



The first 1000 days

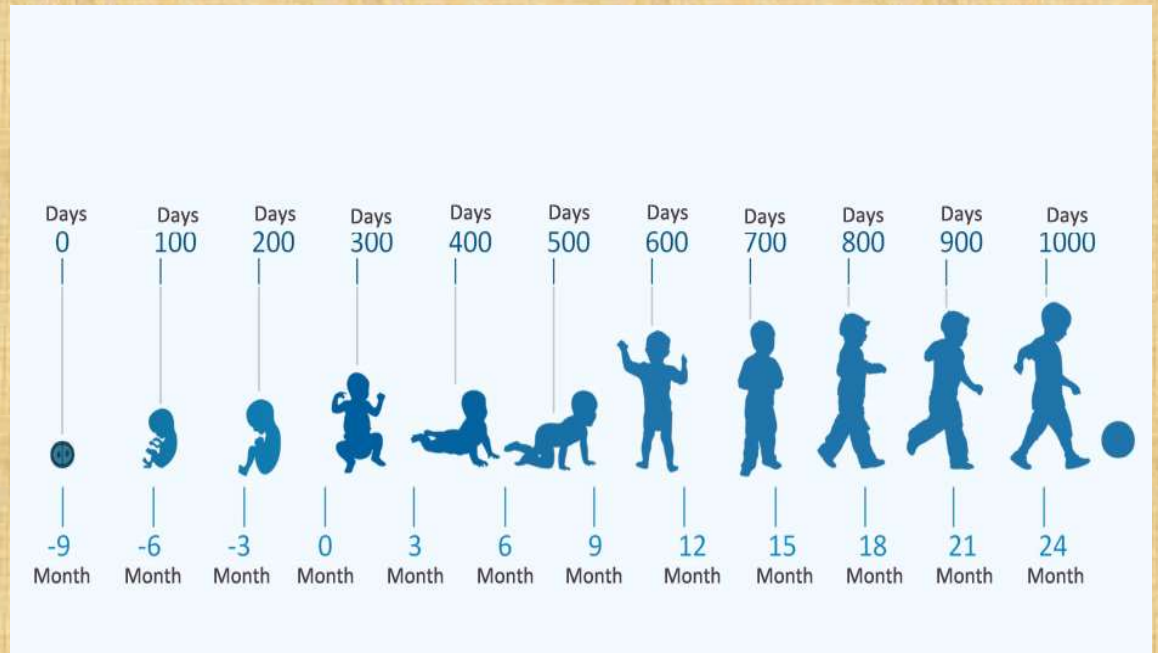
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What is the first 1000 days?

The first 1000 days encompass the period just preceding conception, throughout pregnancy and up to a child's second birthday. During this time a baby's body, brain and immune system develop. According to Department of Education (2023), children aged 0 – 5 are entitled to the best possible start in life, as during this phase they learn and develop at the fastest rate. Consistent and high-quality care and provision are essential to prevent any child from being left behind. UNICEF (2013) explains as age increases, the window of opportunity for brain development gets narrower.



(Image 1: IDS Medical Systems, 2019)

Brain Development

As per Save the Children (2016), a child's brain starts developing in the womb and pregnancy is the most important time for this development. Connections are formed between neurons which become stronger and on a large scale within the first 1000 days. Connections form networks that support children's development.

The following clip from [Video 1] explains how the brain develops rapidly in pregnancy. A baby only has basic functions to begin with, but this leads onto complex functions and needs being required as they get older. Children have genetic and environmental factors which also contribute to child development. Understanding brain development can aid practitioners to grasp how children develop and provide them with the care and pedagogy they need.

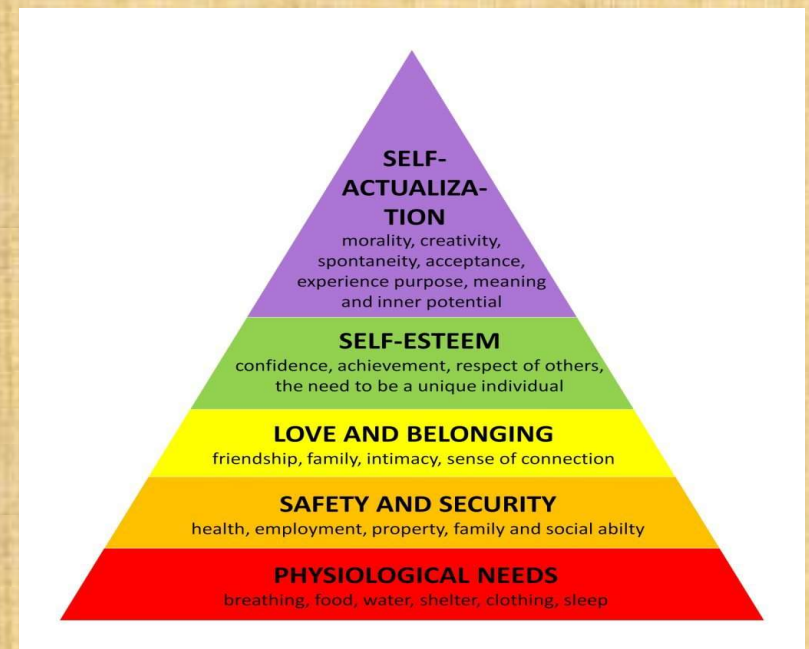


Video 1: Early Years Resources: The Science of Early Childhood Brain Development. (Youtube, n.d).

Why is it important?

Maslow (2020) asserts that for proper survival, a child requires water, food and basic shelter, as these constitute fundamental necessities for human beings. Creating a nurturing environment for a child to grow up in, which is warm and clean, will help foster happiness and comfort in their growth and development. Lavis (2016) suggests that establishing security and cultivating loving, caring relationships, will leave a lasting impact for the child throughout their formative years. Promoting positive self-esteem, contributes to the child's ability to become happy and confident individuals.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs comprises five levels of needs, illustrated in the shape of a pyramid [Image 2]. Pichere (2015, pp. 4-5) explains that these needs encompass both physical and spiritual dimensions crucial for a child's development. Once a need is fulfilled, the foundation is laid so that another can be addressed. The inter-connective nature of these needs mean that all needs must be harmoniously fulfilled to progress up the levels of the pyramid.



(Image 2: Simply Psychology, n.d.)

According to Page, Clare and Nutbrown (2013, p.20) Practitioners and care givers need to understand the research and theory behind all operations of their settings to enable them to build solid foundations for children to learn and thrive. This understanding is crucial for establishing strong foundations that facilitate children's learning and overall well-being. Failing to do so may have adverse effects on a child's welfare, as they might not receive the necessary care. Additionally, practitioners who neglect the foundational theories of child development may hinder their ability to provide effective care.

Early Intervention Foundation (2018) states that professionals who deliver early interventions will enhance the well-being and overall experiences of the child, leading to improved outcomes. As per Birth to 5 Matters (n,d) caring for children is just as important as play and learning. Cultivating a nurturing and responsible approach for those under one's care establishes a safe and comfortable environment, enabling children to thrive. When children experience care and affection, they develop a sense of safety and security.



Pre-natal care



According to information from NHS (2020), maintaining the health of both mother and child is crucial through the consumption of nutritious food during and after pregnancy. Furthermore, taking folic acid in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy is important to support optimal development (brain and physical) of the foetus and reduce the risk of neural tube defects. Eating a healthy diet and not smoking can reduce the risks of complications in pregnancy. Research by Cortes – Alborno et al (2021), suggests that insufficient nutrient intake maybe associated with various complications, including brain defects and behavioural issues, as well as motor and visual complications.

Likhar and Patil (2022), explain the importance of prenatal care in establishing pathways for a positive and healthy start for the child. The health and well-being of children is jeopardised if the mother does not follow a healthy and nutritious diet during pregnancy. According to NHS.uk (2023) a baby relies entirely on their mother to provide all the nutrients they require from conception through to childhood. Maintaining a healthy diet, getting ample rest during pregnancy, and avoiding substance abuse and stress are essential measures to ensure the adequate nourishment and development of the baby, with potential long-term effects on both the mother and child.



What is exceptional care?

As outlined in 1,000 days (2018), the first 1,000 days represent the prime period for children to flourish. Providing exceptional care during this critical time is crucial as it establishes a robust foundation for life. When children receive outstanding care, they develop self-confidence and resilience. Armed with these invaluable skills, children are better positioned to attain good outcomes in life.

According to Learning Journals (2021), as practitioners, being aware of children's diverse needs constitutes a form of exceptional care. Establishing connections with children through activities such as reading books, contributes to their mental wellbeing and self-esteem. Reading provides an avenue for shared interest, fostering communication and interaction as children discuss and explore what they observe. This process will also help enhance verbal communication skills.

According to Nursery story (2021) cultivating relationships through mutual interaction and responsiveness to children's needs is a crucial developmental tool for professional practitioners. Dedication of time and patience to recognise and respond to a child's cues can significantly enhance verbal communication. Utilising both verbal elements, such as talking and varying tone of voice, and nonverbal cues like smiling, facial expressions, and hand gestures, can encourage children to imitate their peers, thereby advancing their language skills.

(Video 2) shows how failure to reciprocate a child's response can have a detrimental impact, leading to frustration and stress. Additionally, the lack of positive stimulation during this early stage of life can hinder the brain's development. Failure to reciprocate a child's response can have a detrimental impact, leading to frustration and stress. Furthermore, the brain is not receiving the positive stimulation in which it needs at this early stage of life.



Video 2: Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University: *Serve & Return Interaction Shapes Brain Circuitry*. (YouTube, 2011).

According to Spencer et al. (2021) allowing children to have an environment where they are free to move, have free play and naturally explore their surroundings can help to build self-confidence. It can also aid mental health and physical development. Allowing children to experience risky play can build resilience in a child.

According to Vasandani (2023), Emmie Pickler's theory of the 'Pickler triangle' shows how children can explore and play without adult interference. Pickler believed children should be allowed to roam and unfold freely in a safe environment. The triangle allows children to be able to climb, crawl underneath and pull themselves up independently. There are also some ideas of adding scarves to the poles to create a sensory tunnel.

Pickler further believed that whilst children should independently explore, they also need caregivers to nurture and care for them, in order secure attachments. When children have a happy, secure relationship with a key person in a setting, they will feel secure and reassured that they can explore and be adventurous, without the fear of anything detrimental taking place.

Bradbury (2023), emphasises that a child's growth is nurtured through love and a sense of belonging. When these elements are lacking, children may encounter challenges in forming connections through social interactions. In the early year's settings, offering professional love plays a crucial role in supporting the overall development of the child. Research from (Teach Early Years Magazine, 2020), suggests children in their early years require a sense of safety and respect. Demonstrating an understanding of a child's needs within these settings can support this requirement by showing respect and care, fostering emotional and physical well-being. Engaging in daily care routines and mirroring the affectionate care provided by their primary caregiver helps children feel secure, cared for, and upholds their rights.



(Image 3: Triclimb, n.d).

The support of the Early Years Practitioner.

The early years practitioner plays a crucial role in aiding children and families during the initial 1000 days. According to (Clare, 2012a, p.35) possessing a solid understanding of child growth and development is vital for meeting a child's needs effectively. By engaging in observation, thoughtful planning, assessing and timely intervention, practitioners allow children to become independent learners led by their interests. This approach is very much aligned to the idea of child-led learning.

Montessori advocates a child led approach to learning. According to Gallo (2022) children learn effectively from their environment, and by fostering an environment that allows them to pursue their own interests enables them to become independent. As practitioners, facilitating open ended play supports social and emotional development as children engage in activities that bring them joy and is of their own choosing. This approach ensures that children will not feel hurried or pressured into activities they do not want to participate in, which contributes to the development of self-confidence.





According to the Welsh Government (2022) practitioners should ensure the Welsh language is promoted within the early years setting by adopting a robust Welsh-speaking ethos. Celebrating the Welsh language by providing tangible resources, such as reading books and display boards will help create a diverse and inclusive environment. Furthermore, speaking Welsh language whenever possible will greatly assist in achieving this outcome.

Collaborative Working

Establishing trust with parents is crucial for creating a sense of safety, enabling relationships to develop within the setting. As noted by Asquith (2021), cultivating positive relationships facilitates effective communication among all parties, which will in turn will ultimately serve the needs of the child. Fostering trust among everyone involved with the child nurtures bonds with the child, allowing for open and free sharing of information about their best interests and requirements.

Inclusive Practice

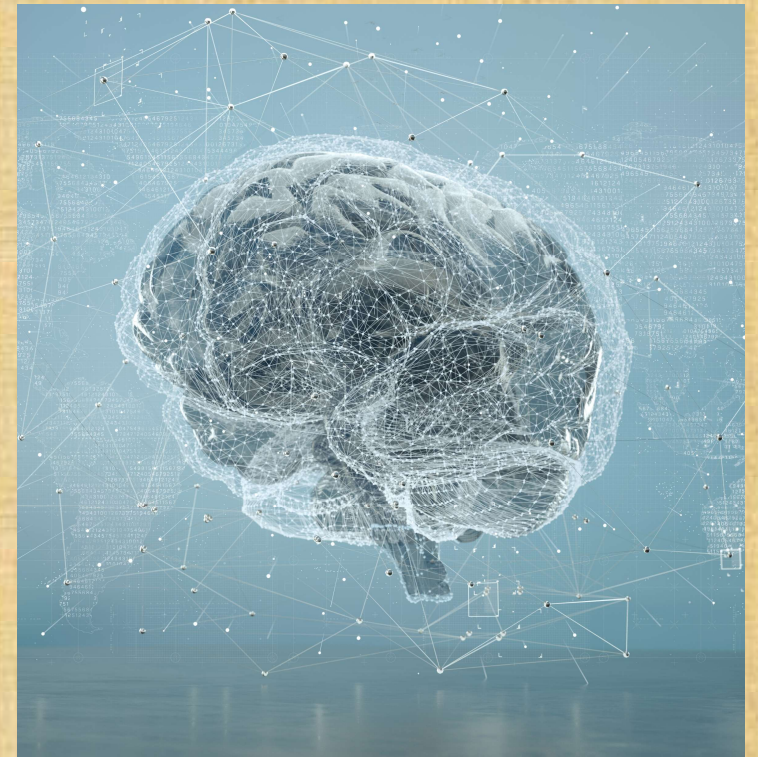
(Twinkl 2023) states that every child should have the chance to develop and to feel included regardless of their background ability or needs. To deliver professional practice is by ensuring every child within the setting is taken into consideration when planning and preparing activities. The focus of planning should be based on what the child can do and not what they cannot do. If a child feels they are not good enough, then they will not engage and gain low self-esteem.

Early Education (2021), states that all professional practitioners should value all individuals within their care. If inclusive practise is not adopted within the early years setting it can have adverse effect on children's development. A child may feel that they have no sense of belonging which may lead to low self-esteem, furthermore, hindering their learning and development.

Factors that could impact development.

As explained by Bradbury and Swailes (2022) Bronfenbrenner's theory supports how a child's environment can contribute to their development. He believed acquiring a nurturing teaching method supports the child's ecosystem which they are surrounded by. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System represents rings that center around the child and have many influences on the child's growth and development. Factors such as home environment, their family life and where they go to school or day care setting can have direct or indirect impact.

According to the research (Van Zyl and Van Wyk, 2021) not only physical development can be affected. Cognitive, social and emotional development are also impacted if the first 1000 days have adverse effects. The mother and child need good health and nutrition during this time. Drug use, stress, interactions, care and play stimulation can all affect development. According to the research (Australia, 2021), if the mother is exposed to stress while pregnant, growth of the child can be affected which can lead to further health issues. It can affect organs, metabolism and the immune system of the child. It can also hinder the mother's wellbeing and how they can support the child when born. According to House of Commons (2019), the first 1000 days of life can have detrimental impact on a child if they are exposed to stress, poverty, neglect and malnutrition.



John Bowlby's attachment theory believes the bond between caregiver and child ensures survival. Pound (2014, p.59) explains how forming trusting relationships is important for child development. Children attach to an adult who can provide all the basic needs for them. Providing children with all their needs by showing love, care, daily routines, nurture and affection can develop emotional intelligence as well as positive attachments.

Attachment theory plays a part in ensuring children have positive development when being cared for by professionals and carers. According to Claire (2012b, p.38) it explains how Bowlby's theory of attachment supports emotional and social wellbeing. Building relationships between caregivers and parents leads to a sense of security and gaining self-worth. If secure attachments are not made then this can lead to poor relationships, the child feeling scared, insecure, and unsafe.

As advised by Estyn (2022), settings must provide a learning rich environment, inside the classroom and outdoors. If a child is not stimulated enough, the brain doesn't develop and create new pathways. Estyn believe that providing a diverse environmental setting will help provide this stimulus. Children should have access to all activities, which should be clear and at a child friendly level. Furthermore, children should be allowed to explore using kinesthesia, which involves children moving and positioning their bodies, using their senses. This method allows children to learn by using touch, sight, sound and taste and by having the opportunities to freely explore through different activities and experiences. Practitioners should optimise learning and development by following provision standards.

What can impact providing high quality care?

According to Morton (2022), we can determine covid 19 had a huge impact on the Early Years Sector. According to the research (Hobbs and Bernard, 2021) we can determine children may have been impacted in many ways during the pandemic. One example is children having to self isolate in a crucial part of their early development stages, which has led to lack of social interaction through attending playgroups and socialising with friends and family. Many children may have been affected from bereavement from losing loved ones during this time affecting their home environment and mental wellbeing. Parents may have lost jobs through the pandemic which has led to financial difficulties and led to personal circumstances to change.

Routines that children have at home will also affect practitioners in early years settings. Cultural differences, dietary requirements and having additional children to care for, will add complexity to the situation. With staff levels low and excess strain on the sector for staff levels, ensuring all children's needs are met can be a big task. By collaborative working and good communication this process can be made easier. (Knight, 2020).

Having children settle at different times into their new environment can also be tricky. Some children find it easier to start a new environment whereas, others find it harder and need a bit more care and attention. According to Early Intervention Foundation (2021) we can determine staff ratios need to be accounted for, and good quality staffing can be provided, to ensure this happens. In a sector where staff issues have arisen from redundancies and low salaries. This can be proven difficult.



Activities

Loose parts

There are numerous advantages to engaging in loose parts play, where children leverage their imaginative skills through diverse materials of varying shapes and sizes to craft creations tied to various subjects in the curriculum. As highlighted by Williams (2021), research indicates that loose parts play fosters children's active involvement in their learning, promoting independence and curiosity. Moreover, it contributes to the development of fine motor skills by involving small objects that enhance hand-eye coordination and balance.

This type of activity aligns closely with Piaget's theory of children's cognitive development through hands-on experiences. Loose parts play also plays a role in fostering language skills, as children express themselves through creation and construction. For instance, in the provided image (Image 3), a child might use buttons and coloured gems to recreate their reflection in a mirror. Engaging with the child by asking questions such as, 'What do you see? What colour are your eyes? Are you feeling sad or happy?' can further enhance language development.



(Image 3: Early Impact Learning, n.d.)

Treasure baskets

Treasure baskets serve as a means of sparking children's enthusiasm and curiosity through the provision of a variety of natural objects in different shapes, sizes, and colours. As Jackson (2009) notes, Elinor Goldschmied advocated for Heuristic play, encouraging children to interact with objects in a way that evokes curiosity and excitement in a relaxed manner. This approach aligns with Froebel's theory, emphasizing children's learning through creative play.

According to Gascoyne (2012), engaging in this activity empowers children to make simple choices at their own pace, contributing to the development of self-esteem. Additionally, treasure basket play supports the enhancement of hand-eye coordination, language and literacy skills, and the ability to focus and concentrate. This type of activity fosters strong relationships between the child and caregiver, as conversations about the sensory experience of each object become valuable talking points, creating a shared sense of wonder and curiosity.



(image 4: Early Years Direct, n.d).

Reggio Emilia approach



(Image 5: Ozuna, 2022).

According to Pound (2014b, p.72) the Reggio Emilia approach focuses on children's strengths and potential. The families are at the center of the child's learning. The approach enables the classroom to be the third teacher by using high standard resources and stimulating materials. The use of light, glass and mirrors enables the child to explore through their senses.

According to Reggio Emilia Approach (2022), cognitive development is stimulated by exploring, thinking and figuring things out. This approach is closely linked to Vygotsky's theory of learning through social interactions. Learning is done socially and in opposition to learning independently.

Forest School



(Image 4: What is Forest School? | Forest School Association. Forest School Association (Forest Schools Education, n.d).

As stated by the Forest School Association (2021), forest school entails an outdoor learning experience centred around exploring natural resources, trees, and the surrounding nature, placing the child at the core of the learning process. According to Williams-Sieghfredsen (2020), this approach fosters physical, social, and inquisitive growth, aligning with Froebel's theory that children should engage with their natural world through outdoor experiences.

Forest school shares commonalities with the Reggio approach, particularly in fostering social learning environments. Both approaches address the holistic needs of the child, promoting profound learning and independence through child-led learning. They emphasise hands-on experiences and instil an appreciation for the world. The primary distinction lies in the fact that forest schools connect children with the outdoors, positioning nature as the educator, while the Reggio approach places a stronger emphasis on community involvement.

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