

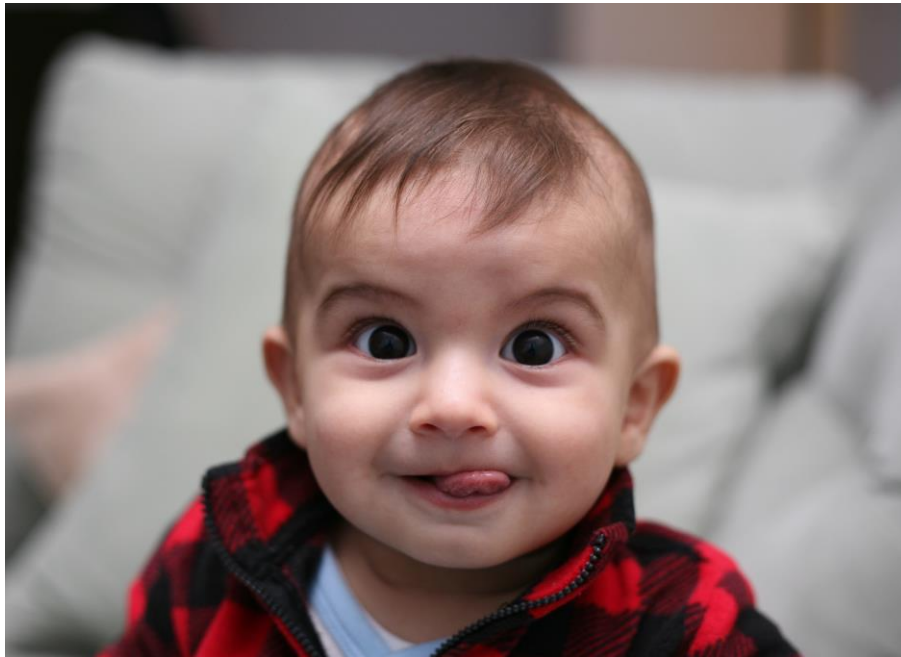
The First 1000 Days

Definition & Importance

The first thousand days of a child's life defines the period between conception and when the child turns two years of age. Simultaneously, they are the most significant and memorable for their future development (Bellieni, 2016).

Starting approximately with the time of conception, the first 300 days of a child's life are mostly characterised by an average human pregnancy with 280 days followed by the baby's very first weeks of life. During pregnancy, certain micronutrients have an influence on regulating for instance aspects on cell differentiation processes that can have short- and longterm consequences on pregnancy and fetal development as well as growth. Therefore, an insufficient intake of specific micronutrients may result in birth defects. (Gernand *et al.*, 2016)

Picture: Kozuch (2011) *10 Months old Baby during Winter Stroll*. Available at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Winter_baby_10-months-old.jpg (Accessed: 10. December, 2024).



1 - Aras, A. (2014) Baby face. Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Baby_Face.JPG (Accessed: 14 December 2023).

Importance of Nutrition & Neurologic Development

(scroll down for more information)

Women's energy and protein needs are increasing during pregnancy especially in the second and third trimester compared to non-pregnant women. Here, the energy intake is 13% higher and the need for protein increases by 54% which reduces the risk of a potential low birth weight. (Otten *et al.*, 2006)

This is the result of the neurological development which occurs in the first 1000 days (about 2 and a half years) of a life, specifically the rapid growth of the brain. The development of the brain starts at day 18 after conception and changes fast until the age of 2. (Thompson & Nelson, 2001)

During this period significant primary structures and processes develop that are responsible for certain behaviours and provide connections and support for structures that grow later. These primary structures and processes are for instance systems responsible for audible and visual sensory, the hippocampus, which is important for learning and memory, myelination (the speed of processing certain things) and the monoamine neurotransmitter systems which include dopamine, serotonin and adrenalin.

Furthermore, the prefrontal cortex (higher- order cognitive processes and 'personality centre') and parts of the brain which are involved in social development grow rapidly during the first 1000 days.

These neurological developmental changes during this period will likely not occur in life again. (Georgieff *et al.*, 2015)



2 - Chrisbwh (2013) Baby teeth in human infant. Available at: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/file:baby_teeth_in_human_infant.jpg (Accessed: 14. December, 2023).

Exceptional Care



Picture: *'muy bien' a los niños* (2015). Available at: (Accessed: 15. December, 2023)

Importance of Exceptional Care

The first 1000 days of life are a critical phase in which the child's development is of importance. Healthy neurodevelopment is influenced by their environment and surroundings including interpersonal and family matters and nutritional factors according to Bronfenbrenner (1977). Developing in a supportive environment with attached caregivers and good nutrition supports the brain in growing and making new neurological connections. Here, their life chances are improved. (House of Commons, 2019)

However, experiencing toxic stress, emotional neglect and infections or inflammations during the first 1000 days disrupts the neurological development and a deficient diet for the baby worsens the growth even more. Children's development might fall behind their friends' or peers'. Without exceptional care or support, those experiences including abuse or conflicts, stay with children their whole life which can cause harm to them and others. Therefore, these so-called early adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) result in lifetime medical and psychological problems, insufficient academic achievement and productivity and may affect future generations. (House of Commons, 2019)

People with four or more adverse childhood experiences are at much greater risk of poor health and lifestyle compared to others with no ACE's. Additionally, those people are also thirty times more likely to attempt doing any harm to themselves like suicide. (House of Commons, 2019)



3 - Wilde, L. (2009) Newborn. Available at: http://www.flickr.com/photos/bean_baker/4090944240/ (Accessed: 03. January, 2024).

Attachment Styles

In order for children to receive the best start in life, intervention and exceptional care must start before conception and continue throughout the whole childhood. Especially, considering the past generations of families who were most likely also subject to abuse, neglect and trauma during their childhood. But also, parental alcohol abuse and substance misuse, mental health issues and conflicts influence the child's health and development. With these parental behaviours, the ability to form a healthy relationship with the child and interact with them decreases immensely which leads to insecure or disorganised attachments. According to Bowlby's and Ainsworth's Attachment Style Theory (1987) three distinct types of children exist: firstly, children who are in a secure relationship with their parents, secondly those who are anxious- resistant meaning they want to be comforted but simultaneously distant themselves and lastly those, who are avoidant. These individual differences are results from infant- parent interactions during the first 1000 days of a Child's life. On the one hand, children who have a secure attachment style to their parents tend to have responsive parents who care about their Child's needs. On the other hand, children who appear insecure (anxious- resistant or avoidant) tend to have parents who are insensitive, inconsistent or rejective to children's needs and care which also includes abuse, neglect, and trauma. However, attachment styles are not only of importance when looking at children, attachment characterizes the whole human life. Therefore, targeting the attachment styles of the parents with exceptional care might shed some light on their behaviors and development. (Fraleigh, 2018)

The Marmot Review introduces an approach called "proportionate universalism", where health inequalities are balanced between universal and specific services and the focus is on delivering those services to the level of need. Hereby, the balance between those two is crucial. If only specific services are offered, the most vulnerable children and families could be identified and helped but others who are less vulnerable but still need services would not be identified. If only universal services were offered without targeted services, an enhanced level of support and guidance for children and families in need could not be delivered. This approach however, is not yet delivered or commissioned by the Welsh or English Government. (House of Commons, 2019)



4 - 'Bubble Bliss, Children at Play' (2023). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/moonjazz/1748498471/> (Accessed: 04. January, 2024).

Enabling Adults and Exceptional Care

What is offered are enabling adults working in exceptional care. Providing vulnerable children and families with exceptional care means providing them with a service where enabling adults offer care free from harm, access to other needed services and implementation of childrens or families preferences. Hereby, four strategies are from importance to ensure a supportive exceptional care experience. Firstly, communication should be frequently, transparent and adapted to each child's and families understanding. The importance here is to convey empathy and compassion, to make the child or family feel heard, valued and understood. Secondly, accommodating the needs of a child or family in need is even more important. This includes, providing health services and care, a clean and quite healing environment and patient- centred care. Thirdly, showing respect for childrens or families values and preferences are important to gain trust. Especially treating them and their autonomy with dignity as well as respecting their cultural norms and values and boundaries. And lastly, engaging and empowering children or families in need to do self care. Even the act of explaining the process of care to them is valuable for the relationship and themselves. (James, 2018)

Professional Partnerships



5 - 'Baby' (2017). Available at: <https://www.pngall.com/baby-png/download/16376> (Accessed: 06. January, 2024).

Background picture: Friendly, M. & Anderson, L. (2021) How to grow an accessible, high quality equitable child care system. Available at: <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/magazines/july-2021/how-to-grow-an-accessible-high-quality-equitable-child-care-system/> (Accessed: 04. January, 2024).

(scroll down!)

The role of an early years practitioner in supporting children and families in the first 1000 days

The role of the early years practitioner is to be an enabling adult. This means, in a setting the practitioner is a facilitator for babies and toddlers, someone who is guiding and supporting them but also a carer who takes care of the needs of the babies and toddlers as well as simultaneously being an educator who provides rich learning environments for them. Because babies need adults, they are

dependent on practitioners and caretakers, on specific health services, social support and are curious about the environment. (WG, 2022)

Therefore, enabling adults have certain responsibilities in early years settings and families during the first 1000 days of a toddler's life. One of them being to understand and highlight the individuality and uniqueness of each toddler, baby and person. Each baby and toddler have its own pace with which it will develop and grow as well as diverse needs which need to be met. Alongside this is the natural curiosity and wonder about the environment, a crucial factor for babies and toddlers. Play is an essential part of childhood where children can experiment and experience according to their needs and opportunities. Through playtime toddlers learn to socially interact, share, communicate, improvise, have fun and engage in solving problems. (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2013) Additionally, enabling adults model an engaging and fun approach to learning by encouraging their natural curiosity and making use of teachable moments that occur naturally during playtime. (WG, 2022) But play should not be hurried or forced, some play might take time because every baby or toddler learns at a different pace. In the first 1000 days of childhood, early years practitioners must allow children to take their time and to let them develop in their own time. (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2013) Furthermore, enabling adults create an environment where babies and toddlers can be socially interactive in a safe and respectful way and where enabling adults are responsive acting as a communicator and facilitator. (WG, 2022)

Moreover, the opportunity for babies and toddlers to develop respectful connections with enabling adults is important because respectful early year practitioners will include everyone. Not just the ones who learn the fastest, who always listen and stay engaged but every baby and toddler. The enabling adult is respecting and valuing them for their uniqueness, their language, culture, family, history, needs and their pace of learning. (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2013) Additionally, they demonstrate respect for young children and babies by supporting their decisions, choices and voices. (WG, 2022)



6 - 'Baby hug' (2009). Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/beautyandpeace/4117088642/> (Accessed: 06. January, 2024).

Why love matters...

Working as an early years practitioner means finding an ethical balance between providing care and developing a loving relationship with the young children and babies they care for. Professional love in an early years setting is crucial for babies especially in their first 1000 days to provide them with secure attachments which they might not experience in other environments. (University of Sheffield, 2015) As the University of Sheffield (2015) states, professional love is the close, intimate and trustworthy bond between practitioners and the young children and babies in their setting which inevitably grows over time. Hereby, the practitioners develop a sensitivity towards the infants in their settings with which they know how to make the young child feel loved and valued.

Moreover, as Gerhardt (2015) believes, love and affection shapes the brain of the baby especially during the first 1000 days. Since the orbitofrontal cortex is an important part of the brain where mainly emotions are developed and it only matures in early toddlerhood, it is vital for babies to have secure relationships for healthy emotional growth and development. Furthermore, developing secure bonds with early years practitioners or adults is fundamental for young children's cognition and learning growth. (Gerhardt, 2015)

However, there are challenges for early years practitioners when it comes to professional love. Some babies or younger children might not have been able to develop secure relationships with their parents or caretakers since their development got influenced by their environment, as Bronfenbrenner (1977) highlights. Therefore, they have anxious-resistant or avoidant attachment styles towards those adults. The challenge is, since those younger children might have never experienced a secure relationship, for practitioners to develop a loving bond with the younger children or babies. Additionally, it could be confusing for younger children to switch from one environment where they feel anxious to express themselves to a loving environment where they are valued for their uniqueness. Moreover, the parents or caretakers themselves might see a problem in professional love as it could be seen as too caring or loving since there is no guidelines to professional love in early years settings. (Gerhardt, 2015) But younger children and babies who have secure relationships with their parents in their home environment and with practitioners in early years settings get influenced in a way that they most likely will develop secure relationships with other people later in life, according to Bronfenbrenner (1977).

Challenges



Picture: Unknown (no date). Available at: <https://n-oofs.blogspot.com/2015/08/entrusting-children-in-daycare-positive.html> (Accessed: 07. January, 2024).

COVID- 19 impacted several lives of many people mentally but also physically or work related. However, the development of children under the age of 5 especially got affected. The domains of development are social and emotional-, cognitive-, verbal-, and physical development. Looking at the Delphi Study (2021), there is one domain of development of children under five years which got the most affected during COVID- 19. Social and Emotional Development seems to be the one which negatively impacted every participant. The other development domains were mostly negatively affected, but some participants stated that COVID- 19 did not impact the development. (Tyrie *et al.*, 2021)

Looking at the impact on different age groups starting at prenatal to 4/5-year-olds it highlights how much of a negative impact COVID- 19 had on all age groups regarding their development. In particular for the 1–5-year-olds, the pandemic not only had a negative impact but rather a strong negative impact meaning delays in speech and language, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. These were the results of denied access to childcare during the pandemic or other early year services. Furthermore, the outcome of the study reflects that younger children who were at a disadvantage before the pandemic such as living in low- income families or with additional needs got even more negatively affected in their development. Moreover, it is crucial to understand that every family experienced the pandemic differently and the children were affected in diverse ways. Only in this way, appropriate support and guidance can be offered to those in need, but it will be challenging for early years practitioners to mitigate the delays in children's development because of routines in settings or not enough trained staff. (Tyrie *et al.*, 2021)



7 - Ribeiro, L. (2013) Child in kindergarten. Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/95639384@N08/8720602322> (Accessed: 08. January, 2024).

Experts suggest certain strategies for each area of development to reverse the adverse impact COVID- 19 had on younger children. In order for early years practitioners to support younger children with their cognitive environment, the early years setting, and environment needs to be supportive of play and extend time during play. This approach is valuable for younger children to develop cognitive skills at their own pace without disturbing them, however extending time especially in early years setting where fixed routines are established, is not always possible. Furthermore, to efficiently

develop socially and emotionally, experts suggest an approach in which practitioners prevent younger children from getting stressed by routines and curricula. This approach as said above is challenging to implement since routines are a traditional way in early years settings. What is more achievable is creating a sense of belonging for those children and providing them with a lot of free play where they can socially interact with others and solve problems. For the speech and language development of children, experts highlight the importance of creating a safe space for younger children where they can lead conversations and express themselves. This approach is encouraged to do it at home as well where children for instance can sing, talk, and read stories. Lastly, physical development can be supported by encouraging child-led play and younger children taking risks in diverse outdoor environments to improve their self-esteem. (Tyrie *et al.*, 2021)

Activity Ideas and Enabling Environments

Picture: Sticker, G. (2005) *Kleine Pause im Waldkindergarten*. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest_kindergarten (Accessed: 08. January, 2024).

Engaging Experiences

The experiences early years practitioners give babies and toddlers should be hands- on, purposeful and meaningful for the younger child which could also include using the five senses. According to Piaget (1950) these children are in the sensori-motor stage where they learn through hands- on activities and trusting their innate body systems. Additionally, in early year settings activities should encourage younger children's autonomy by taking risks and solving challenges to experience success but also failure. This will support younger children with emotional regulation. Moreover, in order for toddler and babies to create meaningful connections to their learning, engaging experiences and activities should be connected to younger children's real and authentic lives where they can actively learn without getting disturbed. Seeing younger children in a holistic approach where everyone is unique and learns at their own pace is crucial for planning and implementing engaging activities but also enabling environments. (Welsh Government, 2022)

Here, Pikler (1930s) elaborates further, that an infant who is able to move freely around in their environment can repeat any acquisition at their own pace by taking risks every time and dealing with big emotions like frustration to get to know their limits. Additionally they are developing concentration skills and exercising their autonomy according to their pace. Moreover, the infants stay curious and try to actively discover the world around them with wonder and awe. This will support them later in learning environments at school. (Vamos, 2015)

Picture Stack: Maruna, L. (2018) *Preschool Classroom*. Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/161375043@N04/41749283632> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Stacy (2015) *Dream Classroom*. Available at: <http://teacherlifeisgood.blogspot.com/2015/07/tell-all-tuesdayon-saturday-my-dream.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Alex (2021) *Triangle de Pikler*. Available at: <https://www.lairdubois.fr/creations/14201-triangle-de-pikler-2.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Mingu (2016) *Kindergarten Spielzeug*. Available at: <http://gartengerate.blogspot.com/2016/06/kindergarten-spielzeug.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



8 - Maruna, L. (2018) Preschool Classroom. Available at: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/161375043@N04/41749283632> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



9 - Stacy (2015) Dream Classroom. Available at: <http://teacherlifeisgood.blogspot.com/2015/07/tell-all-tuesday-on-saturday-my-dream.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



10 - Alex (2021) Triangle de Pikler. Available at: <https://www.lairdubois.fr/creations/14201-triangle-de-pikler-2.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



11 - Mingu (2016) Kindergarten Spielzeug. Available at: <http://qartengerate.blogspot.com/2016/06/kindergarten-spielzeug.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Montessori (1907) adds to this by emphasising the importance in early years settings to create child-centred environments with toys and objects the infants love to engage with. She also highlights that real tools should be provided for infants to experience real life situations and create meaningful connections but also find their own way in using that tool. Furthermore, the materials and equipment in early years rooms should be accessible for the children at any given time. Everything in the room is at their eye level, there are tables which have different heights to meet their needs and motivate them even more. The curiosity approach is inspired by for instance Pikler and Montessori and talks about the natural curiosity of infants to explore the world around them. A suitable activity for this approach could be 'Loose Parts Play' where infants have the opportunity to develop gross and fine motor skills as they challenge their autonomy. Additionally, they experience a sense of awe and wonder which motivates children to explore and be curious. 'Treasure Baskets' are another activity where infants have access to a broad range of natural resources which ignites their five senses as well as helps build vocabulary (Goldschmied, 2004). As Froebel (1836) states children should be able to express themselves and their thoughts freely through creativity or imagination and supported by a nurturing environment and enabling adults. Suitable activities therefore are 'Messy Sensory Play' or 'Water play' which promote their learning by freely enjoying diverse sensory experiences that target the whole body. Here, most materials can be used such as sticky and wet substances, powder or combinations of different textures. This can distress some children with sensory processing issues. The task of the early years practitioner is then to look for other textures together with the infant which do not trigger. (Gascoyne, 2018)

However, the setting environment should be based on interests of infants where they can also manipulate the space. Thus, the design of the environment should be open-ended and exploratory for infants to stay engaged and learn continuously. Additionally, reflecting with the infants on the space and redesign are important for their cognitive development. (Clement, 2022)

Picture Stack: McCann, T. (2011) *Claire and her Water Play Station*. Available at: <https://terryin-sites.blogspot.com/2011/06/claire-and-her-sandwater-play-station.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Lifespan Development (2019) *Exploring the environment allows the toddler to develop a sense of autonomy and independence.* <https://pressbooks.nsc.ca/lumenlife/chapter/introduction-to-emotional-and-social-development-during-infancy/> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Ariadna (2010) *La Panera dels tresors.* <https://ariadnesalichs.blogspot.com/2010/09/la-panera-dels-tresors.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



12 - McCann, T. (2011) Claire and her Water Play Station. Available at: <https://terryin-sites.blogspot.com/2011/06/claire-and-her-sandwater-play-station.html> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



13 - Lifespan Development (2019) *Exploring the environment allows the toddler to develop a sense of autonomy and independence.* <https://pressbooks.nsc.ca/lumenlife/chapter/introduction-to-emotional-and-social-development-during-infancy/> (Accessed: 10. January, 2024).



14 - Ariadna (2010) La Panera dels tresors. <https://ariadnesalichs.blogspot.com/2010/09/la-panera-dels-tresors.html>
(Accessed: 10. January, 2024).

Forest School



Picture: 'Willow Creek Forest School' (2019). Available at: <https://tryonfarm.org/share/node/852> (Accessed: 12. January, 2024).

In contrast to exceptional care settings, the learning environment is outside in every season which ignites the natural curiosity and wonder of the infants and leaves them with endless opportunities to learn real- life scenarios. Here, infants learn to take risks not only physically like in care settings, they include social and emotional risks which supports them in developing self- regulation, self- reflection skills and building up confidence at their own pace. Since forest schools promote the holistic approach, infants grow physically, emotionally and socially but also beyond that, spiritually and intellectually. Additionally, forest schools do not particularly follow a curriculum, they rather follow infants needs and interests. Furthermore, the focus is more on inspiring the learner to gain knowledge at their right moment to make it meaningful, build up self- believe and develop self- guided learning, rather than cramming knowledge inside their heads. (Wall, Litjens & Taguma, 2015)



15 - WoodLandsTV (2017) An Introduction to Forest School. 28 November. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NV6YYfQl3RI> (Accessed: 12 January, 2024).

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