The First 1000 Days

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Introduction

The first 1000 days and the first 1001 days are both terms that are commonly understood to define the period between conception and a child's second birthday.

Yates (2015) and Bust and Pedro (2020) agree that this period is defining and lays the structure of the brain. Yates (2015) further suggests that a robust start is needed for a healthy life, wellbeing and success and that early investments in this period are most effective, introducing them later in life can have a lesser impact. The Best Start for Life Review, TBSLR, (2022) defines the first 1001 days from pregnancy to the age of two and advocate that these days are the most critical time for development.



(UNICEF Philippines, 2015)



Maslow's Hierarchy of Need

Nutrition, love and care are needed to build a baby's brain. Likhar and Patil (2022) state a baby's future health depends on nutrition, it can affect their immune system, metabolism and organ development. This begins pre-birth. Every second of a baby's first year of life over a million neuro connections are being built with the sensory pathways being built first. This period is also when the brain is at it most flexible and has the most plasticity and when the foundation is laid for future learning (TBSLR 2022 and Stead 2024a).

Bust and Pedro (2020) confirm that during the first 1000 days mothers and their infants cannot thrive without their basic needs such as food, shelter and hygiene being met. This directly links to Maslow's hierarchy of need with physiological needs needing to be met before a child can thrive.

Bust and Pedro (2020) further suggest that pregnant women have access to sound health care and education around infant development. This included advice on breastfeeding, nutrition, cognitive stimulation, love, care and play. In agreement Capitani *et al.* (2023) state that a collaborative approach from government, health and third sector services programmes are essential to supporting the family and child.

TBSLR (2022) recognises that during this period a mother and child are at their most vulnerable and that a healthy pregnancy is essential for both. A mothers own mental health and physical wellbeing is essential, the foetus is vulnerable to the environment the mother is in and they are already hearing what the mother hears. They can also react to distress when the mother feels distress. Schwarzenberg et al (2018) and Karakochuk *et al*. (2018) state that malnutrition during pregnancy may result in lifelong deficits in brain development and or function and physical development.





Figure 1: Viral Medical Illustration of Black Foetus (nd, Chidiebere visualised by Limm, 2022)

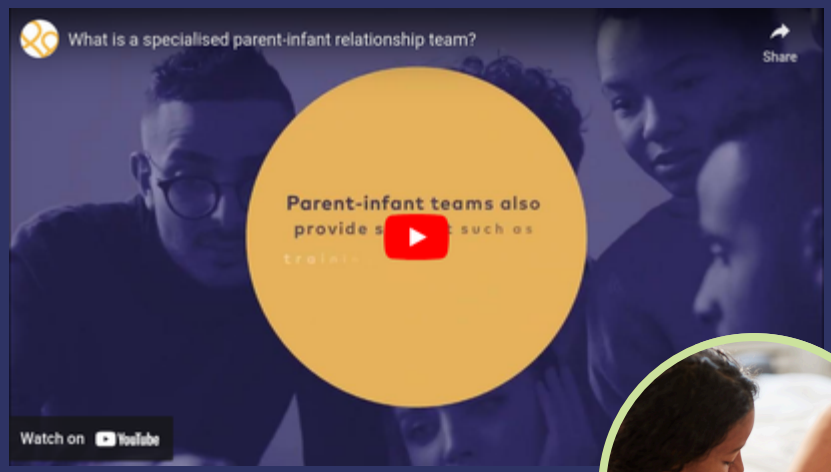
TBSLR (2022) further recognise the mental health and wellbeing of all immediate care givers stating its importance of the healthy development of the baby. If this is impacted it can affect bonding.

Capitani *et al*. (2023) agree and state that pregnancy, birth and parenthood are strongly affected and influenced by social context. The level of support at this time can significantly affect the health and development of the newborn.

Interventions delivered by knowledgeable, caring and enabling practitioners that empower mothers and caregivers are essential to help and support not only their children but themselves and their own health and wellbeing (TBSIL, 2022, Schwarzenberg *et al* 2018 and Bust and Pedro 2020).



(NSPCC, 2017)



(The Parent Infant Foundation, 2022)



Caregiving

Every experience the child is subjected to within the first 1000 days will build and shape their brain. Likhar and Patil (2022) state it is essential to build positive, loving and caring relationships with caregivers and children, ensuring these will have better future outcomes for the chid.

Caregiving begins pre birth with nutrition, nurture, love and care and continues with feeding, changing and interacting with the baby. Prebirth the baby is already susceptible to the mothers feelings so at this stage a well cared for mother equates to a well cared for baby (Parent-Infant Foundation, 2024).



(Nurturing Care, nd)

https://www.instagram.com/nzs.jakarta/reel/C75sSSSSe6N/



(nzs.jakarta, 2024)



(Pikler, 2018)

Within the first 1000 days care and learning are inseparable, every area of growth, development and learning are holistically intertwined. Te Whariki, The Early Childhood Curriculum in New Zealand, believes a curriculum should begin from birth and likens child development to that of threads intricately woven together to build a mat (Brodie 2018).

Brodie (2018) states that holistic development at this stage is essential and includes the child's developmental as a whole rather than as separate areas to develop. Linking the child's wellbeing and sense of belonging. Stead (2024a) states that while offering play based opportunities' to explore that are supported with warmth, nurture and care will allow for better self-regulated, more confident learners.

Stead (2024b) Ensuring baby feels safe and supported is essential to their development. They have to learn everything as such the environment must also be considered. The baby room has become the most important part of a setting. Effective, sensory, language rich environments where the children can learn with their whole selves while being supported by enabling adults are essential (Welsh Government 2024).

Yates (2015) states that hugging, kissing, cuddling and tickling babies, is investing in children. This offers the serve and return that babies need. Stead(2024a) agrees and adds that each time a baby is sung too, rocked and soothed through interactions and play new neural pathways are being built and strengthened. These are essential as they determine how the child digests and absorbs future information and learning.









(NSPCC, 2021)



(Best Beginnings, 2024)



(Story Kate, 2024)



Where babies have freedom of movement and are able to play while engaging in free access to resources is where neuro connections are being made. Well established research depicts the connection between physical and cognitive development. Pickler, Maslow, and Adolph and Hoch (2019, quoted in Stead, 2024b,np) shows that when babies and children are able to move freely they advance psychologically in other areas of their development. Allowing the freedom of movement literally builds their brains.

Boston College Center for Work and Families (2018, quoted on Work and Families Researchers Network.org) describe exceptional caregiving as situations that go further than the traditional scope of parenting. This could be constant care that escalates or be harder as time progresses or that would mean many lifestyle changes. In many cases this would be for parents or caregivers of children with additional learning needs.

Professional Partnerships

The Parent Infant Foundation (2020) state that loving, nurturing relationships within a society that supports and values wellbeing and emotional development is essential for babies to have a healthy life and successful future outcomes. The infant and parent relationship is the baby's first experience of nurturing. A parents own wellbeing is therefore imperative to the child's outcomes and experiences.

For parents to be at their best they need their own positive relationships that are emotionally supportive. Parents are more able when they are socially and financially secure and when they are part of and have nurturing social circles and communities (The Parent Infant Foundation, 2020).



(Cardiff Flying Start, 2020)



(Tommy's, nd)

Sansone (2020) agrees and calls for compassionate, relationship-based, trauma informed and body centred approach to pregnancy and beyond. This should be the common ground for all health care providers. The Parent Infant Foundation (2025) agree, to work effectively with families within the first 1000 days services must recognise the need for highly skilled practitioners who have experience with parent- infant relationships.



In everyday practice holistic development refers to the concept that from pre-birth and beyond the care, learning and development of a child are mutually supporting and concurrent. Holistic refers to dealing with something or someone as a whole. (Brodie, 2016 and Knowles, 2018).

Within the first 1000 days early years practitioners are essential to help meet the needs of new mothers and babies (Children in Wales, 2021). Education Wales (2023) refer to practitioners as enabling adults and their need to develop strong connections between setting, home and the wider community. This will enhance the parent and baby's sense of belonging.

Practitioners will offer holistic approaches within practice, being their for the baby as well as the family. This will include high levels of care offering sustained physical and emotional support to both and picking up on the slightest of cues that may indicate either stress or happiness with either (Knowles, 2018).

Practitioners will be communicative, empathic and flexible in their approach to working with families offering equal access to information about their baby or child. They will be able to communicate and share information with a wide range of agencies in relation to the parent and child relationship as and when appropriate (Welsh Government, 2023).



(Better Start Bradford, 2019)

The Parent Infant foundation (2020) identify that families will need differing levels of support at different times, this could be due to ill health or external stressors. At these times it is vital that families get the right support at the right time. If a baby is unable to receive the nurturing care that they need agencies must act quickly.

Knowles (2018) recognises that children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have the knowledge, means or the resources to support themselves. They also recognise that families with English as an additional language may also be at a disadvantage in terms of accessing services and information.

HM Government (nd) agrees and also identifies that practitioners working within the first 1001 days will need to have a broad understanding of the perinatal period and when they must signpost on to other available services if support is needed outside of their remit. They also state it is necessary to have knowledge of ALN and an understanding of specific health issues that affect their work demographic and the support that is available to them. HM Government (nd) further pinpoints that when working together an inclusive and sensitive approach can and should be developed and maintained.



(Welsh Government, 2022)

Healthy Start

Cardiff Family Advice and Support



(Cardiff Council, 2020)

Within Wales childcare settings endeavour to support babies and children aiming to create a sense of pride and belonging in not only themselves but within their communities (Welsh Government, 2024). Education Wales (2023) state that there are three key principles to holistic learning for children which are enabling adults, engaging experiences and effective environments. These are fundamental during the child's early years experiences.

Enabling adults will support the child's wellbeing and sense of belonging. Engaging experiences will be respectful, promote independence, offer challenge and respect cultural diversity. They will include opportunities for outdoor and multi-sensory play to inspire thinking and creativity. Effective environments are at the centre of learning and offering an authentic experience to the child. Exploration within the environment, including that with measured risk, is key for driving the learning interest of the child (Education Wales, 2023).

When accessing early years provision every child will come with their own unique set of skills and learning requirements. It is a practitioners responsibility to ensure that all children, whatever their needs, will have access to the opportunities settings offer enabling them to thrive while they are in their care (Knowles, 2018).







Challenges

It is well known that the early years sector is in crisis. In consultation with practitioners and childcare settings PACEY Cymru (2024a) summarized that settings are facing challenging times due to the cost of living crisis, policy changes including ALN changes and a new curriculum. PACEY Cymru also specifies the decline in available childminders and that any future funding and government changes need to be considered carefully so as not to further destabilase this area of the workforce.



(ITV News, 2024)



(The Guardian, 2023)

Leitch (nd) and O'Sullivan and Hannan (nd) agree that early years is under immense financial stressors. There is a serious shortfall in the workforce and recruitment and retention are seriously underfunded. They equate in some settings there is over a 30% turnover of staff. They state consistent underfunding and the financial repercussions of Covid-19 have had a detrimental impact on the sector while also identifying more children are presenting with significant educational and health needs.



(Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriö, 2023)



(The National Audit Office, 2024)

27% of Welsh children are living in ‘childcare deserts’ where there are 3 children per childcare space. Britain has some of the most expensive childcare in the world and is considered one of the least family friendly countries. Culturally in comparison within Scandinavian countries family life is more embedded within systems and as such childcare is more valued and funding is placed more appropriately (ITV News, 2024).

Leitch (2024, quoted in Gaunt, 2024, np) states that although government have rolled out free childcare spaces this is meaningless if they are unwilling to fully invest in the infrastructure. Leitch further identifies that settings may not even have the capacity for the roll out with 68% of providers already being full.

Due to budget pressures The National Audit Office (2024, quoted in PACEY, 2024, np) reports concerns with meeting the free childcare rollout in September 2024 and 2025. The highlighted timeframe could impact on the quality of provision, especially for those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged.

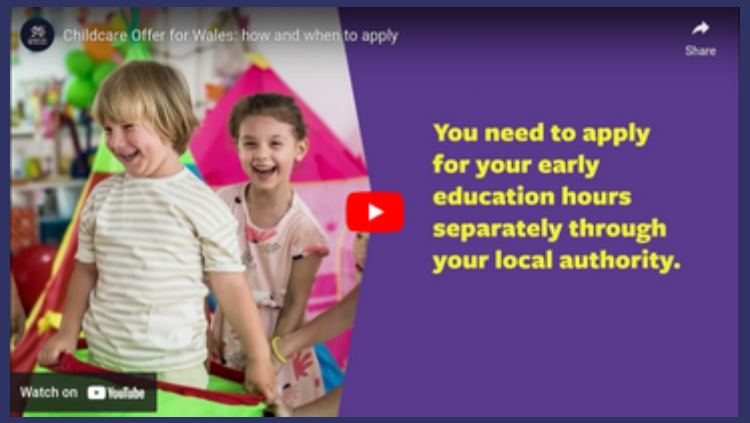
In response to childcare spaces Welsh Government has committed to expanding its Flying Start Programme which currently supports children and families from disadvantaged areas. The expansion will offer all 2 to 3 years olds access to high quality childcare with a particular focus on Welsh provision. Local authorities are being encouraged to use existing provisions across the workforce including childminders (Welsh Government, 2025).

Working with the Childcare Offer for Wales, from April 2025, Welsh Government are increasing the paid hourly rate by 20%. In addition they are also increasing the daily food rate by £1.80 to support with the increase utilities and food prices (PACEY Cymru, 2024b).

(PACEY, 2022a)



https://www.pacey.org.uk/



(Welsh Government, 2024)



With dire budgets and cost of living increasing managing finances within childcare is key. Porter (2022) offers advice on using and being aware of budgets. This includes budget conscious ideas from practitioners which include using plastic PVC strips to still enable an open door policy or joining with other providers and buying resources in bulk which saves on costs and deliveries. Childminders are preparing meals with their family meals and refrigerating until needed or are using slow cookers and air fryers. Practitioners are switching from branded products to slightly cheaper alternatives and are re-using and recycling resources. The Blue Light Card is also available for early years practitioners which offers discounts with some retailers (PACEY, 2024).

Concentrating on sustainability in settings and the use of natural resources that include free, foraged and found will cut costs. Encouraging children to explore their natural environments collect resources and then returning them to nature is a powerful lesson towards sustainability (Tunnell, quoted in teach Early Years, nd, np). In Sweden environmental awareness has been embedded within education from as early as 1969 and begins in pre-school and crosses multiple subjects. Composting food waste to reduce cost of waste removals, taking shoes off inside to reduce harsh and unnecessary cleaning solutions, and they recognise that nature and the outdoors are an integral part of the curriculum (NBC, 2020).



(Journeyman Pictures, 2016)

Activities

Education Wales (2023a) offers guidance on enabling adults, as discussed in professional partnerships, engaging experiences and effective environments. These three enablers are considered essential to a child's learning and developmental journey. They also state specific consideration should include observation, outdoor experiences, play-based learning and authentic purposeful experiences



(PACEY, 2022b)



(Children in Wales, 2022)

Babies and children learn best when they are genuinely interested and engaged in what they are doing or experiencing. They learn with their whole selves and when all of their senses are engaged. Engaging children in active meaningful experiences encourages exploration, creativity and meaningful inquiry (PLASP, 2024). This links in with Dewy's theory that children learn by doing and that their education and learning should involve and be based on real life scenarios and experiences (Aubrey and Riley, 2022).

Froebel's theory specified the importance and freedom of play and believed it was fundamental to the child's development, emotional wellbeing and enjoyment. Froebel also believed in the connectedness of play to nature and the outdoors (Aubrey and Riley, 2022). Outside is not just a place for doing but also a place to feel and think, it's a place of wonder where curiosity, investigation and imagination can flourish (Tovey, nd).



(Better Start Bradford, 2023)



The Curiosity approach (2024) agree and state play is one of the most important things that children can partake in allowing for mark making, developing critical thinking, engaging in communication, targeting fine motor and gross motor skills, cognitive development and more. The curiosity approach further includes loose parts, recycled materials and authentic resources and elements of nature.



(The Regent International School, 2022)









NDNA (nd) suggest experiences should be meaningful and purposeful, offer challenge and risk with opportunities to succeed. Experiences should be in context and be linked to real-life experiences with opportunities to re-visit learning to consolidate skills. They also denote the need to promote physical activity wherever possible and that experiences should be as multi sensory as possible.

In terms of environments NDNA (nd) suggest they should be central to the child's experiences and high light that these should be both indoors and outdoors no matter the weather. Environments should be emotionally warm and inviting and allow for exploration which allows a child to develop their sense of belonging. This links directly to Maslow's hierarchy and the need for a child's basic needs to be met to be able to thrive and succeed.

NDNA (nd) continue that environments should encourage the development of motor skills and practice in different contexts linking to Emmi Pickler's theory and the idea of freedom of movement for babies to roll, sit and climb rather than being confined or restrained in a space to learn.









NDNA factsheets Winter Toolkit Mindfulness

Story telling and sensory stories

Story time is an opportunity to induce warm, welcoming and positive opportunities to secure relationships with children. Telling them stories where they can see themselves or images that they are familiar with can help them to feel belonging and connectedness to those around them. Rhyme and word patterns can create familiarity when children want to read again and again (Smalltalk, nd).

Story telling shouldn't be limited to time or space. It can be anywhere a child wishes and can involve a whole host of natural loose parts and resources or just an engaging adult.Stories that include a child's senses can offer a bridge between visual and the words. This can be particularly impactful with children with ALN. Offering a sound, a smell, a feeling or tangible object can add meaning to what is being said or seen. By exciting the senses a deeper understanding and immersion is achieved (Gabelica, 2020).









In the Jungle Sensory Story

Treasure baskets

Goldschmied was a pioneer of their day and had a profound impact on early years policy globally. One of her primary professional revolutions was treasure baskets. While her ideas were her own her workings were shaped by the Froebelian approach. Treasure baskets offer a range of rich materials of differing textures that a child can choose from. they encourage sensory exploration allowing the child to concentrate solely on the object they have chosen. In this instance an enabling adult will be responsive and close by to observe but not hinder or direct allowing the child to explore for as often as they wish (Froebel Trust, 2024).



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