



The First 1000 Days in the Nordic Countries

Sigrún Danielsdóttir, Cand.Psych/M.Sc
Project Manager for Mental Health Promotion
Directorate of Health, Iceland

The Importance of the Early Years

- The first months and years in children's lives are paramount for their future well-being.
- Brain development is at its peak
 - Foundations are laid for neural pathways and brain regions that dictate future learning, language, emotion regulation and behavior.



The foundation of good mental health

- A child's ability to trust, love, feel compassion, regulate their emotions and form positive relationships of their own in the future develops through close, intimate relationships with their caregivers.
- This lays the foundation for good mental health throughout the lifespan.



The First 1000 days in the Nordic countries

- A three-year Nordic co-operation project launched under the Icelandic presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2019
 - **An extensive situation analysis**
 - Promoting mental health and well-being during pregnancy
 - Supporting positive parent-child relationships
 - Identifying and responding to early to risk factors
 - Supporting well-being among the youngest children in ECEC
 - **Review evidence-base for interventions and assessment tools**
 - **Development of policy recommendations**


The First 1000 Days in the Nordic Countries

- Iceland: Directorate of Health
- Norway: Helsedirektoratet and R-BUP Øst og Sør
- Finland: Itä Children's Foundation and THL
- Denmark: Sundhedsstyrelsen
- Sweden: Folkhälsomyndigheten
- National consulting groups
- Nordic Reference Group with representatives from Greenland the Faroe Islands




Situation Analysis 2019

- The Nordic countries have very important strengths when it comes to supporting a healthy start in life
 - Free healthcare and social service, high participation in prenatal care and infant and child healthcare, universal access to ECEC, substantial parental leave, screening for risk factors, growing emphasis on supporting mental health and the parent-child relationship in prenatal and infant- and child healthcare
- But also numerous areas for improvement
 - Use of evidence-based methods, support for professional development, identification and response to early risk factors, early intervention, inequity in access to services, weaknesses in cross-sectoral collaboration and challenges relating to ECEC




Review of scientific evidence 2020

- Two research teams at the Regional Centre for Child and Youth Mental Health and Child Welfare (RKBU North) at the University of Tromsø – The Arctic University of Norway and the Itla Children's Foundation in Finland.
- Editors Monica Martinussen and Marjo Kurki
- 63 psychosocial interventions
 - 57% at evidence level 1
 - 29% at evidence level 2
 - 11% at evidence level 3
 - 3% at evidence level 4
- 33 psychological tests
 - 12% at evidence level 1
 - 61% at evidence level 2
 - 15% at evidence level 3
 - 12% at evidence level 4




Policy recommendations 2021

- Recognize** the importance of the first 1000 days of life for lifelong mental health and wellbeing.
- Provide** comprehensive support for parents during children's first 1000 days of life.
- Identify** and respond systematically to risk factors early in life.
- Improve** equity and quality in services for young children and their families.
- Strengthen** cross-sectoral collaboration for the benefit of young children and their families.
- Advance** research, knowledge and understanding about the first 1000 days of life




1. Recognize the importance of the first 1000 days for lifelong mental health and wellbeing

- Strengthen policy focus on the first 1000 days of life**
 - Review existing policies and action plans to include a focus on the early years or develop new ones that focus specifically on the first years of life, including pregnancy.
- Support implementation** through clearly defined implementation plans.
- Ensure protection of the rights of the child in all policies**
 - Insert ways to safeguard the rights of the youngest children in existing policies and action plans.
- Prioritize funding** for services for expectant and new parents and children under two years old.




2. Provide comprehensive support for parents during children's first 1000 days of life

- Actively involve **both birthing and non-birthing parents** in prenatal and infant and child healthcare.
- Offer **group and individual parent support** to all expectant and new parents
 - Focus on preparing for the parenting role, supporting the development of parenting skills, promoting positive parent-child relationships, supporting the parental relationship and strengthening the parents' social network.
- Include digital solutions** in providing care, information and interventions for parents.
- Explore ways to **increase flexibility** in combining work and family life for parents of young children.




3. Identify and respond systematically to risk factors early in life

- Implement **valid and reliable methods** in prenatal and infant and child healthcare for identifying major risk factors:
 - mental health difficulties
 - social difficulties
 - relationship difficulties
 - alcohol and substance abuse
 - violence and trauma
- Ensure that assessment and interventions **reach both the parents and the child** when applicable.
- Establish **systematic and tiered routines** for follow-up after assessment and screening.
- Emphasize **early, appropriate and evidence-based** interventions in a tiered fashion for young children and families at risk.



4. Improve equity and quality in services for young children and their families

- Develop effective national strategies to address **inequity in services** for young children and their families.
- Ensure adequate resources** for providing quality, individualized care in all services relating to young children and their families, including families that need extra support.
- Offer regular **skills development, professional guidance and high-quality staff training on evidence-based practices** within all systems that provide services to young children and their families.
- Ensure that **surveillance and quality control systems** perform with adequate frequency, rigour and authority


 **5. Strengthen cross-sectoral collaboration for the benefit of young children and their families** | © Nordic Council of Ministers


- Ensure systematic coordination and collaboration between **prenatal care and infant and child healthcare**.
- Establish systematic collaboration between **infant and child healthcare and early childhood education and care**.
- Ensure effective collaboration between **specialized adult services** and prenatal care, infant and child healthcare, social services and child protection services in the case of parental mental illness, alcohol and substance abuse, violence or other at-risk circumstances.
- **Legally define the responsibilities** of all relevant institutions regarding collaboration within and between systems that provide services to the youngest children and their families.

 **6. Advance research, knowledge and understanding about the first 1000 days of life** | © Nordic Council of Ministers

- **Prioritize Nordic research** pertaining to the first 1000 days of life
 - especially in areas identified as needing further research
 - actively support research collaboration within the Nordic region.
- Encourage a special call within the Nordic countries for research on the **effectiveness of psychosocial interventions and implementation** that cover all levels in a stepped-care manner from promotion to treatment during the first 1000 days in life.
- Promote knowledge about **infant mental health and the significance of the early years** to all parents and staff in healthcare, social services, child protection and early childhood education and care.



 **THANK YOU** | © Nordic Council of Ministers



For reports and more information about the project, please visit:
www.first1000days.is/about-the-project