

The First 1000 DAYS OF LIFE and the IMPORTANCE OF PLAY



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FOREWORD

The FIRST 1000 DAYS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY was identified as a project by the Northern Synod. A task team, consisting of experts in several fields, was created to make a video series and a manual about the

The project focuses on mothers (also pregnant mothers) and the primary care of children 0-3 years.

The purpose of the project is:

to promote awareness about the subject in DR Church congregations in the Northen Synodal region;

to provide support to the congregations of the Northern Synod by launching activities and programmes;

to provide programmes and resources, the necessary support and development services;

to empower congregations to respond actively and positively to this information.

B.

The importance of the FIRST 1 000 DAYS OF LIFE

DR JOHAN ERASMUS
Neurodevelopment Paediatrician

The realization is dawning that the first 1000 days of life—from conception to a child's second birthday—presents a unique opportunity for establishing the lifelong foundations of optimal health and development. Intervention in this critical period also provides the highest returns on investment.

Why are the first 1000 days so important?

The first 1000 days consist of pregnancy and the first two years of life. The fastest brain growth of a person's life happens just before and just after 40 weeks' gestation, so much so that by the 1000th day the brain has already reached 80% of its mature weight. All functions, including vision and hearing, the visual and hearing cortexes in the brain, receptive language and the production of language and the part of the brain that supports this, is already and practically fully developed in by the end of the first two years.

Consequently, it is understandable that any negative impact on the growth and development of the child in this critical period has a significant effect on later functioning. This includes physical growth, lifelong health, emotional and social health, scholastic functioning, and, eventually, success in the job market. It also has a meaningful effect on long-term physical health.

Risk factors

Poverty heightens the chances of malnutrition and exposes children to multiple negative influences, including tension in the family, child abuse and neglect, food insecurity and violence in the family. Early intervention therefore has the potential to reduce inequality and to promote child welfare.





The importance of relationships and nurturing interactions between children and their carers where there is positive response to children's emotional and physical needs, play a significant role in brain development.

The importance of the physical and emotional health of the mother cannot be stressed too much. Poor physical and spiritual health in the mother has a substantial effect on her ability to tend and nurture. Stress and depression, especially, play a significant role. The World Association Infant Mental Health World Congress May 2018 sees maternal welfare in such a serious light that their chief recommendation to the congress was the following, 'Protect the development of the child brain by securing the wellbeing of the pregnant mother.'

Important components of effective childhood development:

- Nurturing care
- Sufficient nutrition
- Responsive care
- Opportunities to learn
- Safety and security
- Effective health sector
- Effective social and child protection units
- Effective educational and teaching sector

(Contact **cmr@cmrn.co.za** for the complete document about The Importance of the First 1000 Days of Life.)

C.

Spirituality in early childhood
THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH

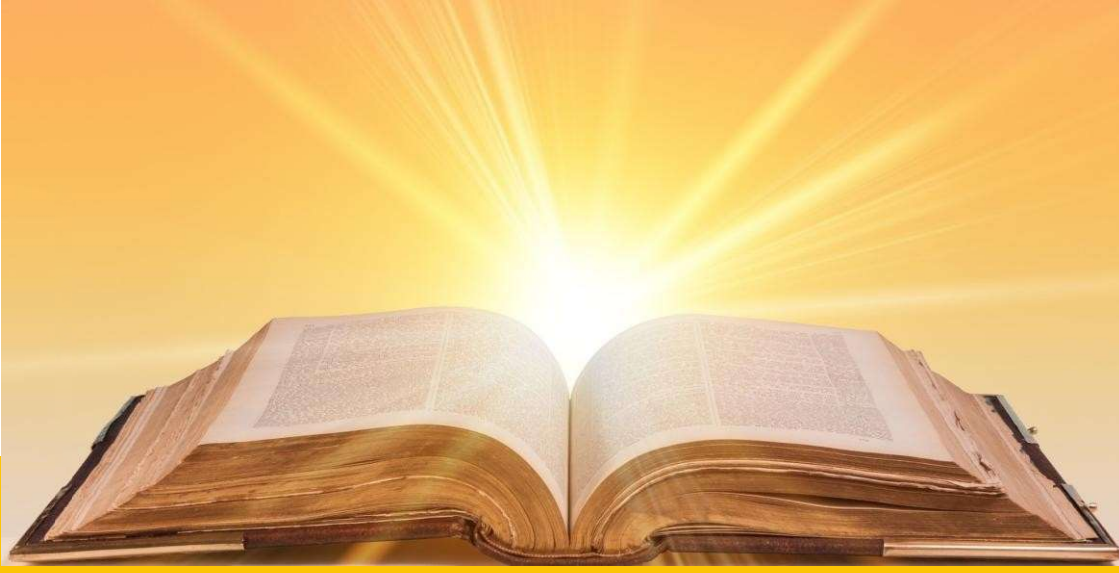
Rev. MARIE-JEAN BRINK
Petra Institute

The spirituality of children in early childhood is often overlooked, and the faith community struggles with its calling in this regard. While youth ministry is chiefly concentrated on adolescents and young adults, faith formation begins much earlier.

Genesis 1:26, Jeremiah 1:5 and Psalm 139 affirm that young children from the moment of conception already stand in a relationship to God. Instead of seeing child spirituality as a candle waiting for its flame to be lit, a more Biblical metaphor is that of a glass—it must be handled with care, but the space for God already exists.

Research in psychology and theology confirms that children are biologically and spiritually wired for a relationship with God and people, and that early nurturing of this inborn spirituality promotes resilience, emotional wellbeing, and the long-term formation of faith.

Practical consequences for congregations include the acknowledgement of the formative power of faith experiences by means of rituals, intergenerational worship services, and the presence of a loving community. Recommendations such as *Pray-Grounds*, purposeful intergenerational support, and the active involvement of fathers, grandparents and mentors emphasise the church's role as a spiritual home for children and their caregivers. The nurturing of children's spirituality from birth confirms their place as full members of the body of Christ and as persons who strengthen the whole faith community.



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https://sikunye.org.za/is-my-church-ftd-friendly/

Little Seeds
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https://badisa.org.za/little-seeds-early-childhood-development

Pray-ground
https://www.sneucc.org/files/websites/www/Pray-ground-for-web.pdf
https://faithandchildren.org/2024/04/23/prayground/

D.

The importance of **PLAY** in CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

PROF. LIESEL EBERSöHN

The Masidlale 1 study 2 found that purposeful play helps children in need to develop positively. The Masidlale Practioners' / Policy Summary gives (i) an easy overview of the moist important findings and suggestions in the complete project report 3, and (ii) practical guidelines for people who work with children or make decisions about how play can be used to promote healthy development. The Masidlale Practioners' / Policy Summary must be read with the complete Masidlale Project Report.

The Masidlale study measured children's development is two residential care centres — one where purposeful play was used, and one where it was not[4]. In the centre where purposeful play was used, the staff were trained to conduct a play programme purposefully with children who had previously been abused.

The study was done in 2021 and 2022 at two residential care centres in Gqeberha, South Africa.

Participants:

- 26 caregivers (directors, social workers, an auxiliary social worker, and children and youth care workers), and
- children: 29 girls and 30 boys between 8 and 12 years (59 children in total).

The caregivers participated in online-interviews, and the children completed several tests to check their health (length and weight), social behaviour

(emotional and prosocial skills), personal development (emotional control and hope), and school achievements (academic progress).
(Contact **cmr@cmrn.co.za** for the 'Practitioner's brief'.)









E.

PLAY and practical resources to SUPPORT young children with EMOTIONAL NEEDS

DR JUDY VAN HEERDEN

When adults support young children with emotional needs, they can use play and practical resources to address this often-complex issue. Play can be beneficial for the children and the adults who support them. When children play, they feel more at ease and less threatened by unknown situations.

Play also helps children to process difficult emotions

When children struggle with complex emotional problems, the struggle often comes to the fore when they play. Children who get the opportunity, space, and resources to play, can work through feelings like pain, fear, or loss while they still act like children. Play gives them a way of expressing emotions they are battling with and for which they do not always have the words to express them fully. By recreating painful events repeatedly by means of imaginative play, children try to understand the impact of what happened. For instance, if a child has seen two adults fight, they can recreate the conflict with dolls.

A PowerPoint© document is available with ideas that adults can use to provide emotional support to children in playful, non-threatening ways. (Contact **cmr@cmrn.co.za** for the complete document.) Adults can use the feelings wheel, books with suitable stories, spinners, and different types of rolling blocks (dice) in creative ways for different age groups to depict and verbalise various emotions. These resources can serve as intentional

invitations to help children to recognise and share their emotions while they play in a non-threatening environment.







F.

How congregations can get involved with EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Implementing role

This role requires thorough research on the state of ECD in your community, what services are already being provided, what networks/forums already exist, where gaps/needs are and which services are suited to the congregation's capacity.

Research must also be done on applicable legislation and regulations. The secret is to not reinvent the wheel or to create competition for your ECD field, but to serve the community with your unique contribution

Examples of an implementing role:

1. **URC Galvendale (Gqeberha)**: Reading groups and home-based programme
2. **DRC Knysna:** Reading groups in collaboration with the local primary school (grades 1 and 2)
3. **DRC Fraserburg + library:** Reading groups
4. **URC Rosemore (George):** Registered ECD Centre (Badisa)
5. **URC Nababeep:** Home-based programme
6. **DRC Kuilsrivier** (Western Cape): Reading groups and home-based programme on surrounding farms





Relationship-driven support role—examples:

1. **DRC Wellington-Oos:** Office space and infrastructure for SmartStart's ClubCoach
2. **DRC Worcester-Vallei:** Spiritual support for SmartStarters
3. **DRC George Tuinedal:** Storeroom for toys.
4. **DRC Ysterplaat:** ECD forum created
5. **DRC Kenridge:** Management function at the ECD Centre
6. **DRC Kuilsrivier (Western Cape):** Provides infrastructure for training
7. **DRC Mosselbaai:** Coordinates and distributes weekly nutrition ECD Centres.

ECD community analysis discussion document for designing a congregation's child protection policy.

Short videos for worship services: www.littleseeds.org.za/resources/

Guidelines for registering an ECD Centre (ECD Toolkit)

https://lrc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/ECD.pdf

SmartStart South Africa

https://smartstart.org.za/

G.

ADOPT-A-PRESCHOOL PROJECT

When a congregation gets involved with Early Childhood Development (ECD), they are sowing the seeds of a community. By providing love, time, and support to young children and their educators, the church helps to build hope, stability and dignity where these matter most. This involvement is not only a service project—it is a living testimony to God's heart for the smallest and most vulnerable among us.

A congregation that takes hands with an ECD Centre or launches ECD initiatives in their area, contributes to healthy families, stronger communities, and a new generation that knows they are precious in God's eyes.

The document offers 50 practical ideas for how a congregation can make a difference in early childhood development at different levels, from simple aid to full-time involvement. This shows that every person or group, irrespective of time or resources, can contribute something valuable.

Contact **cmr@cmrn.co.za** for a list of ideas.

1. Simple, practical support (little effort / no cost)

This section focuses on easy ways to support ECD without great cost. Fior instance: Collect recyclable materials such as egg holders and bottles for toddlers' art projects .

2. Voluntary involvement

Give ideas to people who want to be involved with kindergartens or children at the church. Such as beginning a 'story hour' where volunteers read to children every week at the church, or by starting a local kindergarten.









3. Family and community involvement

Stress the importance of parents, families, and the broader community in the support of ECD. For instance: Begin a 'Parents-and-Children' morning for play, being together, and building relationships.

4. Resources and training

Make suggestions for providing material, training, and skills development for teachers and assistants. Experts in early childhood development can be invited to provide training for parents and teachers.

5. Sustainable long-term ministry

Focus on structural, sustainable ways of making an ECD ministry part of the congregation's calling. The high point would be to build and manage a fully

equipped kindergarten, with nutrition and faith-oriented learning, on the church premises.