First 1001 Days Movement

EVIDENCE BRIEF 3

The Benefits of Nurturing Care

How early interactions influence many aspects of our development

Summary

This Evidence Brief, produced by The First 1001 Days Movement, is one of a series setting out the case for action to support babies and their families.

A baby's early experiences and environment, particularly their relationships and the care they receive, have pervasive impacts on their development. This Brief describes how early parent-infant interactions and relationships play a role in several important outcomes later in life.

Early interactions support the development of language, emotional regulation and other capacities that enable children to reach their potential, both in education and in work.

Exposure to adversity and the absence of nurturing relationships can have consequences for physical and mental health which should be of great concern to our public health systems.

Early nurturing care reduces the likelihood of risky and antisocial behaviour later on, and the costs they bring to individuals and society. Early relationships have long-lasting impacts, not only through the lifetime of a child but onto subsequent generations.

The case for action during our babies' first 1001 days, is compelling. Healthy early development, supported by nurturing care and good relationships, makes it more likely that children will have happy, healthy futures and achieve their potential.

"Science tells us that a child's experiences from conception through their first five years will go on to shape their next 50. It tells us that the kind of children we raise today, will reflect the kind of world we will live in tomorrow. It tells us that investing in the start of life is not an indulgence, but economically, socially and psychologically vital to a prosperous society."

The Royal Foundation[1]

"Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, and these relationships affect virtually all aspects of their development – intellectual, social, emotional, physical, behavioural, and moral. The quality and stability of a child's human relationships in the early years lay the foundation for a wide range of later developmental outcomes that really matter..." [4]

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child

1. A baby's early experiences and environment, particularly their relationships and the care they receive, have pervasive impacts on their development.

1.1 During the earliest years of life, babies and toddlers need nutrition, good health, safety and security, responsive care and early learning opportunities to support their growth and development[2]. This Brief focuses specifically on describing the importance of responsive care and the role it plays in many important outcomes across a child's life[3].

1.2. Babies' brains grow rapidly in the first years of life, and their development is shaped by their environments and experiences. Babies are reliant on their parents, and so parents shape most of their early experiences. Parent-infant interactions are a critical element of early development that influence many different skills, behaviours and capacities.

1.3. Our ***Age of Opportunity*** Brief describes how healthy early relationships set templates for future relationships and help children develop social and emotional skills. These are essential if a child is to thrive and lead a healthy and fulfilling life.

1.4. Each stage of development builds on what has gone before. Early skills and capacities shape how a child interacts with the world and how they respond to future experiences and opportunities. This means that what happens in the earliest years of life can play a significant impact on a child's later outcomes. So early interactions with caregivers can have effects that last a lifetime.

2. Early interactions support the development of language and other skills that enable children to reach their potential, both in education and in work.

2.1. Getting things right during a babies' first 1001 days has enormous benefits later as they grow and begin their education. Healthy early relationships help babies and toddlers feel secure and ready to play and explore. Nurturing early interactions also ensure they begin their education with the cognitive, social and linguistic skills which best equip them to make friends and to learn. Children who are school-ready are likely to get the most from their education.

2.2. Success at school impacts a child's long-term learning and earning potential. Early development also shapes critical capacities – such as relational capability and emotional regulation – which affect our performance at work.

Language development

2.3. Throughout the first year of life, infants learn language in the context of infant-caregiver interactions[5]. How much a parent talks to a child, and responds appropriately to their cues, is a critical factor in shaping their language capacity[6].

2.4. Language development impacts a child in many ways. It contributes not only to a child's academic learning, but also to their social and emotional wellbeing, playing a role in their ability to manage emotions, communicate feelings and understand the feelings of others.

Studies have shown that children from more disadvantaged families are exposed to fewer words in early childhood, which affects their developing vocabulary and language processing skills. Researchers in Stanford found disparities in both language processing skills and vocabulary knowledge between two-year-olds from high and low-income families which were equivalent to a six-month gap in development[7].

2.5. Healthy early relationships also support the development of emotional and social skills, both of which are as important for school readiness as language and number skills[8].

Studies show that a secure early attachment with a responsive caregiver is associated with:

- Better language competence[9] and social competence[10]
- Higher verbal ability, maths ability, reading comprehension and overall academic achievement[11]
- Being better prepared for exams, being able to concentrate better, seek more help and give more priority to studies[12]

An insecure attachment, reduces the child's capacity to take advantage of their early learning opportunities, and is linked to short attention span, problems concentrating at school, and a lack of both confidence and self-motivation[13].

Long-term evaluations of early years interventions have shown that providing support, resources and tools to parents who need them early in their baby's life makes a significant difference to outcomes in both education and work.

- The Abecedarian programme, which provided high-quality care for children from birth to age five from disadvantaged families, was found to result in IQ gains, lasting well into adulthood[14], higher levels of education, higher wages, greater likelihood of homeownership, and reduced likelihood of welfare support or incarceration[15].
- A World Health Organisation study[16] has shown that children who receive home visits to provide nutritional advice and cognitive stimulation show improved development when they are young and increased earnings in adulthood. When the participants of the study grew up and had children of their own, those children developed better too.
- The Nurse Family Partnership in the USA is an intensive home-visiting programme to promote sensitive parenting among young mothers during pregnancy and until their child is two. Long-term follow-up has shown improved academic achievement, as well as fewer internalising mental health problems, at the age of 12[17]. The equivalent programme in the UK – the Family Nurse Partnership –is associated with improved school readiness and reading levels at age 7[18].

3. Exposure to adversity and the absence of nurturing relationships can have consequences for physical and mental health which should be of great concern to our public health systems.

3.1. Early experiences and early development influence babies' mental and physical health, with impacts that can last into adulthood. We can see this most vividly when things go wrong. A baby's early exposure to prolonged adversity adversity in the absence of a protective early relationship – known as "toxic stress" – can have widespread and long-lasting negative effects on both mental and physical health[19].

"The short and long term consequences of exposure to adversity in childhood are of great public health importance. Growing evidence indicates that in the first three years of life, a host of biological and psychosocial hazards can affect a child's developmental trajectory and lead to increased risk of adverse physical and psychological health conditions"[20].

3.2. There are a number of mechanisms through which early experiences shape later health outcomes:

- Negative experiences and adversity influence a babies' developing organs and stress-response system. Exposure to prolonged early stress (known as toxic stress) influences the developing stress-response system and can increase later stress-related disorders such as mental health problems, drug abuse, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases
- Sensitive, responsive interactions help young children learn to regulate their emotions and control their impulses. This is important in helping children to develop a range of healthy behaviours
- When parents understand and respond appropriately to their babies' feeding cues, this enables responsive infant feeding which is a critical component of childhood obesity prevention[21].

4. Nurturing care reduces the likelihood of risky and antisocial behaviour, and the costs they bring to individuals and society.

4.1. Because early social and emotional development enables children to understand and manage emotions and behaviours and to form positive, trusting relationships, it can reduce later risky and antisocial behaviour, and the costs they bring.

4.2. When very young children experience stress, whether due to insecure relationships or unpredictable environments, this can lead to ongoing problems with stress management that can eventually become toxic to the individual[22] and can affect relationships with others. The impacts of poor emotional regulation can include:

- Violent or destructive temper tantrums[23,24]
- A higher tendency to internalise emotions, leading to depression and anxiety[23,24]
- Risky behaviour such as harmful sexual behaviour and substance misuse[25]
- Long-term problems with stress management which can eventually become toxic[26]
- An increased risk of a child developing eating disorders[27]

4.3. Some of these risky behaviours can lead to paths into offending. People with childhood histories of trauma, abuse and neglect make up almost the entire criminal justice population in the USA[28]. And here, early childhood family income, home environment, emotion regulation, oppositional behaviour and minority status are all significant in distinguishing violent offending boys from those with no criminal records[29].

5. Early relationships have long-lasting impacts, not only through the lifetime of a child but onto subsequent generations.

5.1. Early interactions and relationships will influence the way a baby, once grown up, will parent their own children. Parents who have themselves experienced adversity and disorganised attachment can find it more difficult to respond to their babies' needs, leading to intergenerational transmission of trauma.

5.2. The study of epigenetics has shown that our experiences, such as stress and trauma, affect whether genes are expressed. These changes are heritable – they can be passed down to our children[30].

A Call to Action

Healthy early development, supported by nurturing care and good relationships, makes it more likely that children will have happy, healthy futures and achieve their potential.

Getting things right in the first 1001 days is vital, not just for individuals but for society as a whole. Conversely, if children are unable to fulfil their social and developmental potential, this not only harms their futures, but also the societies in which they live[31].

Across many areas of public policy, we can see the benefits when we get things right in the early days, and we can see the harm that can be caused when we get things wrong.

There is a clear case for a wide range of policy makers to pool energy and resources to invest in ensuring all children receive sensitive, nurturing care they need to thrive.

The First 1001 Days Movement calls on national and local decision makers across the UK to value and invest in babies' emotional wellbeing and development in the first 1001 days, giving every child a strong foundation in the earliest years of life.

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