

ECEY4005

THE FIRST 1000 DAYS



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"CAN YOU HELP ME STRUCTURE MY PARAGRAPH, SO IT FLOWS BETTER"

"CAN YOU HELP ME FIND A WELSH GOVERNMENT SOURCE THAT LISTS THE SUPPORT AND AGENCIES AVAILABLE TO FAMILIES"

"WHAT THEORISTS ARE BEST TO USE HERE?"

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WHAT IS THE FIRST 1000 DAYS?

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The first 1000 days are often described as a child's earliest and most sensitive period of development, beginning at conception and continuing until their second birthday. The UK Government's 'Best Start for Life' review describes this phase as "the 1,001 critical days" in which babies' brains and bodies grow at speed, forming the foundations for lifelong health, learning, and emotional wellbeing. During this period, neural connections form rapidly, and early experiences begin shaping children's cognitive, social, and emotional development (HM Government, 2021).

Public health and early years practitioners emphasize that this window is biologically and environmentally sensitive. Mercieca (2023) highlights that early nutrition and movement influence taste development, food behaviors, skeletal strength, and long-term health patterns. Together, these sources show that the first 1000 days are not simply a developmental stage but a formative period where early influences have lasting effects (Mercieca 2023).

Public Health Wales (n.d.) describes the first 1000 days as a "golden opportunity" for shaping children's early development, noting that this period includes pregnancy, birth, and the first two years of life. Babies experience rapid brain growth during this time, and they begin responding to their environment even before birth (Public Health Wales, n.d.).

According to Public Health Wales, the first 1000 days are when the foundations for health, learning, and emotional wellbeing are laid, making this a uniquely sensitive phase where early experiences have a powerful influence on future outcomes (Public Health Wales, n.d.).

Further reading

phw.nhs.wales/topics/the-first-1000-days-programme/resources/the-first-1000-days-a-golden-opportunity-to-build-a-fairer-future-infographic/?utm_source=copilot.com

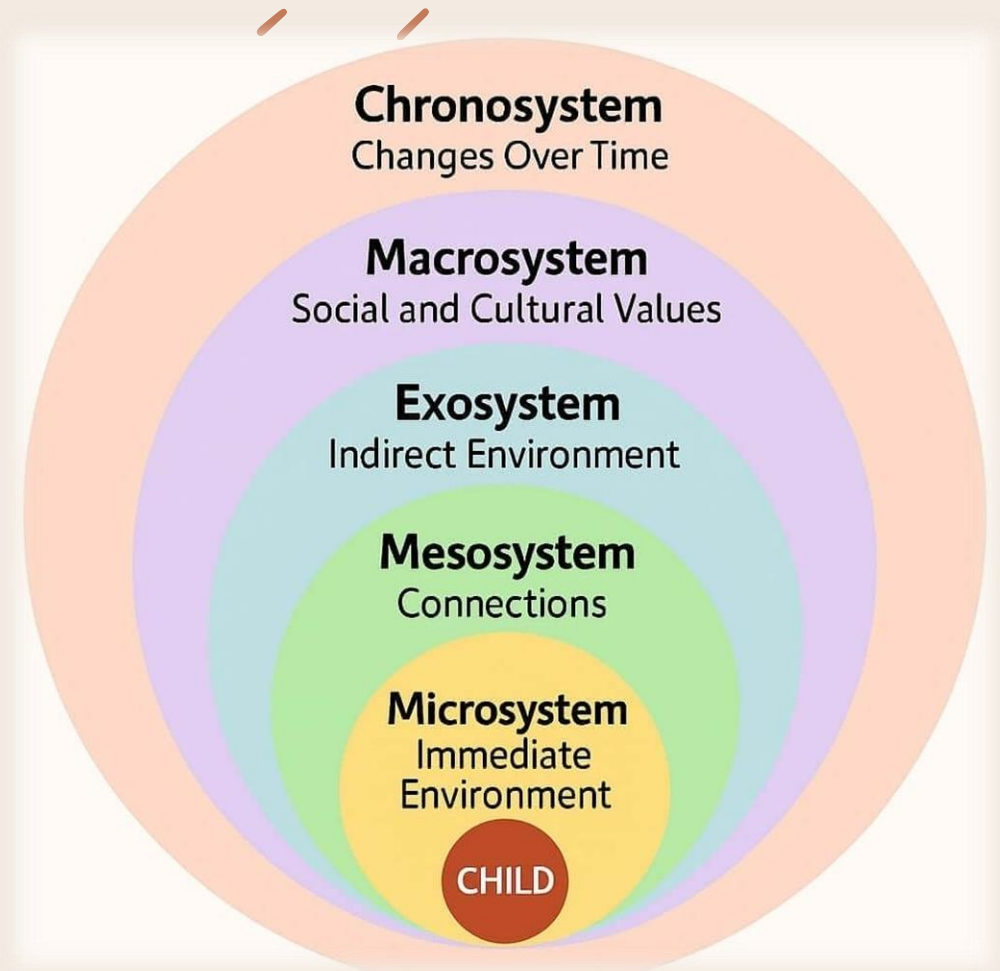
WHAT IS THE FIRST 1000 DAYS? WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The UK Government stresses that supporting families during the first 1000 days is more effective and cost-efficient than later intervention, with early relationships, caregiving, and reduced stress linked to improved long-term outcomes.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps explain why this period is so influential. He argues that children develop within multiple interacting systems from close relationships (microsystem) to wider community, services, and policy structures (macrosystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This aligns with UK early years policy, which emphasizes that babies thrive when families are supported by strong health, community, and social systems during pregnancy and infancy. UNICEF (2023), highlights that the first 1000 days are a decisive period where early relationships, nutrition, and responsive caregiving shape lifelong outcomes (UNICEF, 2023).

The Baby Friendly Initiative describes the conception to age two as “a critical period for building close and loving relationships” emphasizing that early bonding, secure attachment, and consistent caregiving support healthy brain development and emotional wellbeing (UNICEF 2023).

UNICEF (2023) also stresses that early experiences influence stress regulation, communication, and social development, and that supporting families during pregnancy and infancy is one of the most effective ways to reduce inequalities and improve long-term outcomes.



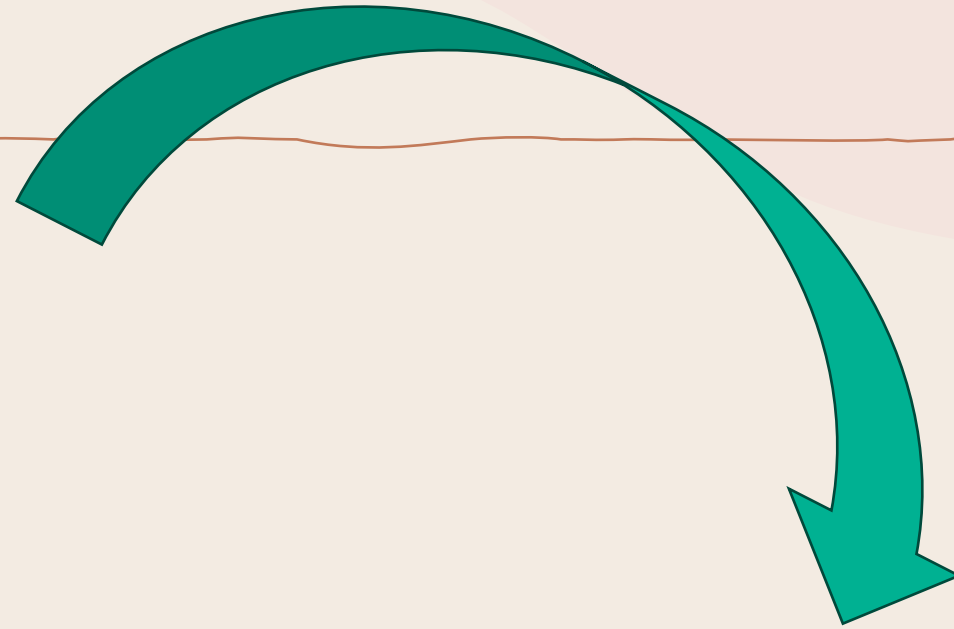
Early Years TV, n.d.)

A healthy pregnancy lays the foundations for a healthy start in life. As the baby develops in the womb, it is closely influenced by the mother's environment and experiences. The foetus is exposed to what the mother eats, drinks, and hears, and can even respond to her stress levels. This means that the mother's physical and emotional wellbeing plays a crucial role in supporting the baby's early growth and development.

The UNICEF (2015) video 'The First 1,000 Days of Life' highlights how early nutrition and care profoundly shape a child's development. It explains that "the First 1,000 Days of Life can give the best start in life for a child," emphasizing maternal health, breastfeeding, and responsive caregiving as foundations for long-term wellbeing.

UNICEF (2015) says that investment in this period "shapes a child's future potential" and reduces lifelong inequalities (UNICEF, 2015).

The UNICEF (2015) video also highlights that good maternal nutrition is essential during pregnancy, emphasizing the importance of key supplements such as iron and folic acid to support healthy brain and body development. It explains that a balanced diet rich in nutrients helps protect both mother and baby, reducing the risk of complications and supporting the rapid growth that takes place in the first 1000 days. UNICEF stresses that these early nutritional choices contribute to long-term health outcomes, reinforcing how sensitive and influential the prenatal period is for shaping a child's future (UNICEF, 2015).



The First 1,000 Days of Life - YouTube





CARE GIVING

WHAT IS EXCEPTIONAL CARE GIVING?

Exceptional care giving means giving children warm, consistent and responsive support so they feel safe, valued and able to learn. Welsh guidance explains that young children develop best when adults build strong relationships, understand their needs and create environments where they can explore and grow (Welsh Government, 2022). Exceptional care giving is not about doing something extra or special, it is about doing the everyday things well (Welsh Government, 2022).

Exceptional care giving includes being emotionally available, noticing children's cues and responding in a calm and caring way. The Curriculum for Funded Non-Maintained Nursery Settings says that enabling adults should help children feel secure, show interest in their ideas and build positive relationships with families (Welsh Government, 2022). Flying Start also highlights the importance of consistent staff who know the children well and can offer sensitive, affectionate care (Welsh Government, 2025).



This video from the Curriculum for Wales demonstrates: the enabling adult, effective environments and engaging experiences (Welsh Government, 2022)

[Foundation learning and Curriculum for Wales video explainer - YouTube](#)

This links to theorist Bowlby and his attachment theory which explains that children need a reliable adult who helps them feel safe. When adults respond warmly and predictably, children develop trust and confidence (Bowlby, 1969). Exceptional care giving also involves understanding the wider influences on a child's life.

It also links to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and reminds us that children are shaped by their family, community and wider society (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This is reflected in the Healthy Child Wales Programme, which encourages professionals to work together with families to support children's health and development (Welsh Government, 2022).

Exceptional care giving is important because it supports children's emotional wellbeing, brain development and future learning. The Flying Start guidance explains that high-quality early years care can improve children's language, social skills and independence (Welsh Government, 2025). It also helps protect children who may have experienced stress or difficulties at home by giving them a stable and nurturing relationship (Welsh Government, 2025).

The First 1000 Days framework shows that early experiences have a strong impact on children's long-term health and development (Public Health Wales, 2023). Public Health Wales (2023) also explains that the period from conception to a child's second birthday is a "critical window" where the brain is developing rapidly, and where positive relationships and stable environments make the biggest difference. The framework highlights that secure, nurturing care helps shape healthy brain architecture, supports emotional regulation and builds the foundations for future learning (Public Health Wales, 2023).

Exceptional care giving also means offering inclusive, meaningful activities that support children's interests and developmental needs. The Welsh Government (2022) guidance encourages play based learning that is hands on, engaging and linked to real life, authentic experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). Activities should reflect and represent cultures, languages and identities, helping them feel a sense of 'Cynefin' (Welsh Government, 2022).

The Welsh Government says, exceptional care giving is supported by enabling environments. These are spaces that are safe, calm, well organised and rich in opportunities for exploration. Outdoor learning is especially important, as it supports physical development, curiosity and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2022). When environments are planned carefully, children can make a choice, take risks and develop independence (Welsh Government, 2022).

PROFESSIONAL PARTNERSHIPS



WHAT IS THE ROLE OF AN EARLY YEAR'S PRACTITIONER IN SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN THE FIRST 1000 DAYS?

According to the Welsh Government, the role of an Early Years practitioner in supporting children within the first 1000 days includes creating nurturing, effective environments where children can learn through play and develop holistically (Welsh Government, 2023). The Curriculum for Wales guidance emphasizes that young children benefit from holistic and meaningful learning supported by enabling adults who use their observations to plan experiences that match children's interests and developmental needs (Welsh Government, 2023). Practitioners promote early communication, social interaction and physical development by offering rich, play-based opportunities indoors and outdoors. They respond sensitively to children's cues, helping them build confidence, take risks safely and explore through trial and error. Through ongoing assessment, practitioners identify each child's strengths and emerging needs, ensuring that support is tailored and inclusive so that every child can progress at their own pace. In the first 1000 days, this responsive, relationship centered practice lays the foundations for secure attachment, wellbeing and positive attitudes to learning.

According to Birth to 5 Matters, the role of an Early Years practitioner in supporting families and caregivers within the first 1000 days includes building respectful, trusting partnerships that recognize parents as children's first and most enduring educators (Early Education, 2021). Practitioners listen to families, value their knowledge of their child and using the insight incorporate into practice and shared decision-making. Birth to 5 Matters highlights that effective partnership requires welcoming every family, creating a sense of belonging, and communicating in ways that are sensitive to diverse needs and preferences (Early Education, 2021). Practitioners also help families understand how children learn, offering reassurance, guidance and information about development, routines and play. By working collaboratively and addressing barriers, practitioners strengthen the home learning environment. In the first 1000 days, this partnership approach ensures continuity between home and setting, supporting both child and family wellbeing (Early Education, 2021).



WHAT IS PARTNERSHIP WORKING?

Community Foundation Wales says that partnership working refers to two or more organizations collaborating towards shared values or a common goal (Community Foundation Wales, 2022). It is based on the understanding that organizations can achieve more together than in isolation by creating a climate of trust, respect and open communication. Partnerships may be formal, such as contractual agreements, or informal, including shared resources, referrals or signposting (Community Foundation Wales, 2022). Effective partnership working requires flexibility, cooperation and an appreciation of each partner's strengths, priorities and limitations. Regular reflection helps maintain positive relationships and ensures the partnership continues to meet the needs of those it aims to support (Community Partnership Wales, 2022).

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The NSPCC says that multi agency working is important because it brings different professionals together that all hold pieces of knowledge about a child or family (NSPCC Learning, n.d). When agencies such as health visitors, social services and speech and language share information, support becomes more coordinated and effective (NSPCC Learning, n.d). Consistent communication ensures families receive clear messages through a key individual who acts as a link. Building trusting, working relationships can encourage discussions to help practitioners that have concerns, make informed decisions and respond quickly (NSPCC Learning, n.d). This collaborative approach strengthens safeguarding and improves outcomes for children and families.



This video demonstrates a wealth of knowledge from different professionals working in partnership (Education Scotland, 2020).

Maternal well-being has a significant impact on a child's development in the first 1000 days. Maternal stress, anxiety, and depression can affect bonding and emotional availability, which may influence a child's early development (NHS Wales, 2020). Poor nutrition, substance use, and domestic abuse can also affect pregnancy and early parenting, increasing risks for both mother and baby (Public Health Wales, 2019). NCT (2026) says, during pregnancy, a wide range of health professionals can offer support, each playing a different role in maternity care (NCT, 2026). These include midwives, GPs, health visitors, anaesthetists, dentists, maternity support workers, obstetricians, physiotherapists, neonatal nurses, neonatologists, sonographers, and independent midwives. Midwives are usually the main point of contact, providing antenatal checks, support during labour, and postnatal care (NCT, 2026). GPs may provide early pregnancy support, carry out postnatal checks, and oversee baby vaccinations. Support strategies include personalised care plans, opportunities to ask questions, and access to additional services such as physiotherapy for pelvic pain or specialist care for complex pregnancies (NCT, 2026). Health visitors offer ongoing support after birth, helping families adjust and monitoring the baby's development up to age five. Together, these professionals ensure safe, informed, and continuous care throughout pregnancy and beyond. Financial support is an important aspect of ensuring stability during pregnancy and early parenthood. Alongside the care provided by health professionals, individuals may be entitled to a range of benefits designed to ease financial pressure. These include Child Benefit, Universal Credit, and additional allowances for those caring for a child with a disability (Citizens Advice, 2026).

MATERNAL FACTORS AND SUPPORT STRATEGIES AVAILABLE



FURTHER READING
Benefits available during pregnancy –
background information - GOV.UK



WHAT ARE THE
CHALLENGES
IN PROVIDING
HIGH QUALITY
CARE?



FUNDING & FINANCE

Argile (2024), says funding rates are too low to cover costs. Many childcare providers in Wales report that the funded childcare rate does not cover their real operating costs, meaning most settings expect to make no profit or a loss (Argile 2024). This threatens their long-term viability. Staff costs rising with stagnant funding. Staff wage bills are rising faster than funding, making it harder to recruit and retain qualified workers (Argile, 2024). Nation Cymru (2025) reports that providers warn that without fairer funding, many nurseries and early years settings could close altogether, shrinking the number of available places (Nation Cymru, 2025).

As well as this, Nation Cymru (2025) say, providers receive £6.40 per hour, which sector leaders say does not cover the cost of delivering childcare, forcing many settings to operate at a loss (Nation Cymru, 2025). Costs such as food, utilities, insurance, and regulatory compliance have increased significantly, but the funded rate has not kept pace, widening the financial gap for providers (Nation Cymru, 2025). A report from the Early Years Alliance (2023) shows that rising costs, difficulties recruiting staff, and long-term underfunding are affecting providers across the country. They warn that without better financial support, more nurseries may struggle to stay open, reducing the number of places available for families. This supports the concerns raised by Argile (2024) and Nation Cymru (2025) showing that the education and childcare settings need fair and sustainable funding to remain financially stable (Early Years Alliance, 2023).



NDNA (2025).



Staff shortages in schools are having a negative impact on children's education and safety, according to a recent UNISON survey (UNISON, 2025). Almost three in five support staff (59%) say there are fewer colleagues in their school compared with last year, and more than three quarters report that staffing levels are no longer enough to meet pupils' needs. Many also feel that reduced staffing makes it harder to keep children safe (UNISON, 2025).

The survey that had responses from nearly 3,000 school workers across the UK found that the shortages in schools is due to not replacing staff when they leave. As a result of this, the remaining staff manage heavier workloads, unpaid overtime and increasing pressure. Some staff often cannot provide the level of support pupils require, run extracurricular clubs or cover classes effectively.

Ofsted (2024), state that staff shortages often mean managers and leaders have to work in ratio, which keeps rooms open but reduces the time they have for essential responsibilities such as inducting new staff, updating policies and sharing important information (Ofsted, 2024). These pressures also affect staff wellbeing. When temporary agency staff are brought in without the correct training or qualifications, the existing staff take on extra responsibilities (Ofsted, 2024). This leaves staff without opportunities for training and can restrict their professional development and leave them feeling undervalued. Overall, workforce challenges place additional strain on teams and make it harder to maintain high quality care (Ofsted, 2024).

STAFF SHORTAGES



ACTIVITIES

LOOSE PARTS PLAY

The Welsh Government (2022) highlights, in the early years, the activities we offer should be practical, meaningful and rooted in children's real experiences (Welsh Government, 2022). The non-maintained nursery curriculum also says, high-quality experiences encourage independence, allow children to take appropriate risks and give them chances to succeed as they explore and learn (Welsh Government, 2022). When activities connect to children's interests and everyday contexts, they support deep involvement and sustained periods of active learning. These experiences also help children make links across different areas of development and return to ideas over time, strengthening their understanding. Through varied opportunities for mark-making, early mathematical exploration and hands-on investigation, children begin to recognize patterns, symbols and relationships. Activities should also include opportunities to explore digital tools in simple, purposeful ways, supporting holistic learning across the Curriculum (Welsh Government, 2022).

Casey and Robertson (2018) says, loose parts are simple, open-ended materials that children can move, adapt and use in different ways. Unlike fixed toys with a single purpose, loose parts encourage children to decide how the materials will be used, supporting imaginative and flexible play (Casey. T and Robertson. J, 2018). These resources can include natural items such as stones, shells and sticks, recycled objects like tubes and bottle tops, or larger materials such as crates, fabric and wooden planks. Because they have no set function, children can transform them into anything they choose, allowing play to evolve freely. When children have access to a wide range of loose parts supports creativity, problem-solving and independent thinking (Casey. T and Robertson. J, 2018). Children design their own play scenarios, test ideas and make decisions, which strengthens cognitive and social development.

Casey and Robertson (2018) highlight, environments where materials can be moved and manipulated offer rich opportunities for exploration and discovery.

Essex Council says, Nicholson's ideas help explain why loose parts remain so valuable in early years practice today. He argued that children are naturally creative when they have access to materials they can move, adapt and use in different ways, and that this freedom supports deeper thinking and invention (Essex County Council, n.d). 276

EXAMPLES OF MATERIALS & HOW TO USE THEM

<i>Materials</i>	<i>How to use it</i>
Stones & Pebbles	Counting, Sorting, counting, building pathways, creating patterns, representing food or characters
Sticks & twigs	Building dens, making shapes, mark-making in mud, imaginative tools (wands, fishing rods)
Fabric & scarves	Den-building, dressing up, creating small-world landscapes, role play
Shells & Natural Objects	Counting, sorting, storytelling prompts, sensory trays
Mirrors (Reggio-inspired)	Exploring reflections, symmetry, light play, self-awareness

LOOSE PARTS PLAY



Children build a vehicle

Children create floor structures



Children create a builder's yard

Amazing loose parts play examples
Early Years Foundation Stage (2022)

ENVIRONMENTAL APPROACHES

Learning through Landscapes Cymru (2011) says, outdoor learning has become increasingly important as many children now spend more time indoors and have fewer opportunities for active exploration. A well-designed outdoor environment offers rich, hands-on experiences that extend indoor learning and support children's curiosity. As the outdoors changes with the weather and seasons, it naturally promotes holistic development, especially in understanding the world. Outdoor spaces also encourage communication, storytelling and imaginative play, helping quieter children express themselves more confidently. With room to move, experiment and solve problems on a larger scale, children can engage in meaningful, child-led learning that strengthens physical, emotional and cognitive skills (Learning through Landscapes Cymru, 2011).



FOREST SCHOOL & REGGIO EMILIA

Forest School (2024), is a long-term, child-centred approach that takes place in woodland or natural outdoor environments. It emphasizes holistic development through hands-on experiences, supported risk-taking and sustained exploration (Forest School, 2024). The natural environment is central to the pedagogy: trees, mud, sticks, stones and weather changes all become part of the learning process. Sessions are regular and long-term, allowing children to build confidence, resilience and independence over time. Practitioners support children to take appropriate risks, solve problems and develop physical competence through activities such as climbing, tool use, den building and fire lighting. Forest School (2024) also nurtures emotional wellbeing, offering calm spaces, sensory experiences and opportunities to connect deeply with nature. Learning is child-led, with adults acting as facilitators who observe, respond and extend children's interests. This approach values the unpredictable, dynamic qualities of the outdoors as a powerful driver of meaningful learning (Forest School, 2024).

Forest School and Reggio Emilia are two influential environmental approaches that place the learning environment at the centre of children's development. Although they differ in setting and philosophy, both emphasize exploration, independence and meaningful, child-led learning.

The Reggio Emilia (2022), approach views children as capable, curious learners who express themselves in many ways such as art, movement, construction and role play (Reggio Children, 2022). The environment is considered the "third teacher" and has intention, beauty and purpose to encourage thinking and collaboration. Spaces are organized with natural light, mirrors, open-ended materials and accessible resources that invite exploration. Relationships are central as children learn through collaboration, discussion and problem-solving. Recording observations play a key role in making children's thinking visible allowing their ideas to come to life quickly. Unlike Forest School's reliance on natural landscapes, Reggio Emilia focuses on carefully curated indoor spaces that support creativity, communication and long-term project work. The approach highlights shared decision-making, ongoing reflection and thoughtfully designed environments that support rich, meaningful learning (Reggio Emilia, 2022).

Both approaches recognise that the environment plays a key role in children's learning, but they use it in different ways. Forest School relies on natural outdoor spaces to build confidence, resilience and physical skills, while Reggio Emilia uses carefully designed indoor environments to support creativity, collaboration and expression. Despite these differences, both encourage child-led exploration and meaningful engagement with open-ended materials.

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