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The first 1000 days

By Rhiannon Lewis

What is the first 1000 days?

This is the time from conception to a child's second birthday. This period is widely recognised as a period of exceptional potential but also immense vulnerability.

Across the literature, there is a collective view that the brain develops rapidly during this time and making early experiences in the child's life, helps shape their future.

Early relationships, and the environmental influences surrounding a child during these early days, begin to set the foundations for lifelong health, learning, and wellbeing.

These early interactions shape how children respond to the world, how they form attachments, and how they develop socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

Because development happens so quickly, the conditions surrounding a child during this period can have lasting effects. (Thousand Days, 2018; UNICEF, 2019; Public Health Wales, 2023a).



Why are the first 1000 days important ?

Research consistently highlights, that good nutrition, responsive caregiving, early stimulation, and access to quality healthcare play a crucial role in shaping developmental outcomes.

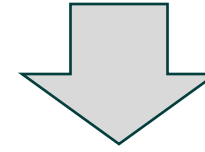
These factors help ensure that children receive the physical nourishment, emotional security, and cognitive stimulation they need to thrive. In contrast, poor nutrition or negative early experiences can lead to long-term and sometimes irreversible impacts on cognitive development and future life chances (Thousand Days, 2018; Sharma, 2026).

Public Health Wales (2023a) further emphasises that supporting parents to be confident, resilient, and well-informed during this period can reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for their children. When parents are supported, they begin to understand and know they need to provide nurturing care, make informed decisions and create stable environments that promote healthy development. Collectively, these sources demonstrate why the first 1000 days are considered critical for intervention, prevention, and holistic development.



(HelloWIC, 2021)

This Video explains what the first 1000 days is, and why it is important.



The First 1000 Days

A Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents

Pregnancy

7-24 months

0-6 months

(PxHere, n.d.)

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According to UNICEF (2015), the first 1000 days is in 3 parts. Pregnancy, 0-6 months and 7-24 months. During pregnancy it is important that a mother takes what is recommended to prevent birth defect. A balanced diet is important. During Infancy, breastfeeding helps give the baby colostrum, this is their first vaccine. Toddler years the baby can continue to breastfeed and be introduced to food. A child who is cared for correctly and has good nutrition will have less chance of catching life threatening diseases and have a better adult life.



Gradovski et al. (2020 pp 8-9) argues The first 1000 days can also be understood in two noticeable parts: the first 300 days, which include conception, pregnancy, and the very early days after birth, and the next 700 days, which is up to the child's first two years of life.

This period is considered particularly important because a child's growth declines sharply during the first 24 months, making it a crucial time to prevent stunting (Gradovski et al., 2020, p. 7).

A woman's nutrition around conception and in early pregnancy supports implantation, placental development, and early cell growth, while poor nutrition can affect birth outcomes, especially for babies born very small or prematurely (Gradovski et al., 2020, pp. 8–9).

Early breastfeeding also protects newborns and supports healthy development (Gradovski et al., 2020, p. 9).

Good nutrition throughout the first 1000 days is essential for children to reach their cognitive and developmental potential, particularly as brain growth is rapid during this time (Gradovski et al., 2020, p. 11).

Together, these findings reinforce that the first 1000 days represent a unique window where the right support can have a profound and lasting impact on a child's future.



(Ausnutria Nutrition Institute, n.d.)

Caregiving is an essential part of the first 1000 days. Pregnancy and the first years of life are when a baby's brain and body are built, and good nutrition, along with a caregiver talking, responding, and playing, all help support this development. Babies also need love, nurturing care, and attention from their caregivers (Public Health Wales, 2024).



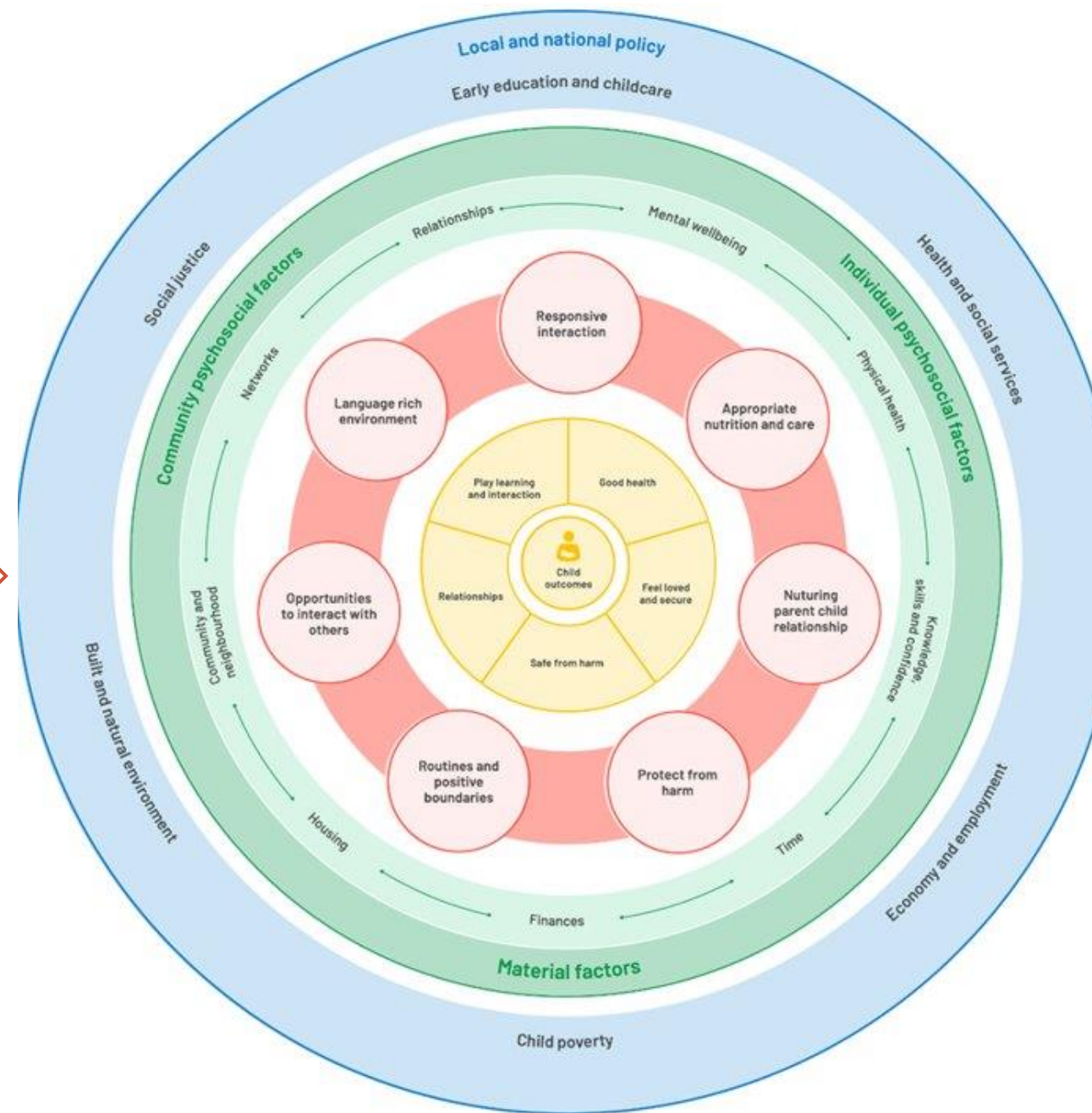
What is exceptional care?

Caregiving is also about being respectful. Physical care such as feeding, changing, and sleeping is just as important as playing and learning, and these moments should be unhurried and enjoyable for the child. The environment should be resourceful and laid out so the child feels safe, comfortable, and free to explore (Early Coalition, 2021, p.12).



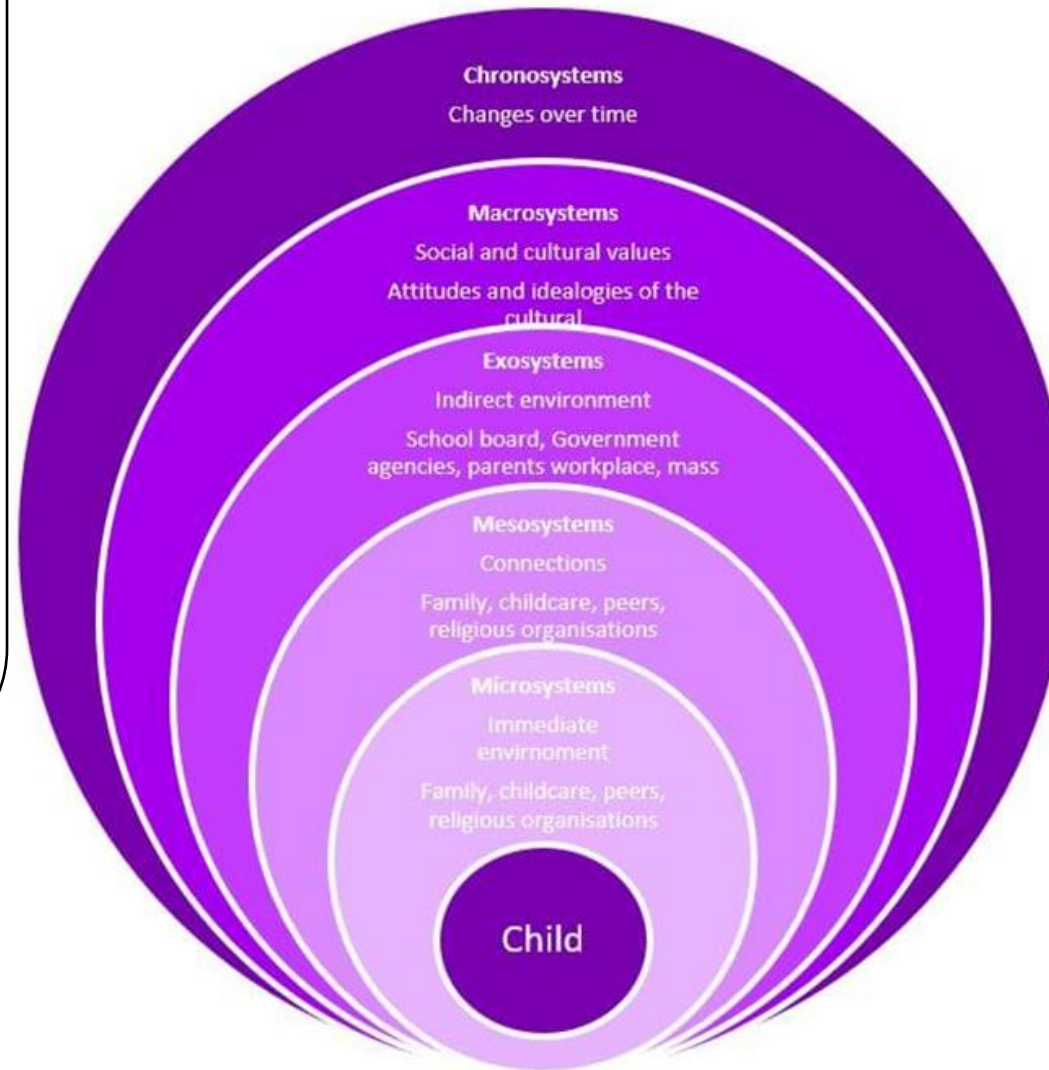
Emmi Pikler recognised that secure, trusting relationships between a caregiver and baby are essential for their overall development. She felt that caregiving routines such as feeding and changing are key moments where a secure, trusted relationship is formed through meaningful connections (Tardos, 2010). Her ideas continue to have a strong influence on policy today.

Public Health Wales (2023b) has developed *A Public Health Model of Supporting Parents* (shown here), which outlines what exceptional care looks like and how it positively influences a child's first 1000 days.



(Public Health Wales 2023)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helps explain how the Public Health Wales model understands the different influences on parenting. Bronfenbrenner describes child development as happening in nested environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 3). He emphasised that a child's development is shaped not only by their immediate family but also by the wider community and the influences that surrounds them (Webster, 2025).



(Education people 2021)

The model places the child and their needs at the centre. Surrounding this are five key elements that help create strong foundations for a child's future health, learning, and wellbeing. These nested layers mirror the layers of the public health model: the inner layers focus on the child's immediate needs and the parent-child relationship (microsystem), while the surrounding layers represent the wider psychosocial, community, and structural factors that shape parenting (mesosystem, ecosystem, and macrosystem). Using this ecological perspective helps show that supporting parents requires more than focusing on individual behaviour, it involves strengthening the broader environments that influence how parents think, feel, and act (Public Health Wales 2023b).

Baby Brain Facts

Babies:

- hear at around 24 weeks of pregnancy,
- recognise familiar voice at birth, and
- prefer faces to other shapes.

We are hardwired for relationships!



In the first years of life, more than 1 million new connections are formed every second in a baby's growing brain.

The way babies' brains develop is shaped by their interactions with others.



A range of research shows that **the way parents interact** with their babies **predicts children's later development.**



Family income and education is strongly related to children's development. Babies in higher income families are more likely to have frequent caregiver-child conversations. By age 3, babies with university educated parents have been found to have vocabularies 2-3 times larger than those whose parents had not completed school.

Children's development in the early years sets them on a positive trajectory, although what happens next also matters. Children's development at just 22 months has been shown to predict their qualifications at 26 years.



8,300 babies under one in England currently live in households where domestic violence, alcohol or drug dependency and severe mental illness are ALL present.

Rigorous long term studies found a range of returns between £4 and £9 for every pound invested in early intervention for low income families.



When parents experience problems in the first 1001 days it can have long term impacts on their children.

One study showed that children whose mothers were stressed in pregnancy were twice as likely to have mental health problems as teenagers.



Adults who reported four or more adverse childhood experiences had 4- to 12-fold increase in **alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and suicide attempts** compared to those who experienced none.



Tackling adversity + supporting early relationships healthier brains + better futures

References and further information can be found on <https://1001days.org.uk/resources>



Center on the developing Child at Harvard University (2010) explains Serve and return is an interaction between the child and their caregiver. It helps shape brain curiosity. Neurocognitions are created as the baby begins to serve by babbling, using facial expressions and gestures. The return is the adult responding in a meaningful way. It explains that from a very early stage this should happen, when a baby cues at their caregiver, they will respond with a facial expression letting the baby know they are listening. This helps create neuro connections in the baby's brain. Adult caregivers who engage in serve and return with their child help form a positive foundation for their future life. The video will explain more in depth of what serve and return is and how important it is for brain development it also gives the example of how literacy and language skills are developed from using this method.



Here I am!

A pledge for babies in Wales

This pledge has been developed to highlight the perspective of the baby, focusing on their rights and needs within the first 1000 days. It is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and has been co-produced with parents, their babies and professionals across Wales.

Babies have unique needs and are more vulnerable than others because they can't advocate for their rights, so this pledge ensures their needs are considered.

This pledge acknowledges that all babies and their grown-ups (parents, carers or guardians) are different, and some will need more support than others.

This pledge is written from the voice of the baby. It sets out what a baby needs from their grown-ups, what their grown-ups need to support and care for their baby and what babies and their grown-ups need from communities.

I am my own person, and I depend on you to love me and help me understand this big wide world. This is my voice.

We are all different but have similar needs for love and care.

- **I need** my grown-ups to feed me, keep me safe, warm and clean.
- **I need** my grown-ups to take care of my health, both physically and emotionally.
- **I need** my grown-ups to hold me close, talk to me, comfort me and show me I'm important.
- **I need** my grown-ups to play with me, sing to me, read to me and show me new things so I can learn and grow.
- **I need** my grown-ups to try to understand how I feel. They won't always get it right and that is ok; we can learn together.

Children in Wales (2021) have created a pledge for babies to ensure their needs are met. It was co-produced by parents, their babies and professionals across Wales. They recognise how vulnerable a baby is, as they cannot advocate their own right. The pledge ensures their needs are considered. The pledge echoes the Children's UNCRC rights of the child ensuring the babies voice is heard and their needs are met.

My grown-ups are important to me, they need to be supported, feel valued and have their own needs met.

- **My grown-ups need** to feel heard and be able to get support for any difficulties they experience, so they can take care of me.
- **My grown-ups need** to be given the right information, at the right time, in a way that is right for them.
- **My grown-ups need** to spend time getting to know me, I'm new to them, we are learning together.
- **My grown-ups need** to be able to meet my basic needs, like having enough food, clothes, and a safe place to live.
- **My grown-ups need** welcoming places, activities and groups they can enjoy with me, so we can learn, play and grow together.

Me and my grown-ups need support from our communities to help me have the best start.

- **Me and my grown-ups need** communities to listen to us, so that we can have a say in shaping policies and services that affect us.
- **Me and my grown-ups need** communities to recognise how important but challenging this time can be, every kindness helps us on our journey.
- **Me and my grown-ups need** communities to play their part in keeping me safe, protected and nurtured as I grow.
- **Me and my grown-ups need** communities to provide clear and up to date advice and information, so that we feel informed and supported.
- **Me and my grown-ups need** communities to have welcoming places or activities we can get to easily that are safe, clean and fun for me to play.

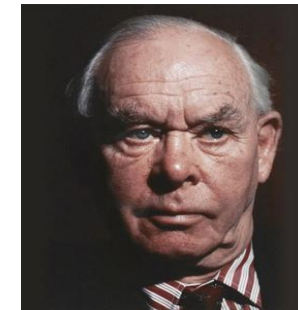
This Pledge has been developed by the Children's Rights in Early Years Network (CREYN) and coordinated by Swansea University and Children in Wales.

Welsh Government (2023) in their Early childhood play, learning and care: Developmental pathways 0 to 3 document also echoes the I'm here pledge. An Early year's practitioner should ensure they are following what the developmental pathways say. Welsh Government (2023) and Children in Wales (2021) are clearly echoing each other to ensure the child's needs are fully being met.



Stead (2024) in her blog explains the importance of investing in a high-quality baby room, with a sensory rich environment with highly trained staff, will help enrich the baby's development. She talks about having experiences that engage all the baby's senses through exploration, with safe materials and that practitioners should prioritise language development, by introducing new vocabulary words and narrating daily routines. By giving these babies undivided attention can shape their young brain for life.

This reflects Bowlby's view on bonding and attachment; his theory highlights the importance of creating a nurturing environment with responsive practitioners (Webster 2025). Therefore, the first 1000 days is considered a significant development period reflecting the need for high quality environments and enabling adults.

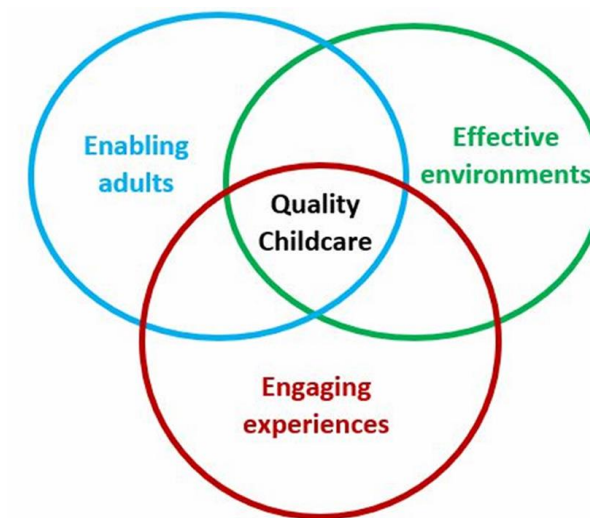




(Welsh Government News, 2022)

The Flying start programme, is a Welsh government initiative for families with children under 4. The core elements influence positive outcomes for children and their families. The enhanced health visiting service, access to parenting support, access to speech language and communication development support, followed by funded quality part time childcare, to offer a positive start to a child's future. Quality childcare, consist of 3 things Enabling adults, effective environments and engaging experiences. (Welsh Government 2017)

This is good practice of partnership. All the different teams work together to ensure the needs of the family are met as well as the child.





This diagram shows step by step the journey and care that will happen from conception to the child's 3rd birthday when they leave Flying Start to go to Nursery. (Carmarthenshire family information service 2025)

Professional partnership Wales



In Wales, using a public health approach to the first 1000 days ensures conditions that enable parents to thrive, noticing that parenting is shaped by social, emotional material and structural characteristics. This model highlights that a child's early experiences are influenced, by the support and resources available to families (Public Health Wales, 2023b, pp. 1–3).

The public health model emphasises that multi agency partnership including midwifery, health visiting, early childhood education, and social services, is necessary to create a working system that supports families from the start at pregnancy. (Public Health Wales, 2023b, pp. 11–12).

Wales highlights the importance of creating whole system approach, aiming to strengthen the families, where they live, work and socialise. Ensuring needs are identified early and the service to support is provided where required (Public Health Wales, 2023b, pp. 10-12).

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Professional partnership England

HM Government, (2021 pp. 41-43) highlights the need for “seamless support”, the arrival of a new baby can be overwhelming, even support with breast feeding can help that new mother to feel at ease.

England’s vision is to let parents know what services are available as soon as a mother is pregnant. They hope to integrate multi-agency pathways across midwifery, health visiting, mental health, and breast-feeding support, as well as services that relate to special educational needs and Disability (SEND).

There is a digital personal child health record for parents to ensure that they do not have to repeat their story (HM Government, 2021 p. 77) and that professionals share responsibility for early intervention in the family hubs (HM Government, 2021 p. 65).

These approaches will reduce inequalities and improve outcomes during these crucial first 1000 days. They both link strongly to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological system. Bronfenbrenner argued that children develop with nested systems and this is what these neighbouring nations are trying to achieve (Webster, 2025).



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Challenges: Poverty

For most parents, pregnancy and welcoming a new baby is a joyful experience, but for families living in poverty this period can create significant stress, pressure and anxiety. Poverty that is persistent and experienced within the first three years of life can be highly detrimental, with its impact beginning as early as pregnancy. These early disadvantages are shaped by parental health, wellbeing and social status. Research highlights that by just 11 months old, noticeable gaps in communication and language skills have already emerged. Poverty also limits the experiences a child may have, as parents have less money to support early social development. Many families face pressure to prioritise essentials such as food, warmth and nappies (Oppenheim, 2024).

In response to these challenges, England has introduced Best Start Family Hubs across local authorities, offering both universal and targeted support. With a £500 million investment, these hubs provide advice, guidance and information from pregnancy through the first 1,001 days, helping parents nurture their children and aiming to reduce inequalities linked to poverty (HM Government, 2025).



(HM Government, 2025)

In Wales, support for families in deprived communities has been established for a longer period. The Flying Start programme focuses on improving outcomes for families with children under four in some of the most disadvantaged areas. Wales has also launched its Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) approach to ensure babies, particularly during the crucial first 1000 days and young children receive rich, high-quality learning and care experiences in any setting they attend (Welsh Government, 2024).

Recruitment and Retention



(Birmingham Conservatives, 2015)

One big issue is the shortage of qualified professionals joining the sector. In 2023 the early years workforce survey highlighted that 40% of providers reported that it was difficult to recruit new staff and it is a continuing problem that has got worse. (Hill, 2024)

Social Care Wales (2023 p.23) highlights that recruitment is the biggest challenge for the early years sector. Issues include struggling to meet the ratio of qualified practitioners, getting unqualified staff trained quickly, and dealing with staff who are uninterested or not passionate. The cost-of-living crisis also adds pressure. While hiring unqualified staff is easier, the real challenge is finding staff who are already qualified and experienced to meet the requirements.

Department for Education et al. (2024) indicates recruiting early years workers is even harder than before, it has doubled since Covid-19. Finding already qualified staff is difficult and it can take up to 10 weeks to fill a vacancy. Some who have left said they would consider returning and others still work in education or with children and families in social care, which shows their passion.

Both nations have strategies they propose to help with this challenge and to meet the demand of the service and the expansion they are both completing, although they are slightly different.

Social care Wales (2023 p.42) recommendations are to expand advertising and develop a clear identity as well as more resources online. They will support setting to upskill and be professional within the setting and support employers to understand the importance of diversity and inclusion.

England priorities for now are to rescue the sector to meet their expansion proposal. Long term they would like the sector to establish the high-quality provision that families deserve. This includes training ensuring professional development. (Hardy et al., 2023) England are also offering a sign-on bonus of £1,000 for childcare workers to tackle employment and be able to offer more childcare spaces. ((Department for Education et al., 2024)



(Carmarthenshire Family Information Service, n.d)

Treasure Basket

A treasure basket is filled with natural and recycled everyday household items, that an infant can explore. Play at this stage is sensory and the baby will explore through using their fingers, hands and mouth. By providing a varied number of materials for the baby to explore will enhance brain development. (Hughes 2024)

They are a really good way to introduce babies to a variety of textures and unfamiliar objects. The baby will be able to explore the object using all their senses. The aim of using a treasure basket is for the baby to explore both new and familiar objects, hold different shape and sized items and learn to grasp small and large objects (National Day Nurseries Association 2025).



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. This podcast talks about the developer of the treasure basket Elinor Goldschmied (1910-2009). The podcast explains that treasure baskets were created for baby's who can sit up but was not yet mobile. This means all the interesting things are brought to the baby in a basket. They are things made of natural materials and offered autonomous play.
(Manning-Morton, 2024)



Elinor Goldsmith had her own ideas pedagogy and training style, but these ideas were shaped and developed from Froebelian practices. (Hughes 2024)



This video shows what kind of things can go into a treasure basket, it is a great way to learn new words of items all around the home. This video is a good resource to help a practitioner or parent, understand what to put in the basket and what benefit the different materials have. (Early childhood and family service, 2020)

Tummy Time

Tummy time is a crucial activity in the first 1000 days because it helps a baby to develop their muscles in their upper body. Tummy time can start from birth by placing the baby on the caregiver's chest while fully awake and alert. Each day the duration can be increased until the baby seems comfortable and then tummy time can move to the floor. This activity gives the baby a new awareness of their surroundings and helps develop their neck, back and shoulder muscles (NHS, 2025).

Below is a video about tummy time and the benefits that this activity has for a baby. It echoes the NHS (2025). This is a workout for babies and should only be done when a baby is awake and alert. If they do fall asleep for safety, they should be put on their back. Toys they like will keep them engaged and entertained. It also helps sensory development. It is normal for a baby to protest as this feels unfamiliar to them. (Pathways, 2025)



Messy Play

Messy play can often sound negative, but this type of play is fundamental for a child's cognitive and creative development. Babies and young children can explore new materials without needing to have a finished product. This type of play encourages risk taking and problem solving and is great for children with SEND (ALN). They can explore materials in their own way as there is no right way to play with it. Messy Play allows children to use all their senses and encourages their curiosity and experimentation; it is linked to Piaget's idea of cognitive disequilibrium, when a child has a wow moment when they realise cornflour changes texture and turns into gloop (Duffy, 2021, p.2). Messy play is linked to sensory and physical development; it develops fine and gross motor skills. It encourages communication, language and social development, taking turns with each other and sharing, as well as talking and listening (Duffy, 2021, p. 6).





(The Blossom Nursery and Preschool, 2023)

Practitioners can support messy play by ensuring the environment is set up appropriately (Duffy, 2021, pp. 3-4), modelling the play and engaging well with the children, using a range of vocabulary. Practitioners should work in partnership with parents, to help them understand the benefits of messy play (Duffy, 2021, p. 3).

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