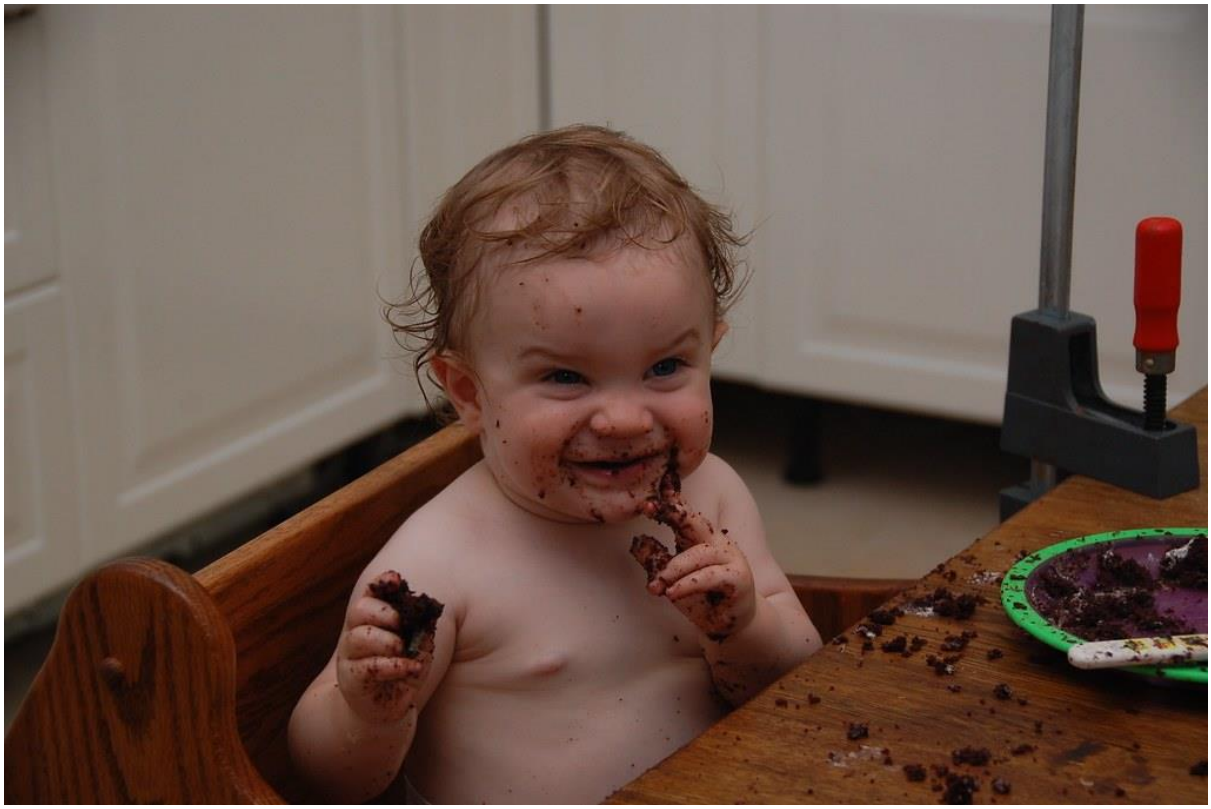
and Return concept when bringing Cynefin into their planning, they can link it to learning opportunities that are meaningful to the child and their lives; For example, if a child picks an apple from a tree to eat and discovers the seeds inside, a responsive and knowledgeable practitioner can show them how to plant the seed and watch it sprout, they will begin to understand how they are connected to their world and have agency within it. This principle is mirrored by Early Years Practitioners in Norway who incorporate the idea that children should learn to take care of - themselves, each other and nature while they are in Kindergarten (Gradovski, Mikhail, et al., 2020)

Communication is another pathway. Brodie (2018) discusses the importance of quality interactions across all ages, even with pre – verbal children, as it is how they learn to communicate. Language development can be developed in these early days through 'Serve and return' interactions.

When infants babble, they are seeking interaction. Enabling adults who respond to these interactions, provide comfort when the baby cries and learn to understand the cues given by young children in order to have their needs, strengthening the bond between child and adult and the neural pathways between all areas of the brain. (The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child) supporting the **Wellbeing** of the child.

From this foundation of communication, **Language** can be developed further by Enabling Adults who read stories to children. Data collected by Save The Children (2016) tells us that a three year old child's brain is approximately twice as active as an adult brain. Therefore, Allowing children to have dedicated time to listen and engage with language and relate words to pictures and writing during this sensitive period, they will acquire this skill themselves in a way that feels natural and comfortable, and with the incorporation of creativity into their play, over time, they will discover they are able to create and write stories and represent images themselves, further reinforcing their language and communication skills (Save The Children, 2016)

Play in the first 1000 days



Caregivers may relate to mealtimes being a messy experience as babies who are being weaned use their hands to explore the new food, this could be thought of as opportunity for babies to learn through personally directed, sensory play. Multiple senses are engaged as they touch, taste, and throw their food as they learn to eat independently. During this stage, identified as the sensory motor stage by Piaget (Riddall - Leach, 2016) the food will be brought to the mouth for further investigation and the child, if they enjoy the taste, will experience pleasure, recognise that the substance is edible and repeat the action, feeding themselves independently.

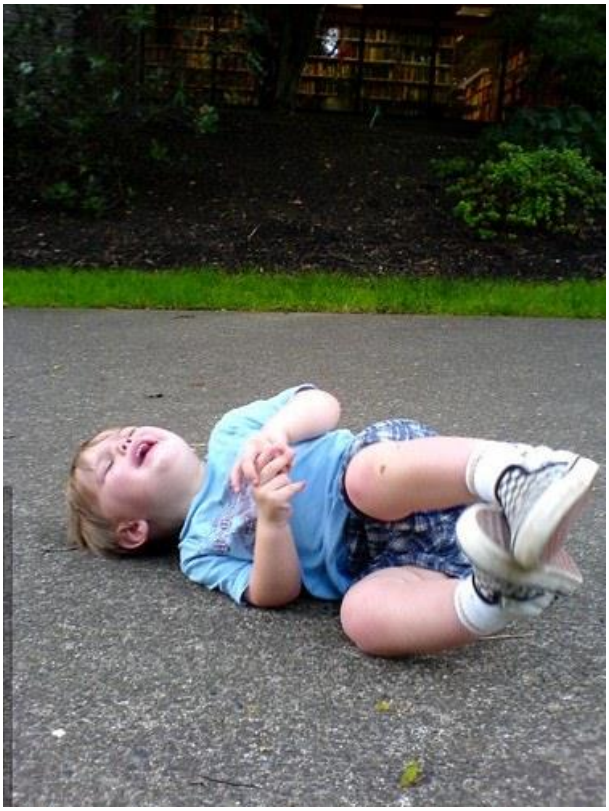
Some families may observe the platitude “Don’t Play with your food”, believe that food play is unhygienic or not have the time or resources to indulge this sort of play. Which is why, quality early years settings should provide plenty of opportunities for messy play to bridge this gap and allow all children to build strong neural pathways. Pikler (2021) supports this view with their research that states daily routines, such as meal times, and personal care routines are optimal moments to enhance their understanding of their surroundings through direct interactions between child and carer.

Gascoyne (2011) invites practitioners to handle a bag of plastic toys with closed eyes and try to differentiate the items represented by the single material. This is difficult to do without being able to see what the toy is meant to represent.

There is a place for plastic toys in play, but we must consider their limitations, particularly when working with children with additional needs, if a child has a sensory impairment, only providing them with toys with poor sensory output means they will not reward the child with a pleasurable experience that develops their understanding.

In contrast, imagine handling a bag of mixed items from the real world, a bunch of jingling keys, silky scarves and tickling feathers. Even with closed eyes, the richness of these materials can evoke many senses and provide opportunity to develop language by describing the colours, textures and sounds. Goldschmied, appreciated that children were drawn to these interesting objects from the adult world and pioneered the concept of 'Treasure Baskets' - a box of natural and real world objects chosen for their sensory potential, offered to babies to explore (Gascoyne, 2011) as a way to facilitate heuristic play. Riddall – Leach (2012) asks practitioners to think of Heuristic Play as a flexible approach, rather than a fixed set of instructions, that allows children to learn things about their environments by following their curiosity and making discoveries freely and independently.

Play is also the Key to healthy **Physical Development**,



2 - Challenges for Early Years Workers in the first 1000 days.

Having the opportunity to have a positive influence on a babies development is a rewarding experience, but it also presents some challenges as they are so vulnerable. Early Years Practitioners must have an extremely high standard of health and safety to ensure that accidents do not happen while a child is in your care, to make a physical environment which is warm and rich in stimulating sensorial experiences, but also free from hazards can be difficult. To act in accordance with article three of the United Nations Convention on the Rigts of the Child, Practitioners must make sure that the safety of children is the priority.

Very young babies are unable to move around the setting unaided or do much for themselves and their needs are frequent, this means , to run a Early years setting that is able to provide adequate care, you will need to staff it with Qualified Early Years Practitioners, it can be difficult to find enough qualified staff to satisfy the ratio of children to adults a setting needs to be safe and able to meet the needs of all children. (Department for Education, 2022)

Transitioning young children from their primary caregiver to nursery can also be challenging and requires a lot of planning to make the experience a positive one.(Brooker, 2008)