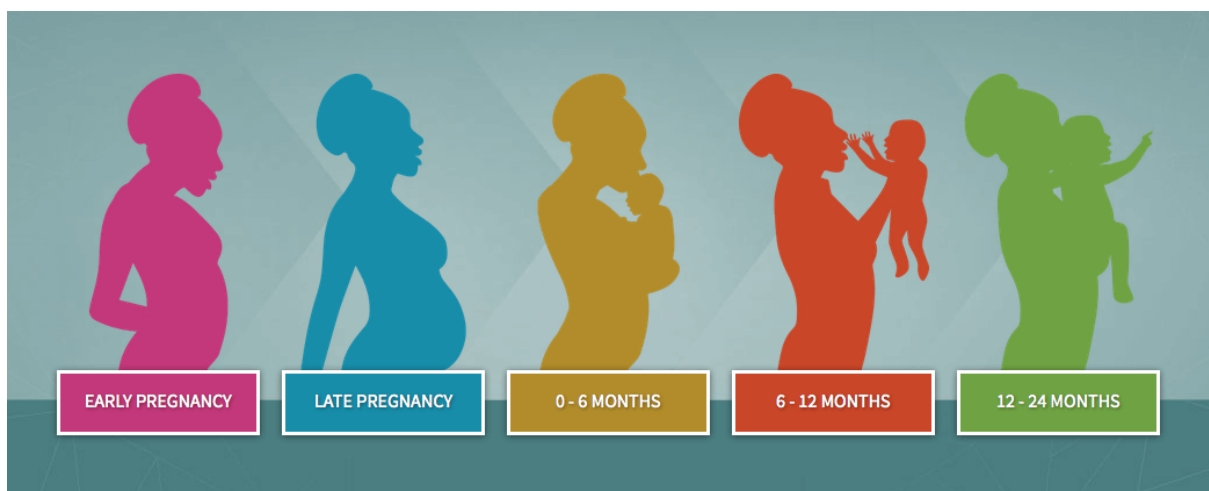




(Source: Early Learning Nation 2021)

# The First 1000 Days

## Introduction

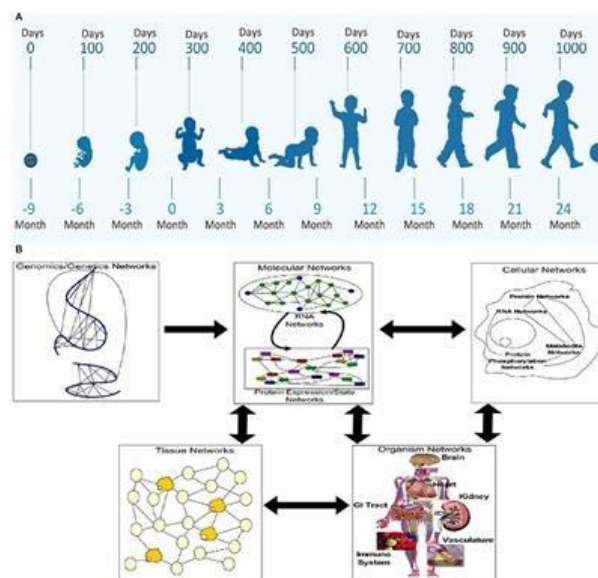


The first 1000 days of an individual's life, spanning from conception to the age of two, represents a foundational period marked by profound and rapid developmental changes according to Black *et al.* (2013). This critical timeframe is increasingly recognised by researchers, policymakers, and healthcare professionals as a pivotal window during which interventions can have far-reaching implications for a person's health, well-being, and overall life course.

The term "first 1000 days" refers to the period from conception to the age of two years, encapsulating the gestational and early postnatal phases of a child's life. This developmental epoch is characterised by the rapid proliferation of cells, intricate neurological wiring and the establishment of fundamental physiological systems. Importantly, it encompasses the prenatal phase, acknowledging the impact of maternal health and environmental influences on the developing fetus, and extends into the critical initial years of postnatal life (Victora *et al.*, 2008).

The first 1000 days witness unparalleled brain development, with a surge in synaptic connections and neuronal pathways. The quality of early experiences profoundly influences cognitive abilities and neurological functioning throughout the individual's life. During this period, the foundations of emotional and social development are laid through the establishment of secure attachments between the infant and primary caregivers. Research by Bowlby (1969) underscores the critical role of early attachments in shaping emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships. Nutritional experiences and health interventions during the first 1000 days significantly impact long-term mental health outcomes. Victora *et al.*, (2008) highlights the enduring consequences of early undernutrition on adult health and human capital.

### 1000 Days



1 -

- Optimum time for health, growth and neurodevelopment
- The Brain creates the most neuro connections during this time frame.
- Lays the foundation for a child's future.

### Lighting up Young Brains

The initial years are pivotal for language acquisition and cognitive skill development. Exposure to a rich language environment and cognitive stimulation during this period has lasting effects on linguistic and intellectual capabilities (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012).

Interventions during the first 1000 days, such as proper nutrition, immunisation, and healthcare access, serve as preventative measures against a spectrum of health challenges, as emphasised by Black *et al.* (2013). Identifying and addressing developmental challenges during this window allows for early interventions that can mitigate potential adverse outcomes. Early intervention strategies have been recognised as crucial for optimising developmental trajectories (Shonkoff *et al.*, 2012).

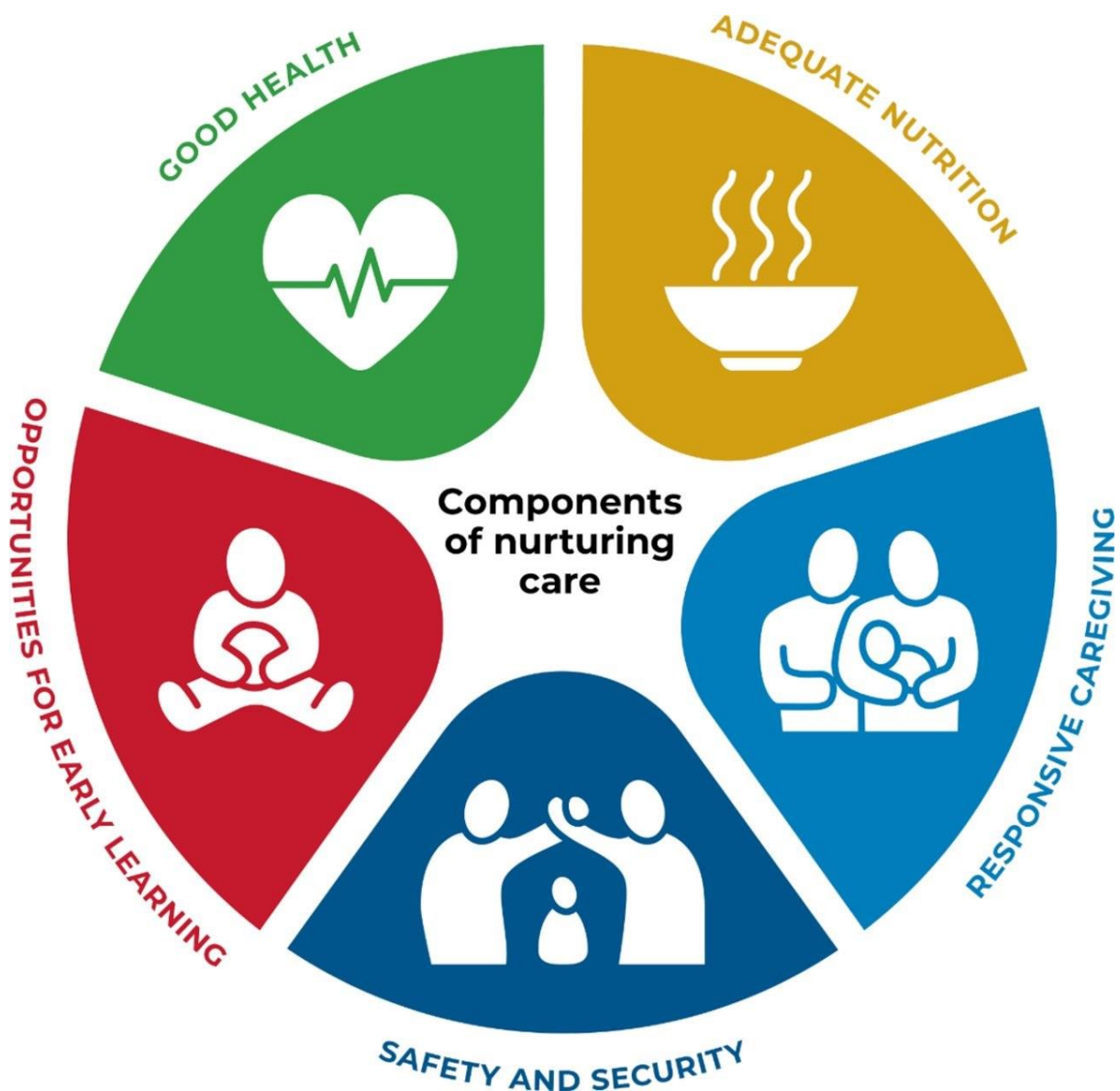


(Source: Wikipedia, no date)

**Do the First  
1,000 Days  
Determine  
the Rest of  
Your Life?**



## Caregiving



Exceptional care extends beyond the fulfilment of basic needs; it encompasses an intricate dance of attentiveness, empathy and responsiveness to the unique characteristics and evolving requirements of the care recipient. In the realm of early childhood, theorists like Bowlby (1951) and Erikson (1950) laid the groundwork for understanding the significance of secure attachments and the role of the responsive caregiving in fostering emotional and social development. Contemporary perspectives, such as the concept of “professional love” in the PLEYS (Professional Love in Early Years Settings) project (Nutbrown, 2011), further underscore the emotional dimensions of exceptional care.

Exceptional care plays a vital role in laying the foundations of a child’s development. The quality of caregiving interactions shapes cognitive, emotional and social milestones. Shonkoff *et al.* (2012) highlights the profound impact of early experiences on the architecture of the developing brain. Providing exceptional care fosters secure attachments between the caregiver and the recipient. Secure attachments, as outlined by Bowlby (1951), serve as a secure base for exploration, positively influencing emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships throughout life.

Exceptional care contributes to the development of emotional regulation skills. Responsive caregiving, as theorised by Ainsworth (1964), supports the infant's ability to regulate emotions, fostering resilience and well-being.

The importance of relationships in exceptional caregiving is emphasised in the works of Pikler (1999), who highlights the significance of respectful interactions and the role of the caregiver in facilitating a sense of security and trust.

Emmi Pikler's (1946) approach to exceptional care during the first 1000 days emphasizes seven key principles that prioritize respectful and individualized caregiving. These principles include the concept of primary caregiving, keen observation, freedom of movement, autonomous activity, caregiver attunement, uninterrupted play, and environmental considerations. Pikler's work aligns with contemporary research highlighting the importance of secure attachments, unrestricted movement, autonomous play, sensitive caregiving, and the impact of the physical environment on child development. Overall, Pikler's principles provide a holistic framework for fostering a nurturing and enriching environment for infants and young children during their formative years.

Research by Erikson (1950) underscores that the quality of early caregiving experiences has lasting implications for an individual's psychological and social well-being across the lifespan.

Exceptional care aligns with professional ethics and standards in early childhood settings. The PLEYS project, as discussed by Nutbrown (2011), emphasises the ethical dimensions of professional love and the importance of reflective practice in caregiving.



- *Adapting your skills and knowledge to meet the needs of the child*
  - *Safety/Safeguarding*
  - *Secure and positive relationships*
- *Working in partnership with others, carers, professionals, agencies.*
  - *Listening to the child*
- *Creating a stimulating and enabling environment*



Exceptional care during the first 1000 days of a child's life is of paramount importance as it forms the foundation for lifelong health, development, and well-being. Numerous studies highlight the critical nature of this period in shaping a child's future. The landmark work by Shonkoff *et al.* (2012) emphasizes how early experiences, particularly during the first 1000 days, influence brain architecture, laying the groundwork for cognitive, emotional, and social capabilities. The Lancet series on maternal and child undernutrition (Black *et al.*, 2013) underscores the significance of proper nutrition during this time, emphasizing the lifelong impact on health. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) illuminates the importance of emotional bonding and secure attachment formed through exceptional care, providing the basis for healthy social and emotional development. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004) highlights the role of relationships in shaping social skills, further emphasizing the importance of supportive caregiving. Research by Heckman (2006) and Cunha and Heckman (2007) underscores the economic and societal benefits of investing in early childhood development, emphasizing the long-term returns on skill formation and productivity. Duncan *et al.* study (2007) connects early childhood experiences to school readiness and later academic achievement, demonstrating the potential for reducing inequalities through early interventions.

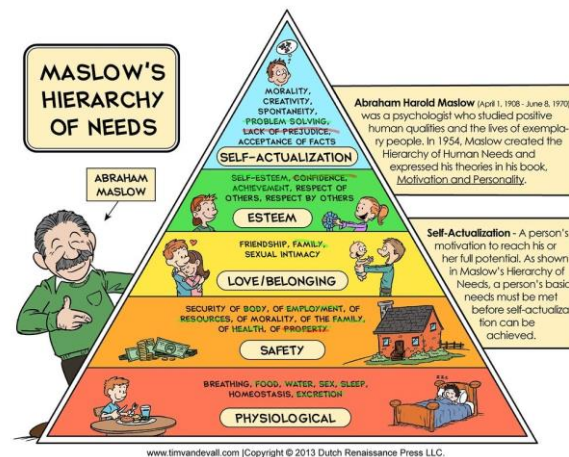
### [Attachment Theory](#)

Early years practitioners act as facilitators in the holistic development of children during the first 1000 days. Drawing from Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978 - a), practitioners' scaffold children's learning, creating environments rich in language, cognitive challenges and social interactions that promote optimal development.

In alignment with Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1951) practitioners play a crucial role in fostering secure attachments. By providing a consistent and responsive caregiving environment, they contribute to the emotional security and wellbeing of the child, laying the foundation for healthy relationships in the future.

The initial 1000 days of a child's life are crucial in meeting foundational needs for holistic development. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explains the importance of exceptional care during this

critical period. This theory outlines a pyramid of human needs, starting from basic physiological requirements and progressing to higher psychological and self-fulfilment needs. The first tier of the hierarchy focuses on physiological needs, such as air, water, nutrition, and sleep. Adequate nutrition, responsive caregiving, and a secure environment are necessary for meeting these needs. Moving up the hierarchy, the second tier emphasizes safety and security needs, which are fulfilled through responsive caregiving and a nurturing environment. The third tier emphasizes social needs, including the formation of attachments with primary caregivers. Exceptional care during the first 1000 days contributes to the development of secure attachments and fulfils social and emotional needs. Caregivers also play a role in addressing higher-order needs, such as esteem and self-actualization, through responsive caregiving and a stimulating environment.



(Source: Herbalife, 2023)

- *Helps develop children holistically*
- *Helps children with relationships*
  - *Better behaviour*

## Professional Partnerships



Practitioners actively engage families in the developmental journey, recognising the significance of family involvement in a child's early years. This aligns with the family systems theory, emphasising the interconnectedness of family dynamics (Bowen, 1976). Practitioners encourage active participation, shared decision-making, and collaborative goal-setting.

Utilising aspects of Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), practitioners operate within the various systems that impact a child's development. They play a crucial role in early identification of any emerging needs, intervening to mitigate potential challenges and ensuring a child's development occurs within a supportive environment.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the layers of influence on a child's development. Effective partnership working aligns with this theory by recognising the interconnected systems influencing a child's life – from the microsystem of the family to the macrosystem of societal values and beliefs. Effective partnership working ensures consistency across the various systems impacting a child. This consistency creates a stable and predictable environment, crucial for a child's sense of security and trust, as highlighted by the attachment theory.

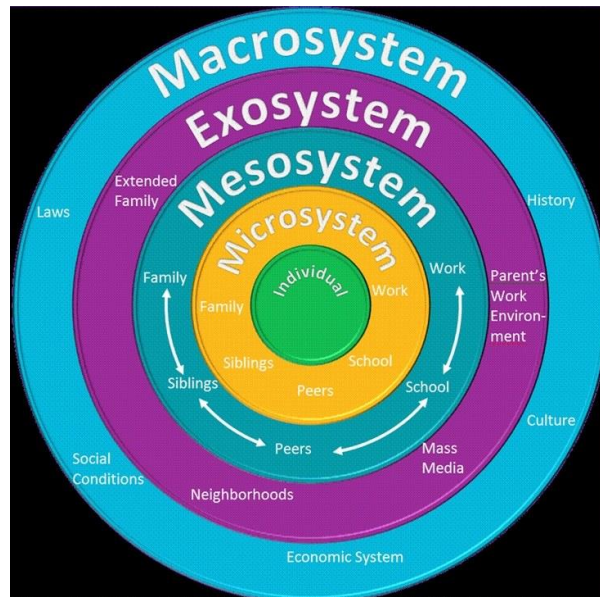
Partnership working involves sharing information and resources among practitioners, parents, and other professionals. This collaborative approach aligns with the principles of the Reggio Emilia approach, emphasising collaboration and the exchange of knowledge (Edwards, Gandini & Forman 1998).

An effective partnership allows for early identification of needs and prompt intervention. This resonates with the principles of early intervention advocated by theorists like Shonkoff *et al.* (2012), underlying the importance of addressing developmental concerns early for optimal outcomes.

It is extremely important to form Professional Partnerships/Relationships as collaborating across professions ensures a holistic approach to early childhood development, considering physical, cognitive, emotional, and social aspects (World Health Organization, 2017). According to the Centre

on the Developing Child (2010) professionals working together can identify and address developmental concerns early, leading to timely interventions that can have a lasting impact on a child's trajectory.

Partnerships with parents are vital during the early years. Professionals working collaboratively with parents can provide valuable guidance, support, and resources to enhance caregiving practices (Dunst & Dempsey, 2007). Ertel & He (2019) believe that professionals from different fields bring unique expertise. Collaborative partnerships facilitate the exchange of knowledge and best practices, enriching the overall quality of care. Seamless collaboration ensures continuity of care and services, preventing fragmented approaches to child development support (UNICEF, 2017).



(Source: Early Years Careers, 2015)



There are however challenges as stated by Gibbs (2019) differing terminologies and communication styles among professionals from various disciplines may hinder effective collaboration. Inequities in resources and funding among different professionals and organizations can pose challenges to collaborative efforts (Sivakumar & Wasti, 2018). Centre on the Developing Child (2010) highlight that lack of coordination may lead to fragmented service delivery, impacting the overall effectiveness of interventions. Professionals may have different priorities and goals, potentially leading to conflicts in decision-making (Matarasso, 2019) or as suggested by Dunst & Dempsey (2017) sharing sensitive information across professions may raise concerns about privacy and confidentiality.



## Current Challenges



Caring for infants in early years settings brings forth a myriad of challenges, spanning curriculum development, regulatory adherence, and the delivery of high-quality care. Oberhuemer *et al.* (2010) highlights the complexity of crafting a curriculum that caters to the diverse needs and backgrounds of infants, requiring practitioners to ensure inclusivity and balance holistic development.

Staying current with research findings on infant development and caregiving practices is imperative, demanding practitioners to navigate academic sources (Rodriguez, 2019). Translating research into practical strategies within childcare settings poses challenges, requiring critical analysis and adaptation (Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016). The demanding nature of the caregiving role, as noted by Phillips (2014), may limit practitioners' time for engaging with research-based practices.

Overcoming resistance to deviate from traditional caregiving practices and aligning with parental expectations demand effective communication and collaboration (Coyne, 2014; Lavery & Farrier, 2019). Ensuring staff are trained for non-routinized caregiving approaches requires ongoing professional development and support (Lally *et al.*, 2015).

Providing high-quality care involves navigating challenges associated with a stable and qualified workforce, financial limitations, and facilities and learning material adequacy (Whitebook *et al.*, 2016; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2018; Dalli *et al.*, 2011). The multifaceted nature of these challenges directly influences the delivery of services and child development outcomes.

Navigating through constantly changing regulations poses a formidable challenge for early years providers, impacting the consistency and quality of care (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2018). Language barriers present hurdles in effective communication between practitioners and parents, affecting information exchange about a child's development (Bartlett *et al.*, 2016). Inclusion of children with diverse learning needs introduces complexity, requiring adaptation of teaching strategies and collaboration between parents and practitioners (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2018; Dalli *et al.*, 2011). The

collaborative dynamic is crucial for creating an inclusive environment where all children can thrive, regardless of their backgrounds.



4 -

- *Staying current in with new frameworks, policies, procedures and curriculum*
  - *Staffing*
  - *Language barriers*
  - *Resources*
  - *Lack of training*
  - *Funding/budgets*



## Enabling Environments



### Enabling Environments

Goswami (2011) delineates the process of children's learning as one that is grounded in experiences and encompasses a range of sensory inputs. Moreover, this process is highly individualized, varying for each child and contingent upon the particular context or environment in which they are immersed. By engaging in activities that involve creative and natural resources, as well as role play or imaginary play, children can actively stimulate their multi-sensory learning capabilities. In doing so, they can effectively tap into the full spectrum of their abilities. In order to effectively facilitate these learning opportunities, it is imperative for practitioners to possess not only the requisite skills, but also the confidence to observe and discern the various intelligences exhibited by children. According to Goswami (2011), learning occurs through incremental steps, with the brain naturally extracting and representing structures that are presented to it, even in the absence of direct instruction. Additionally, the brain prioritizes emotional information, granting it privileged access to the learning process.

Previous research conducted by Goleman (1999) has discovered that emotional intelligence holds a greater significance in comparison to cognitive and academic intelligence in regards to achieving success in one's life, both for children and adults. The concept of multiple intelligences, as well as emotional intelligence, garners support from educational professionals such as Claxton (2006), who criticizes the educational curriculum that places excessive emphasis on intellect while disregarding the ongoing development of other areas of learning. Claxton (2006) emphasizes that learning manifests in various ways, encompassing immersion in experiences, imitation, imagination, intuition, and intellect.

Practitioners must provide stimulating and facilitating environments for children by strategically planning for educational activities through playful and innovative methods that activate all the

senses and provide opportunities for incremental learning at the individual child's level of preparedness to acquire knowledge. Nevertheless, according to Whitebread and Bingham (2011:2), the crucial inquiry lies not in whether a child is prepared to learn, but rather in what a child is prepared to learn. They challenge Piaget's theory that children must possess cognitive readiness before they can learn. Instead, Vygotsky's (1978- b) learning theory is currently favoured, as it recognizes that children are capable of socially constructing their knowledge, comprehension, and learning. They progress from what they already know (ZAP) to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) while receiving support (scaffolding) from more experienced peers and adults.

Moyles and Worthington (2011) expressed disapproval towards early years practice that fails to provide sufficient motivation for children to assume accountability for their own educational development. They propose that the educational framework ought to encompass a greater range of prospects for children to acquire knowledge through exploration. This suggestion is based on their examination of the disparities in practitioners' comprehension of play, as well as the perspectives of children regarding play, and how these factors impact the instructional strategies employed in designing educational plans for children.

In a subsequent investigation, Howard and McInnes (2012) underscored the significance of practitioners possessing the capability to comprehend children's perspectives regarding their interpretation of play, in order to effectively facilitate playful circumstances that children are inclined to participate in, and that can augment the potential for play development. They discovered that children's emotional well-being experienced an elevation when a particular undertaking was perceived by children as 'play' rather than as an educational pursuit (Howard and McInnes, 2012).



5 -

- *Sensory*
- *Play*





## Activities



Early childhood activities play a pivotal role in fostering holistic development and among them, loose parts play, Montessori, Froebel, Forest School and Reggio Emilia approaches have gained prominence.

Loose parts play involves the use of open-ended materials that can be manipulated, combined and reimagined by children. Research by Nicholson (2017) suggests that loose parts play enhances creativity, problem solving skills, and social interaction among children. The open-ended nature of

loose parts encourages imagination and divergent thinking, fostering a sense of autonomy and agency in the child.

Loose parts play inherently supports inclusive practice by accommodating various learning styles and abilities. The open-ended nature of loose parts allows children with diverse needs to engage meaningfully, irrespective of their individual abilities or preferences.

Loose parts play aligns with the concept of meaningful learning, as proposed by Ausubel (1968). By allowing children to construct their understanding through hands on exploration, it facilitates the acquisition of knowledge that is personally significant and applicable to real-world contexts.

### Loose Parts

The Montessori method places great importance on establishing an environment that is well-prepared and encourages self-directed learning. Lillard (2012) posits that Montessori education nurtures self-reliance, undivided attention, and a genuine passion for acquiring knowledge. The utilization of specially crafted materials enhances the development of sensory and motor skills, as well as cognitive abilities, thereby promoting a comprehensive approach to education. Montessori education is consistent with the principles of meaningful learning, which emphasizes the integration of new information with pre-existing cognitive frameworks. Dewey (1938) contended that experiential learning, exemplified in Montessori classrooms, stimulates the child's active engagement in constructing knowledge through hands-on experiences, thus imbuing the learning process with greater significance.



Froebel's Kindergarten places its emphasis on the interconnectedness between play and learning. According to Froebel (1887), he firmly believed in the transformative potential of play in fostering physical, emotional, and cognitive capacities. Activities such as finger plays, songs, and the utilization of geometric gifts all contribute to the holistic development of the child. Froebel's emphasis on play as a crucial medium for learning resonates with the principles of meaningful learning. In this particular context, play is regarded as a purposeful and educational endeavour that aligns with the child's stage of development, thereby promoting a profound comprehension of the world.

Forest School is characterised by outdoor, nature-based learning. Research by Knight (2013) indicates that Forest School activities enhance physical health, emotional well-being, and environmental awareness. Exposure to nature fosters curiosity, resilience and a connection to the natural world. The Forest School approach supports meaningful learning by immersing children in authentic, real-world experiences. Nature-based activities provide a context for exploration, inquiry, and problem solving, aligning with Vygotsky's (1978 - b) notion of learning within a socio-cultural context.

The Reggio Emilia Approach places a strong emphasis on a learning model that is centered around the child and based on projects. In their work, Edwards *et al.* (1998) draw attention to the advantages of the Reggio Emilia Approach, which include the development of enhanced creativity, collaboration, and communication skills. The utilization of visual documentation and representation serves as a powerful means of expression. Reggio Emilia's focus on projects led by the child is in alignment with the concept of meaningful learning. Dewey (1938) advocated for the significance of experiences that hold personal meaning for the learner. The emphasis that Reggio Emilia places on projects initiated by the child allows for the exploration of topics that are of importance to the child.

Haifa (2020) recognises that the commonalities shared by Montessori, Froebel, Forest Schools, and Reggio Emilia lie in their child-centered orientation, which places a high priority on addressing the individual needs and interests of each child. All of these approaches underscore the significance of holistic development, thereby acknowledging the interconnectedness of cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being. However, the differences among these approaches are apparent. Montessori, for instance, follows a structured curriculum that utilizes a specific set of prepared materials, while Reggio Emilia relies on an emergent curriculum that is driven by the children's interests. Additionally, Montessori and Reggio Emilia primarily operate within indoor settings, whereas Forest School places significant emphasis on outdoor, nature-based learning. Lastly, it is important to note that Froebel's Kindergarten is deeply rooted in Froebel's philosophical beliefs, while Montessori draws inspiration from the educational philosophy of Maria Montessori.



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