

The First Thousand Days

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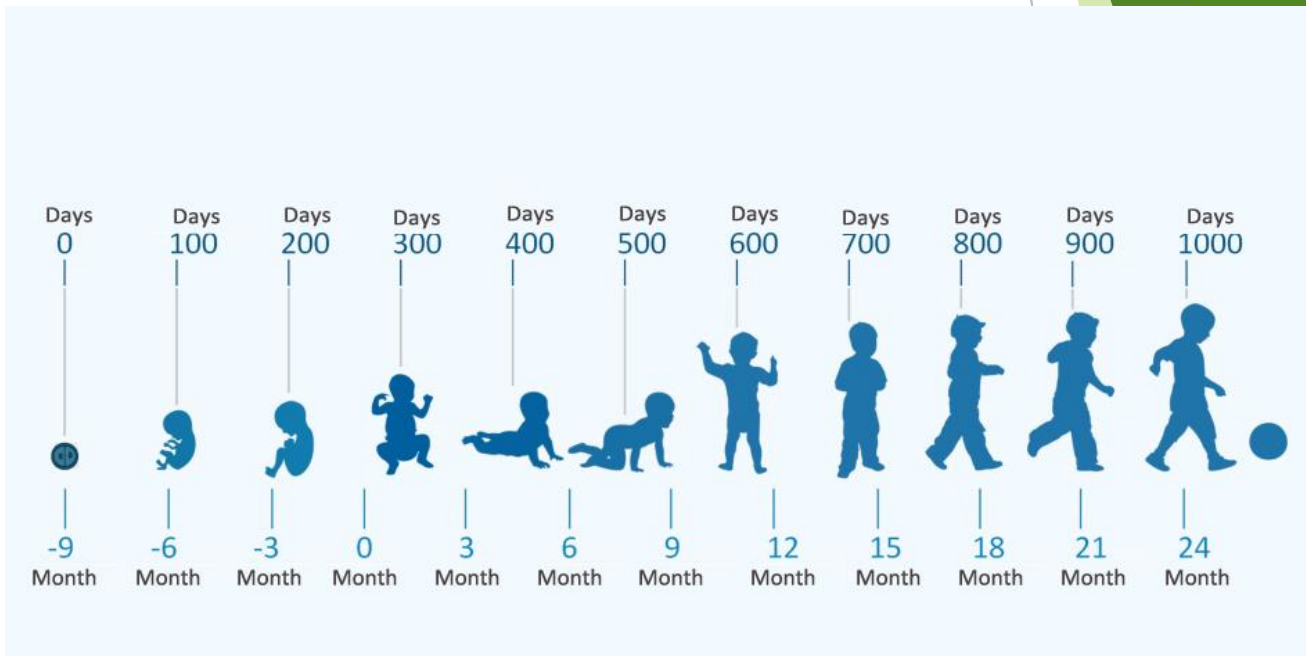
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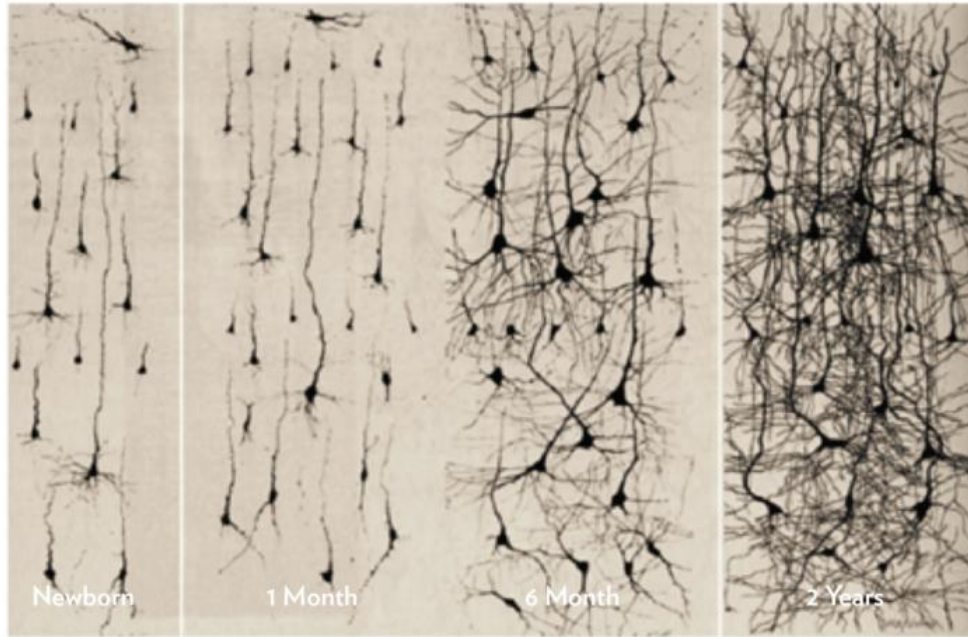
South Dakota Department of Health (no date)

What are the first thousand days?

Karakochuck (2018) states the first thousand days start from conception and continues until the child's second birthday. This period is increasingly becoming more recognised as a crucial time in life as many factors will determine how a child develops, affecting and influencing them throughout their life. According to Nursery Management Show (2024), babies are born with the majority of their brain cells, however, their neural pathways need to be formed. They continue by explaining this is achieved with children's early experiences and every time a child is interacted with by being sung to, touched, or engaged through play, the neural pathways are formed and strengthened.



Idsmmed (2022)



DRAMATIC GROWTH OF NEURONAL ARCHITECTURE FROM BIRTH TO 2 YRS

Source: "The Pediatricians Role in Addressing Childhood Poverty", David Keller

(Merck, 2018)

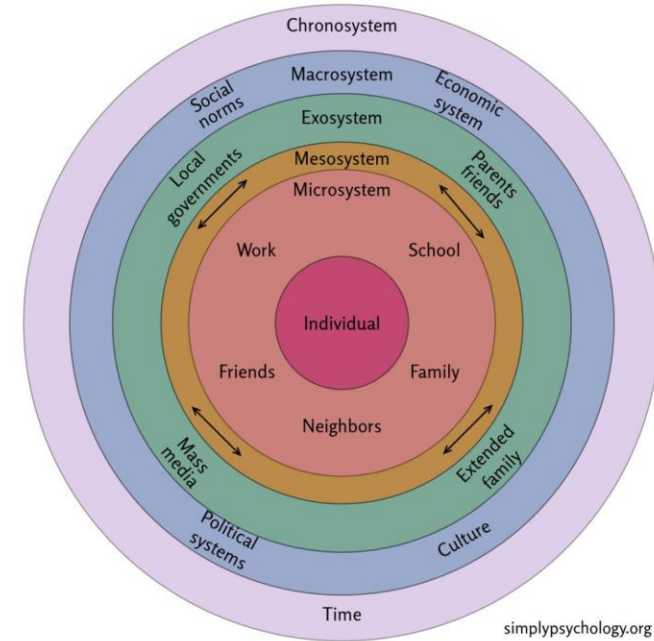
First, one must consider the importance of maternal care. It cannot be denied the impact a mother has on the development of their child and giving them the best start, starting in the womb. Green et al. (2018) discuss how through pregnancy, a woman's energy and protein needs are 13% and 54% higher to be able to provide adequate nutrition. These nutritional influences will affect how the fetus grows and the child's development. Research also indicates that when a woman is pregnant, her well-being, stress levels and nutrition will most likely affect the development of her unborn child (Likhar and Patil, 2022). Knowing the impact of maternal care, the benefits and contribution of antenatal care must also be considered. NHS (2022) state that antenatal care is important as it provides valuable information but also helps to detect and manage potential health issues and support the baby's development.



Lawler (2022) reported that 80% of the brain develops within the first thousand days and that poverty and malnutrition can affect the child's brain development. By not receiving the right nutrients, it can contribute to impaired cognitive and motor functions, poor growth, and a weaker immune system. Cusick (2016) holds the view that by not optimising brain development early on in life, it appears to have long-term impacts to education, mental health, and other health risks. "In this formative stage of life, a baby's brain can form more than 1 million new brain connections every single second - a pace never repeated again" (UNICEF, no date). In this period, how the brain develops will contribute to how a person grows and who they will become.

- ▶ Another significant aspect of the first thousand days are the influences and the environment surrounding the child. Although the importance of this has only been thought of more recently, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner are two theorists who appreciated the significance of sociocultural influences and the impact it would have on a child's development. Vygotsky (1978) saw development as a socially transmitted process where children developed their skills and knowledge through their dialogue with older, more skilled adults. Parents who regularly read and engage in play with their child will have a positive effect on the child's language skills. Sadownik (2023) explains Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as exploring the social context and the complexity of relationships that shape and define a child's development. If a child is born in a deprived area, it may be assumed that the adults surrounding them may not be as educated as someone from an affluent area. Therefore, the child would already be at a disadvantage compared to someone living in a wealthier area.

For more information on the first thousand days please click [here](#) for the NHS the first 1000 days programme



What is exceptional caregiving?



Researchgate (2020)

- ▶ Exceptional caregiving can come in many forms and has many attributes. It is supporting the holistic development of a child by establishing relationships, recognising their needs, responding to them and being an enabling adult for them. The Education Hub (no date) believes intimate caregiving relationships through primary caregiving support building trust and reassurance for infants.
- ▶ Nurturing care framework (2020) sets out five key features for nurturing care. These are good health, adequate nutrition, safety and security, responsive caregiving, and opportunities for learning. As far as safety and security is concerned, it can be argued that a relationship will need to be established to provide the best care.

Relationships and Caregiving



Wallace, 2017)

- It is interesting to explore the relevance of relationships regarding providing exceptional caregiving. Bowlby's attachment theory (1979) suggests that experiences of relationships with their caregivers at an early age will mold how they view themselves and form a basis of how they view relationships and what to expect from them. Establishing healthy relationships within the setting and creating positive attachment experiences will be an advantage. Crowley (2017) discusses how securely attached infants will be more confident and self-reliant and suggests it could promote emotional regulation skills. The relationship between the settings and the parents must also be considered when trying to achieve exceptional caregiving. Brodie (2018) mentions how a key person in a setting is someone who has special responsibility for their key children, their family and any other agencies involved with the family. This approach reflects the application of attachment theory, which suggests that it improves a baby's emotional well-being and if they have at least one adult who they can bond with and form an attachment. The impact of relationships in the first thousand days will carry throughout a person's life. Centre for community child health (2017) state a secure attachment is associated with improved developmental outcomes in later life, including greater self-reliance, self-efficacy, empathy, and social competence.

Enabling adults

- ▶ A child will develop and learn easier with an enabling adult to support them. It can be seen in Vygotsky's zone of proximal development when practitioners guide children towards performing tasks that are slightly beyond their current ability (Dolya, 2010). An enabling adult will provide a safe and welcoming space for the child so they feel they can go off and explore. This is important as by creating an enabling environment is supporting inclusive practice and minimising potential barriers to learning and support effective development. They will provide learning opportunities by presenting sensory rich, fun, educational environments to support learning and development. Welsh Government (2023) state an enabling adult will be able to notice changes and recognise where they are developing. To do this, practitioners will need to observe the children so they can gain an understanding of their capabilities. Connect childcare (2024) express how observations help early years educators understand children's development, allowing for a personalised learning experiences to be created that is tailored to each child's needs and interests. They will also pick up signs and symptoms if the child is unwell or acting out of character and be able to respond to the situation. Responsive caregiving is acknowledging when a child needs something and responding to the need.

An example...



Pampers (2020)

- In an early years setting, an infant may be crying because they need their nappy changed. To provide exceptional caregiving a practitioner will respond quickly and efficiently to the infant fulfilling their need. They will use eye contact, physical touch and narrate what is happening. Pikler viewed interactions such as this as opportunities to learn. She believed that the caregiver should follow a gentle, mindful pattern. Communicate clearly about what will happen next and to wait for the child's response. By doing this it is using a respectful approach that will help build the child's sense of worth. Kayir (2022) suggests that the Pikler approach is different to other theories as unlike others, she specifically focuses on 0–3-year-olds.

Professional Practice



- The role of an early years practitioner is complex to maintain an effective pedagogy and to consider all the aspects of a child's holistic development. On the non maintained setting curriculum, it expresses that early years practitioners 'should set the expectation for learning by creating emotionally safe environments that support children to begin to express and regulate their feelings and behaviour's in positive ways' (Welsh Government, 2024). Other qualities also being providing adequate nutrition, promoting independence, being reliable and approachable for all stake holders. Having a multi-agency approach will be beneficial for the child's development. Liaising with their family will give you access to more information on the child and how best to support them. It can also provide consistency and will mean the setting has access to more support for the child and the family. For a multi agency approach to work effectively, clear rationale is needed as there are many factors that could create obstacles. Paige- Smith and Craft (2008) add a more current note a few as being time restraints, lack of understanding of the purpose of multi-agency practice, professional rivalry, and cultural differences.

Role of the Early Years practitioner

Meaningful Experiences

- It is important to provide children with meaningful experiences as Forrester *et al* (2021) explain children will reflect on their experience as an ongoing process, which will support cognitive development and greater understanding of what and why something is happening. Welsh Government (2024) indicates these activities should be based in real-life, authentic situations to engage children for longer periods of time with uninterrupted active- learning. Practitioners will need to be patient to be able to provide such experiences and be an active listener, so they are able to be completely in the moment with the children. To see what the Welsh Government think of engaging experiences, click [here](#).



(Yates, 2015)

- ▶ Welsh Government (2024) convey that as an enabling adult, practitioners have the responsibility to create relationships with the child's home and community which will support to strengthen their sense of belonging through embracing their past and present experiences. Working closely with the family will allow for sharing and understanding and to be able to create more consistency for the child and contribute to working in a child centered way. Effective partnerships will only work if there is a level of respect for one another and a respect for values. This is the second layer of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model that focuses on the different relationships between the microsystems. By doing this it aids working in a child centered manner which is key in the early year settings. Education Wales (2024) state in Welsh curriculum that addressing their developmental needs and interests, is more likely to encourage a love of learning and create a positive attitude towards learning.

Role of Supporting families

- Offering support to families is a vital role for a practitioner. Some families may not know where to go for help and advice and may not be sure what facilities are there for them to use. It is widely assumed that children coming from deprived areas may already be at a disadvantage but as a practitioner, it is their job to try and provide equal opportunities to everyone. Welsh Government (2013) state their aim is for everyone involved in the care of young children and to ensure they are well-informed, receive the support they need, and have the necessary skills to help all children be healthy and reach their full potential.

Take a look at what free activities Neath and Port Talbot are offering.

[What's on in NPT - Neath Port Talbot Council](#)



(Childcare Network, no date)

- ▶ Dolya (2010) suggests how settings can send 'homework' for parents. She describes these as parent activities packs and gives ideas to parents on practical ways on how they can become actively involved in their child's learning, through games and other fun activities.
- ▶ There are challenges parents have that could affect how they care for their children. It could be something as simple as being a first-time parent and not knowing the best way to support your child. As an early years practitioner, information should be given to the parents on what support is around and help they could be entitled to. Flying start is an excellent resource and the Welsh Government (2017) state it is for children four and under and their parents from disadvantaged areas. However, it is not accessible to everyone in Wales and it is only from the age of two.



(Flying Start NPT, 2014)

Challenges



There are many reasons why a setting may not be providing exceptional care. Owsten, Jones and Stanley (2024) identify some key issues being low pay, lack of professional development, poor leadership and low well-being. It could be argued that one of the greatest challenges is lack of funding the settings have. Not having enough funding may affect equipment that is bought for the setting. With lack of funding, it can prove difficult for settings to afford new resources. Although this can be considered a challenge, it does not necessarily mean that the setting cannot provide high quality care. Settings can use charity shops to look for resources. Parents could also be asked to help with donations of toys, books, puzzles and other resources.

Staffing Challenges

- It can be argued that Early Years staff are underpaid and over-worked. The retention of staff is getting less as working in a supermarket is higher paid and could be considered less stressful with less responsibility. Nuffield Foundation (2020) findings show poor pay progression and low salaries, were felt to be inadequate for the increased workload and responsibilities. There are more targets to hit, more paperwork to complete and more legislations to follow. Although these are there to improve the care, if staff are already pushed for time with supporting the children, it is added pressure. This could result in staff finding the pressure too much and being off sick. To cover the sick member of staff, agency workers can be used if they are available. The issues that can come along with using agency is that they do not know the setting or the children which can sometimes cause problems. The level of care will not be as good as permanent staff. Early years alliance (2021) report that 60% of their respondents say that they are finding it very difficult to recruit staff. Some reasons being that they cannot meet the salary demands, there are not enough applicants and applicants not obtaining full and relevant early years qualifications.

For a more in depth look at figures provided by the Early Years Alliance, here is a link for their [Breaking Point](#).



Freud, 2022

- ▶ External factors within Bronfenbrenner's exosystem and macrosystem present challenges for early year settings. Currently, there is a cost of living crisis. Jio (2022) talks about how children are like sponges and absorb everything. If a parent is stressed and anxious about food or money, then the child will also feel stressed and anxious. The full webinar is available to watch to the left. The local government association (2023) discuss how over the past 12 years, council budgets have decreased, and a reduction in the percentage pass-through rate in the early years funding has forced local authorities to make hard decisions about reallocating or redirecting funds. As a result, the staffing numbers in early years teams has been reduced, limiting the council's ability to effectively manage and provide direct support settings.

Activities

►As previously stated, within the early stages of life, each experience contributes to neural pathways being developed. Local Government Association (2018) also support that cognitive skills develop more in the early years than at any other point in our lives. They continue to state that there is evidence to show that if children fall behind in early cognitive development, they are more likely to fall further behind at later stages in education. This is why it is important in early years settings to provide activities and experiences for children that will encourage all aspects of development. Barrell and Darling-Hammond (2008) claim there is increasing body of research that indicates that children gain a deeper understanding and perform better on complex tasks when they have the chance to take part in more "authentic learning experiences, such as projects and activities.



(Own image)



(Own image)



(Own Image)

Treasure Baskets

- ▶ Treasure baskets contain objects you can find around your house that offer a choice of different textures. They are for infants who are not yet crawling but are sitting up. The idea was first considered by Elinor Goldschmied during her time working with young, single mothers in post-war Europe, Froebels trust (no date). She recognised that children in her care were very curious but as they could not crawl, got frustrated when they saw interesting objects. From the observation she produced the treasure basket, allowing children who could sit up right to explore objects and textures in a safe way. In Manning- Morton podcast (2024) she discusses how treasure baskets bring the world to the babies. How none of the toys are bought and ideally not made from plastic. Treasure baskets should consist of household items made from natural materials where possible. Manning- Morton also emphasises that the role of the adult is to be available but to not interfere, lead or suggest. McTavish (2023) writes how Goldschmied also suggested the 'sixth sense' of bodily movement, which involves the whole body in discovering and exploring. Infants will use touch, sight, sound, smell and taste to discover new objects. On Froebels Trust website quote Elinore Goldshmeid (1989) "[Babies] suck, grasp, touch and feel objects, [rehearsing] behaviours which foster their earliest learning...". An infant will need an enabling adult to construct a treasure basket for them and ensure that it is safe and beneficial for them to develop.

Loose Parts

- ▶ Loose parts are found objects and materials that can be used alone or collectively. They can be moved and manipulated, and as there are no instructions on how to use them, it creates endless opportunities for children to use their imagination. A stick can become a fishing rod and later a magic wand. Daly, Belogovsky and Daly (2014) hold the view that loose parts can contribute to developing highly valued skills in adult life, as they encourage social competence, supports creativity and innovation. Flannigan and Dietze (2017) are confident that children cannot help but be curious when presented with loose parts. They believe this sense of curiosity is how children become inspired to engage in new activities and discoveries. The loose parts can also provide opportunities for sustained thinking between the children encouraging conversation which in turn will support language and communication skills.



Te Whāriki



NZEI Te Riu Roa (2016)

- ▶ Te Whāriki is what guides New Zealand's early years curriculum. It is play based and aims to support children to grow and thrive according to Ministry of education (2023). The whāriki, or woven mat, is used in the curriculum as a metaphor for where the four key principles are intricately connected with the five curriculum strands. Their principles are empowerment, holistic development, family and community, and relationships and their strands are well-being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration.
- ▶ There are many comparisons we can draw upon between New Zealand's curriculum and the Welsh curriculum. New Zealand view their children as active explorers, much like the Welsh. New Zealand recognise that a child's development is holistic and Te Whāriki advocate that each dimension of the human development is 'interwoven and interdependent.' Both the curriculums have a strong focus on relationships and understand the importance of them to build trust and security. Te Whāriki highlights the importance of strong relationships between children, educators, families, and communities in promoting learning with Education Wales (2024) stating effective, child-focused teaching, which is adaptable, responsive, and rooted in strong relationships, is crucial to achieving the goals of their curriculum.
- ▶ By comparing the two curriculums, one may notice many similarities. However, one difference that could be argued an important one, is that New Zealand's curriculum starts from zero and the Welsh starts from the age of three. Given the vast amount of information that supports the importance of the first thousand days, it does pose the question to why the Welsh curriculum does not start from an earlier age.

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