



Exceptional Care in the first 1000 days



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Introduction



The first one thousand days of life is the period from conception to a child's second birthday. This period has been seen as a window of opportunity for gaining good mental health, nutrition, economic benefits, and brain/cognitive development (Darling et al., 2020). Although the human brain develops throughout life, these first 1000 days are the period in which the brain has its highest plasticity and growth. In the first year after birth, the brain works at a rapid rate, especially within the language processing area along with the early development of the part of the brain which is called the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for controlling areas such as flexibility, inhibition, and attention (Cusick & Georgieff, 2013). There is scientific evidence through studies which suggest that this is also the period in which the brain is at its highest vulnerability. The effects of living in poverty, negative relationships, and stress during this period can lead to a lifetime of difficulties (Tomlinson et al., 2021).

It is the role of the staff within the setting whether it be maintained or non-maintained to provide all children with exceptional care. Providing children with a stimulating environment to aid their development, providing healthy nutritious meals, building positive relationships, and being aware of the independent needs of each child. Exceptional care is a lot of positive things under one umbrella including friendships, relationships, and respect. Implementing a holistic approach to these things will provide the children with exceptional care (Department for Education, 2021).



Current Challenges



According to Prime, Wade and Browne (2020), Millions of children all over the world have missed out on early childhood care and education due to the closure of schools and early years settings during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. These unprecedented steps were taken by many countries to try to control and prevent further spread of the virus (Prime, Wade and Browne, 2020). School closures alone affected around 1.5 billion children in 190 countries, this represents 90% of school-aged children globally (Robertson, 2020). Although children were not among those most at risk of the COVID-19 virus, they were at a much higher risk of adverse effects from setting closures and

worldwide lockdowns such as prolonged mental health effects and overall well-being (UNICEF, 2020). Early years settings are essential to enable the development of social skills in young children. Socialising with adults and children builds the foundation for positive relationships (Blair et al., 2018). Viner et al (2020) states that during COVID-19 lockdowns these interactions were taken away from children, arguing that it was virtually impossible to enable the development of pro-social skills which an early year's setting would naturally allow.

A study that took place in Ontario, Canada from April – June 2020 saw parents and teachers of children in early years settings expressing their concerns about the negative emotional and social impacts COVID-19 has on young children. Highlighting concerns for those children who had no siblings and for those from low-income families that were feared to be going hungry because parents would normally rely on early years settings/schools to feed their children. Deep concern was also raised for the prolonged impact of mental health issues arising due to unsafe and negative home environments as well as loneliness. A teacher expressed how important interaction for young children is, outside spaces were closed such as parks, and play dates were not happening thus having a detrimental effect on a child's development (Timmons et al., 2021).

According to Wise (2022), babies born during the pandemic scored lower on their developmental screening tests at 6 months old as opposed to babies born pre-pandemic. Research from 2021 shows that "covid babies" also scored lower on standardised tests for cognitive ability, fine and gross motor skills and verbal communication (Dyer, 2021). Early years practitioners are now seeing the adverse effects COVID-19 has had on babies and children (Morton, 2022). Babies who were born in 2020 have had limited interaction with other children and adults and have lacked engagement with the wider community through baby and toddler groups cancelled, parks being closed and play dates not allowed (Byrne et al., 2022). Children are taking longer to feel comfortable and settled within the childcare setting and relationships are taking longer to form through a lack of trust and interaction (Morton, 2022). These children now tend to be reserved and quiet as opposed to children who were integrated into a setting and normal community life pre-pandemic (Byrne et al., 2022). However, limited research exists for babies who were born during the pandemic, and the effects this is currently having on them, this is a really important area that needs to be actively researched further.

Urie Bronfenbrenner's believed that the environment in which a child grows up will immensely impact a child's development, he created an ecological system that consisted of the child being at the centre of the theory and how that child is affected by the people and environment around them (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022, p.18). This theory links nicely to show how COVID-19 has impacted children.

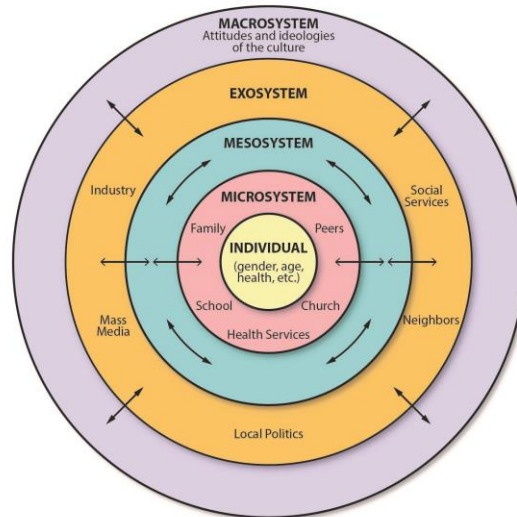
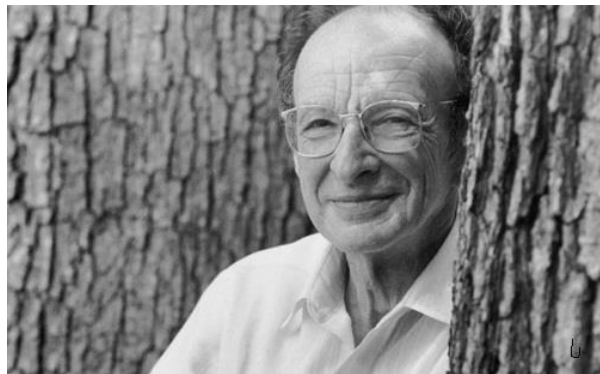


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model considers the child's environment as a nested series of interconnected systems. [Image modified from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_systems_theory]

2 - Ecological System



3 - Urie Bronfenbrenner

Activity Ideas



4 - Baby sensory play



Sensory play

Prendiville, 2021 states that sensory play engages some, if not all of the body's senses. Sensory play requires babies/children to use their bodies to experience sounds, taste, smell, movement and touch (Prendiville, 2021). It is believed that sensory play is an experience that provides foundations on which all subsequent thought, creativity and knowledge are built (Gascoyne, 2016, p.2). When a baby/child encounters sensory stimulus one brain cell makes a connection with another, making those all-important new connections in the brain. Repeated experiences enable those connections to grow thicker and stronger while each new experience establishes a new connection (li, 2023).

Piaget argued that in the first 1000 days, a developmental stage of sensorimotor development occurs. During this stage of development, children learn how to rely on their senses to learn about the environment around them. Piaget believed that a multitude of motor skills and sensory perceptions created the earliest form of intelligence (Hickley, Golden and Thomas, 2018). Froebel also placed emphasis on first-hand experiences and senses, whereas Montessori believed that providing children with sensory activities, allowed them to learn and develop at their best (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022).



6 - Jean Piaget



7 - Outdoor Play

Outdoor Play

There is a lot of research that reiterates the importance of outdoor play to aid children's healthy development (Yew et al., 2022). Promoting emotional well-being, cognitive, social and physical development (National Geographic, 2019) along with the multitude of sensory experiences which go hand in hand with nature and outside play (Gascoyne, 2016, p.2). Bento and Dias (2017) state it is impossible to replicate the stimulating experience of being outside in an indoor environment. Outside, children can experience freedom, an ever-changing environment and the ability to fully explore their gross motor skills. Exposure to open air, natural elements and sunlight contribute to bone development, help build a strong immune system all whilst helping to stay fit and healthy with plenty of exercise (Bento and Dias, 2017). Piaget said

"Growth and development of the brain, body and feelings are inseparable. At the same time as children are gaining control over their muscles, their minds are being exercised as feelings about themselves and their abilities are established" (Ouvry and Furtado 2020, p.34).

Bates (2019 p.208-209) states that Friedrich Froebel was the creator of a programme which later became the foundation for kindergartens (translated as child garden). Froebel believed that children learnt best in an environment that was stimulating, where children could be free and learn from their own perspectives, stressing the importance of hands-on exploration (Bates, 2019, p. 208-209). Froebel promoted a holistic approach to development by providing opportunities for active engagement with objects, people and the environment, stressing the importance of meaningful, joyful and engaging experiences through play (Bradbury and Swailes, 2022, p.42-43).



Environment





8 - Loose parts



9 - Play using real tools

Environment

Enabling environments play a key role in the development of babies and young children. When children feel relaxed, comfortable and secure in their surroundings, they will build trust, play and interact with those around them positively (Early Years Matters, 2022a). Enabling environments are more than just visual surroundings, it's also about emotions from practitioners, parents and the children who attend the setting (Early Years Matters, 2022b).

There are many factors that contribute to an enabling environment, one of which is loose parts play (Houser et al., 2016). Loose parts play consists of any loose, tactile and found objects that children can pick up, roll, manipulate or squeeze for example during play, allowing the imagination and creativity to flow (Groen, 2018). Using loose parts play in a setting is beneficial in all areas of

development, using gross motor skills to pick up larger parts, using fine motor skills to grasp small objects and aiding cognitive development by problem solving (Houser et al., 2016).

Maria Montessori strongly believed in the freedom to learn in a neutral, uncluttered prepared environment, with real tools and materials, which would be clearly labelled at child height to give freedom of choice and enable the child to direct their own learning. Promoting free-flow settings from inside to outside, with outside areas being prepared to encourage curiosity, independence and the freedom to explore. According to Montessori (2021), Montessori's approach is based on 6 principles:

- Freedom and Structure – An organised routine where children have the freedom to do as they please as long as they keep within the boundaries set by practitioners and the structure of the setting.
- Beauty, Nature and Reality – Settings are designed to be comfortable and inviting. Nature is usually the inspiration within the setting, including many natural materials.
- Social environment – Practitioners encourage children to play with each other. Children pick up on the behaviors of other children, and also learn how to empathise and constructively work together.
- Intellectual environment – Settings provide skills such as language, reading and maths, with various activities incorporating these intellectual aspects (Montessori, 2021).

Maria Montessori's approach is linked well in the curriculum for non-maintained settings in Wales. The curriculum states that settings should offer children hands-on experiences, encourage children's independence, provide opportunities and offer risks. Settings should offer children a choice with the opportunity to go back and take part in that activity again. Settings should also use those experiences to incorporate the use of simple intellectual skills/vocabulary (Welsh Government, 2022).





10 - Maria Montessori

Being Inclusive



Nutbrown (2019) states, being inclusive within a setting is paramount. Adapting the environment around the child is essential to inclusion (Crawford et al., 2014). Every child has different needs,

children have the right for those needs to be met with love and care (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989). Crawford et al. (2014) says practitioners should apply their knowledge to be able to customise their approach to learning and play to promote inclusion for the child, giving plenty of praise and offer prompting when needed. The ability to be fair is key, making sure activities on offer are accessible for all children (Crawford et al., 2014).

Nutbrown (2019) says the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework is very clear about the expectations of practitioners who care for children with special educational needs (SEN) or for children who are disabled. One of the commitments to the EYFS framework is to make sure every child has the right to be treated fairly, regardless of religion, abilities or race (Nutbrown, 2019).

The curriculum for non-maintained settings in Wales also states that all children must receive full support to participate in learning. The environment within a setting should be well organised and adaptations should be made where necessary for accessibility, thus removing any barriers to learning and participation (Welsh Government, 2022).

The United Nations Conventions of the rights of the child clearly state in

- **Article 2 (non-discrimination):** *The rights set out in the UNCRC apply to every child whatever their race, colour, gender, language, religion, ethnicity, disability or any other status.*
- **Article 23 (children with a disability):** *Disabled children have the right to enjoy a full life, with dignity, and to participate as far as possible in their community. The government should support disabled children and their families.*
- **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. (UNCRC, 1989).*





Professional Partnerships/Relationships





Professional Partnerships/Relationships

A professional partnership is a relationship between the practitioner and the child, colleagues, families, caregivers and others from the wider educational sector (WJEC, 2019). EYFS (n.d.) say that babies and children learn to be independent and strong through secure, loving relationships with those around them. When children feel safe and secure it has positive effects on their learning and development, thus parents and practitioners working together have positive outcomes for all (EYFS, n.d.).

Raising Children Network (2020) say that children learn about the world around them through relationships. Giving children the freedom to express themselves, crying, babbling, laughing or asking questions and responding positively to those gestures teaches children how to communicate, how to show emotion and develops their social skills. A positive response also embeds the feeling of being secure and safe, due to this the child will feel at ease to explore and develop in their surroundings (Raising Children Network, 2020).

Challenges can arise creating a barrier to a professional partnership (Busch et al., 2018). The child and parents may not speak Welsh/English or a parent/child may be deaf. These barriers can be overcome by putting precautions in place to enable communication for example a translator/google translate (Busch et al., 2018) or sign language being taught within the setting for staff and children and letters being given to the parents to stay informed about activities and the progress of their child (Zaidman-Zait, 2008).

Relationships are vital for a child's socio-emotional and cognitive development (parent infant foundation, 2023). Several theorists highlight the importance of this. Both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner emphasise how important relationships are for children (Exploring Your Mind, 2019)

(McLeod, 2022). Bowlby's attachment theory also shows how beneficial positive, loving and trusting relationships are (Bates, 2019, p.189). Bronfenbrenner said:

"In short, somebody has to be crazy about that kid" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p.262).



Respectful care and meaningful learning





Respectful care and meaningful learning

According to the Infant Toddler Resource Guide (2017), There are many varied activities day to day that practitioners do routinely, for example, nappy changes and dinner time. These activities can be rushed and lack engagement due to limited time, or lack of staff ratio, but these activities should be meaningful and respectful (Infant Toddler Resource Guide, 2017). Carter (2021) says that children learn through sensory experiences, providing these experiences during play and set activity time is easy to provide by most practitioners, but making the experience relevant and meaningful to daily routine activities can be a challenge. Meaningful interactions with babies and children should be attentive, nurturing, warm and respectful. Taking the time to slow down and embrace that moment to engage with the child/baby will reflect on a positive experience for the child/baby and aid in cognitive and socio-emotional development (Childmining.org, 2023).

Mcintyre (2018) wrote that quality childcare settings place emphasis on respectful care. Babies and children should be respected at all times within a setting. Speaking to them, giving them a moment to process what you are going to do for example, wiping a child's face. Respecting when a child is full and no longer hungry and showing respect during caregiving activities such as nappy changes, not forcing babies/children into uncomfortable unnatural positions (Mcintyre, 2018).

Marlen (n.d.), says that Dr Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) has influenced many childcare settings in Europe with the Pikler approach. Emmi Pikler's aim was to assure good health in young children, she believed the key to this was through secure attachments. Pikler believed that giving respectful care, especially during times such as nappy changes was the main tool for achieving these attachments (Marlen, n.d.). In Pikler settings, nappy changing is seen as the most delicate of care times, whilst also one of the primary times a relationship and trust can be developed. Nothing within a Pikler setting is carried out without the child or baby's consent, meaning all aspects of care are provided with the child/baby's cooperation, all aspects of care are done with the child, not to the child (Marlen, n.d.).

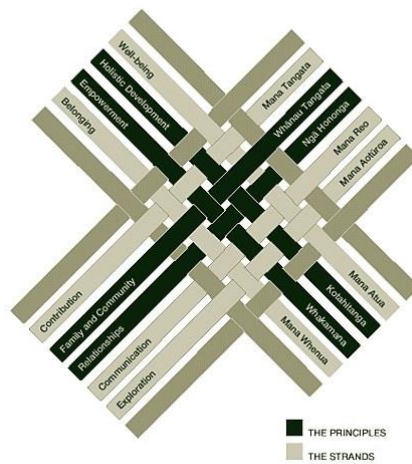


International approaches



11 - New Zealand

Te Whariki is New Zealand's Early Years Curriculum, Te Whariki is the Maori word for woven mat (Veazey, 2020). This mat can be visualised as development and learning being woven from goals, principles and strands. Te Whariki does not set guidelines for methods or content, it enables the idea that children interact with their environment, and each environment creates a new opportunity (Veazey, 2020). In its own words, the curriculum will be *"provided by the people, places, and things in the child's environment: the adults, the other children, the physical environment, and the resources"* (School curricula guides, 2016).



12 - Te whariki woven mat (Veasy, 2020)



13 - Wales

Welsh Government (2022) told us In 2022 the Curriculum for Wales changed for the better with noticeable inspiration from Te Whariki. Key stages 2,3 and 4 disappeared, and the principles of the foundation stage stayed the same but will now become part of a seamless curriculum for children aged between 3-16. Assessments will now be part of the daily routine with ongoing monitoring for children over time and learning will include experiences and more freedom (Welsh Government, 2022).



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