



Exceptional care in the first 1000 days

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“The first 1,000 days of life:

The brain’s window of opportunity”

(Cusick and Georgieff, 2013)

The first 1000 days is the period from the conception of a child to their second birthday, this is a time of rapid growth and brain development where external factors such as love, diet and environment have an enormous impact (Kraemer et al. 2018). Hyson and Biggar-Tomlinson (2014) explain that children are born with billions of brain cells but the connections between most of these brain cells have yet to be built, a child’s brain develops at its fastest during the first 1000 days, meaning that by the time a child reaches their third birthday they should have billions of connections between their brain cells. However, according to Cusick and Georgieff (2013) there are hundreds of millions of children living in developed countries around the world who are not meeting their potential due to poor diet, insecure connections, disease, neglect and abuse during these first crucial 1000 days. With the such a large amount of a child’s development happening in the first 1001 days and with children at this age being incredibly vulnerable, Best start for life (2021) explain that this time is a vital foundation for healthy child development and a key opportunity for carers to help build their future.



What is Exceptional care?

Care inspectorate Wales (2019) state that to provide exceptional care a provider must be committed to the continued development of the provision, with many strengths including elements of sector leading practice and new, innovative ideas which promote and improve a child's wellbeing. However, Burnham (2016) explains that exceptional practice may look different to everyone but to be an exceptional practitioner a practitioner must be able to adapt quickly in an ever-changing environment while keeping up to date with research and evolving pedagogies which influence practice. This is also reflected by PACEY (no date) who describe high quality childcare as settings where providers are committed to professional development and build strong and secure attachments with the children in their care. PACEY also list well managed environments full of opportunity for safe high-quality play, positive social interactions including during nutritious mealtimes and good relationships with parents and carers where they are fully involved and informed in their child's care as essential signs of high-quality care. Melhuish (2004, cited in Buckley, Martin and Curtin 2020) explains that worldwide studies show the provision of high-quality early years care can promote brain development, language ability and the social skills of children in disadvantaged communities. These findings are supported by the Sylva et al (2004) EPPE study which found that where children attended lower quality settings, they showed less independence and higher rates of unwanted behaviour by school age than children who attended high quality settings.

Barriers to exceptional Care

Nutbrown (2011) explains that continuity of care is vital in early development, however Hyson & Biggar-Tomlinson (2014) describe how, many providers face challenges with promoting deep

meaningful relationships when staff working patterns may not match those of the children they care for or when children attend multiple settings.

Where practitioners are more highly trained there are better outcomes for the child (Sylva, K. et al, 2004). However, professional development can often be expensive and often settings don't have the staff cover to allow practitioners to attend courses (Hyson & Biggar-Tomlinson 2014) .

Wilson (2016) states that many practitioners feel they don't have enough time to build relationships with parents and therefore struggle to bridge the gap between home and setting but Nutbrown (2011) explains providers must find time to observe children, evaluate the quality of their care and plan for meaningful learning experiences.

Respectful Care





Respectful care

Respectful care not only effects a child's relationship with their caregiver but their relationship with themselves and their future relationships with others (Birth to 5 matters, no date)

It is important for practitioners consider their crucial role in supporting children using high-quality interactions (Smith, 2022). The EPPE study supports this with its findings showing that where staff are more highly trained, interactions promote higher quality care and lead to better outcomes for the child (Sylva, K. et al, 2004)

Emmi Pikler believed in a respectful approach to child development. Her approach encouraged children to reach their milestones in their own time through well throughout environments and deep and meaningful relationships. The pickler approach promotes a mutual respect between caregiver and child, providing tender loving caregiving moments and offering the promotion of self-worth and body autonomy (The Pikler approach, no date)

Birth to 5 matters (no date) support Emmi Pikler's approach explaining that in an early years setting it is as important to plan for respectful care moments as it is for play and learning. Through touch a baby can learn to understand that they are loved, respected and valued, they can be soothed, and positive relationships built. These respectful interactions between caregiver and child promote a child's rights and support healthy emotional development.

The early experiences matter study supports Emmi Pikler's approach, finding that where young children are cared for in a setting which follows a relationships based curricula with an emphasis on attachment, wellbeing and responsive care, children we happier, transitions were smoother and there was a positive impact on the children's learning (Ebbeck, Warriar, & Goh, 2018).

Birth to 5 matters (no date) explain that respectful care can be promoted by –

- Being aware of how gestures, body language and use of touch make a child feel.
- Ensuring responsive care by monitoring a child's cues.
- Slowing down and working in the moment.
- Being patient – allowing the child time to participate.
- Adapting practice to be individual to each child.
- Giving the child the opportunities to participate and lead their own care.

Environments





Effective environments

The importance of the environment cannot be overlooked, providing continuous opportunities for children to grow and develop a well prepared environment is stimulating and flexible, providing unlimited possibilities for holistic learning with the support of emotional present adults for encouragement (Hodgman, 2011)

Education Wales (2022) explain that the environment should be at the core of the child's experiences. This is reflected in the Reggio Emilia approach, as described by Brunton and Thornton (2007), where the environment is viewed as the third teacher and every area should have a purpose and promote curiosity. The environment should not only represent a physical space but should also be a safe emotional space where children can regulate emotion and practitioners model and facilitate this with flexibility, a responsive approach and areas which allow for expression, physical play and quiet reflection (Education Wales 2022). Saran (2007) explains that Piaget argued children do not learn by being told what to do and that learning is done through real experiences influenced by the environment in which they are present. Piaget's theory is also mirrored in Maria Montessori's approach which enables children to direct their own learning in a free flow, prepared environment promoting exploration and independence (Hodgman, 2011).

Play



The importance of play

“Article 31 (leisure, play and culture) Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.” (UNICEF, 2019)

For young children, as described by Play Wales (2018) the most prominent part of their life is play, play is central to their holistic wellbeing and influences a person’s resilience throughout life. According to Brodie (2018) play is incredibly difficult to define because what one person believes to be play another might see as something else, however Play Wales (2018) state that true child led play has no set outcome or reward and the UNCRC 1992, cited in Brodie, 2018) defines play as self-initiated and voluntary action with infinite possibilities controlled by the child themselves. Play Wales (2018) explain that structured activities give opportunities to explore new ideas but do so at the detriment of a true child led experience.

So how can practitioners offer opportunities for rich and immersive play that promote holistic development without doing so at the detriment of a child led provision? Forbes (2004) explains that keeping toys open ended can allow children to explore without pre perceived ideas about what should be done with them, however where a toy has a specific purpose such as a shape sorter, a practitioner can model a more open ended play approach by exploring a shapes properties themselves. Open ended resources such as loose parts are readily available, promote concentration and are immensely engaging (Play Wales, 2018).



Treasure baskets

Forbes (2004) describes how treasure baskets are a perfect example of how to present carefully selected loose parts to babies and young children. They offer babies an opportunity to explore authentic items promoting holistic developments. Shiny ladles may show the child's reflection, feel cold and smooth, offer opportunities for scooping other items, making noises and exploring size and shape, whereas a soft piece of fabric offers comfort, makes little sound and yet moves fluidly.



Sensory play

One of a babies' earliest way of making sense of the world around them is through their senses, before they are mobile they explore their environment through touch, sound, smell, vision and taste (Forbes ,2004). Forbes states that this time was referred to by Piaget as the sensorimotor stage and therefore it makes sense to promote this early developmental stage with opportunities for sensory play. Mathers (no date) suggests that sensory play can be the simplest of activities, giving children

the opportunity to explore paint with their hands or smell different things such as a variety of herbs. Sensory play gives children the opportunity to link experiences together, such as the smell of chlorine being a reminder of going swimming. However, it is worth considering the ethics of using food in sensory play. With many UK families currently having to make the decision between heating or eating and many cultures viewing food as sacred, although the benefits of sensory play with food are undeniable it may be viewed as disrespectful (Mojica, 2022)



1 - Floor play gives opportunities for natural unfolding.



2 - Authentic resources and loose parts provide opportunities for role play.

Inclusivity



Inclusive practice



Nutbrown (2011) states that inclusive care is as much about teaching children how to be inclusive as it is for practitioners to promote inclusivity. Inclusive practice must be at the centre of a settings approach, Inclusion is not about treating everyone in the same way but treating them in a way which allows them to be included as an equal (Birth to 5 matters, no date b). However, Brodie and Savage (2015) explain that inclusion isn't easy to define, and practitioners may need to look at how someone can feel excluded to really understand inclusion.

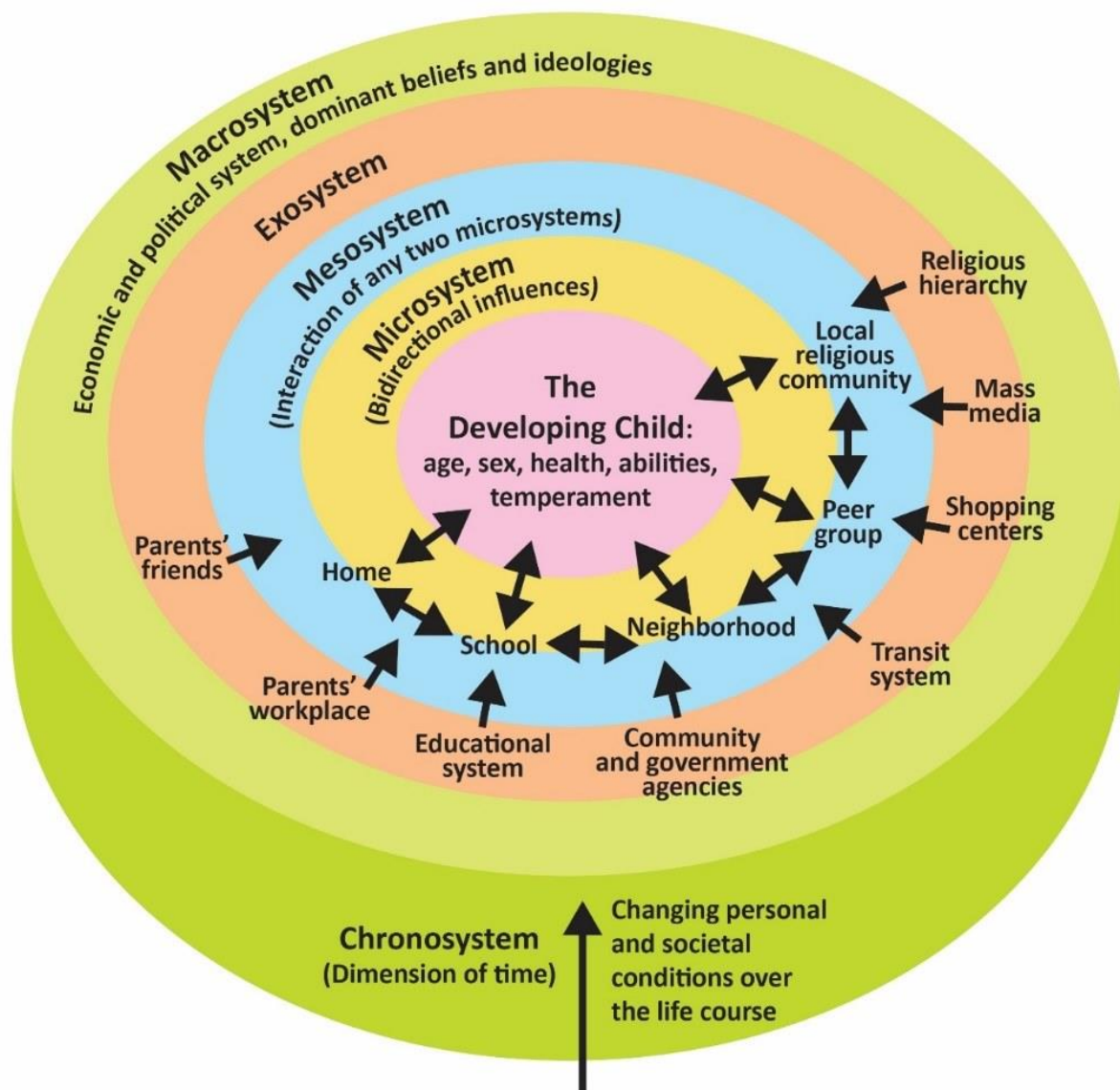
Every child, every person and every family have their own beliefs and identity and it is essential that these are listened to without bias or misconception (Birth to 5 Matters, no date b), Inclusion should not mean giving up a sense of individuality to fit in (Brodie and Savage 2015)

Birth to 5 matters (no date b) state that it is part of a practitioner's role to challenge stereotypes, but how can this be done in practice?

Inclusion is multi-dimensional and cannot be a one size fits all approach, there will always be barriers to inclusive practice and practitioners must be flexible in their approach in order to adapt and promote inclusivity (Brodie and Savage 2015)

However, when children experience different cultures, religions, genders and disabilities first hand these experiences will stick with them, and they are more likely to be inclusive of others, children should have opportunities to see others like them reflected in their environment and celebrate diversity thus creating a sense of belonging (Birth to 5 Matters, no date b)

Effective relationships



Effective partnerships with parents

Care inspectorate Wales (2018) explain that parents must be kept involved and informed with their children's care and Education Wales (2022) state that practitioners have a responsibility to create meaningful relationships with children and strong connections with their families to promote a sense of belonging. There is evidence to suggest that where parents and providers work closely together and form professional relationships that there will be a positive impact on the child's development (Nutbrown, 2014)

Bronfenbrenner's model locates the child at the centre of their own development, it shows the influence the people around the child have on their development and how changes of environment also have an impact. Bronfenbrenner believed that the microsystems, which are those closest to the child such as a parent, or care provider have a direct impact on a child's life and relationships, whereas when there are 2 or more microsystems, they become metasystems and the relationships

inside each microsystem effect the relationships in the whole metasystem. (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017)

Explains where practitioners have built secure relationships and have a strong working relationships the family is more likely to come to a practitioner with concerns and the family is more likely to be more open to seek support from outside agencies when necessary and the outcome for the child will be more positive (Wilson 2016)

The Welsh Approach

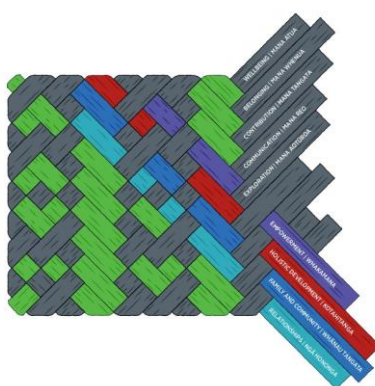


In 2022 the new curriculum for Wales was introduced. As part of the new curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings was also introduced. The curriculum is designed to build a solid foundation and sense of cynefin (a feeling of belonging) for young children from which children can develop and flourish throughout their learning journey. The curriculum focuses on providing high quality opportunities for free play and authentic experiences in both indoor and outdoor environments to promote holistic development. Adults are an integral part of supporting the child to reach their potential, providing secure attachments and facilitating opportunities to support the child's curiosity, emotional wellbeing and self-regulation. With Enabling adults, effective environments and engaging experiences in place along with a thorough understanding of child development the curriculum can be successfully implemented to promote

- ambitious, capable learners
- enterprising, creative contributors
- ethical, informed citizens
- healthy, confident individuals.

(Education Wales, 2022)

International approaches



3 - Te Whāriki online (no date)



4 - Te Whāriki online (no date)



New Zealand

Te Whāriki is the early childhood curriculum adopted in New Zealand. Translated from the Māori meaning The woven mat, Te Whāriki curriculum recognises the potential in children for growth when supported by adults who allow them to develop at their own rate with a strong sense of identity, language and culture in a setting where the child's wellbeing is at the centre. (Ministry of Education, Newzeland. 2017). Gradovski et al (2019) describe Te Whāriki as an opportunity for children to have more freedom in their first 1000 days than at any other period in their life. Te Whāriki moves away from the child needing to meet certain academic milestones and allows them to find a sense of self while being free to move, explore and develop at their own rate.

Finland



According to Gradovski et al (2019) , in Finland national policies view the home environment as the best place for children during their first 1000 days, this is reflected in national statistics which show that less than 1% of children under the age of one and only around 28% of children aged one attend early childhood education and care. Finland encourage long periods of parental leave with a generous benefits system, However, In order to claim maternity allowance a mother must consult a maternity clinic and ensure the holistic wellbeing of their baby from conception and beyond. Nordic council of ministers (2022) state that once parental leave has ended all children in Finland have a guaranteed place at an early childhood setting , where the curriculum should be designed around each individual child and through continuous observation and evaluation can shaped to enhance child development. The Nordic Council of minister explain that ratios should be kept relatively low with a 1 practitioner to every 4 children under 3 and that a minimum of one third of practitioners must be qualified to degree level.

Denmark



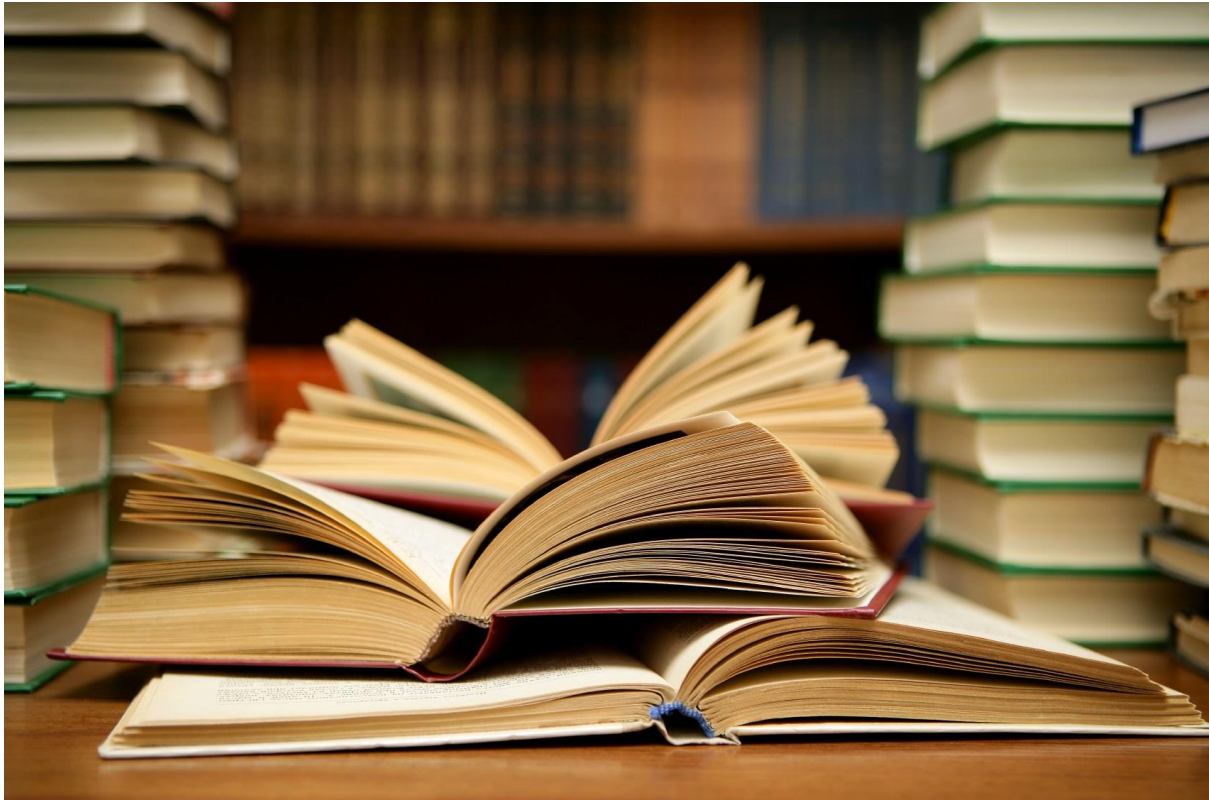
According to the Nordic council of ministers (2022) in Denmark all children have the right to enter an early childhood setting from 6 months old, where the ratios for under 3's are set at 1 adult to 3 children and more than half of practitioner hold a relevant degree. Bertram and Pascal (2016) explain that all early childhood education and care settings in Denmark are publicly funded

The Ministry of children and education (2020) explain that the main elements of the Danish ECEC curriculum are -

- The child should be valued for being themselves
- The child should be listened to and their voice valued.
- Play should be central to the child's day
- Learning should be viewed holistically.
- Children should form a sense of belonging and community.

- Environments should be prepared and enable true child led play and exploration to promote learning.
- Strong cooperative relationships with parents promote child development and wellbeing.
- All children have the right to be challenged, including those who are vulnerable.
- The provision should be continuous and help support future transitions.

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