

First 1000 Days

A Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents

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Key Themes

Parenting matters for children's wellbeing now and into the future.

During the first 1000 days parents are central to children's lives; shaping children's experiences and interactions with the world. Confident, resilient and positive parenting is associated with improved health, wellbeing and learning for children now and into their future. Action to support parents to thrive in their parenting role has the potential to break intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and support the wellbeing of future generations.

Parents want to do the very best for their children but circumstances mean that it is harder for some parents than others.

Parenting is not easy. It is harder if you don't have the things you need and are constantly worrying about making ends meet. There are unfair differences in the resources and support that parents have and the circumstances they face. Parenting knowledge and skills play a part but, to support parents give their child the best start in life, system wide action is needed.

More can be done to help create the conditions for families in Wales to flourish.

The places in which parents live, work and socialise influence parenting in two ways. They influence how parents think and feel, and what they are able to do. A society that supports parenting offers fair work; homes that are safe and warm; affordable transport; strong communities; and easy access to supportive services when they are needed.

Good mental health and social support act as buffers, helping parents manage challenges and minimise impact for their children.

All families will face difficult times and it will not always be possible to immediately address the root cause. Families often feel the impact of economic and environmental crises that are outside the control of a single organisation. Action to enhance parents' mental wellbeing and support networks provides a route to minimise the impact of wider structural factors on children's health, wellbeing and learning. Interventions that consider parents' feelings, the resources they need, and their social networks are more likely to effectively support parenting.

Introduction

The First 1000 Days is a health improvement programme led by Public Health Wales. It was established in response to strong evidence that suggests the period between conception and a child's second birthday offers the greatest potential for impact in both improving outcomes and reducing inequalities. A key aim of the programme is to support the system to understand and act on the best available evidence.

This report describes a public health approach to supporting parents during the first 1000 days. The model brings together the latest theory, evidence and insight into the lived experience of parents and professionals in Wales. It identifies the key building blocks that need to be in place to support parents to give their child the best start in life. A technical report describing in more detail the methodology and underpinning research is available¹.

The report also highlights and discusses implications for policy and practice to enable adoption of such an approach in Wales. It will be relevant for anyone with an interest in improving outcomes for children in Wales, in particular, policy leads, key professional groups such as midwifery and health visiting, and local strategic partnerships.

It is important to recognise the diversity of families in Wales and that it is not just mothers and fathers that take a parenting role. Where we refer to parents we always mean any main caregiver with a parenting role. This includes grandparents, wider family, foster carers and those providing informal and formal childcare.

The development of this public health approach to supporting parents, and its associated model and framework for action has identified a number of key themes;

- Parenting matters for children's wellbeing now and into the future.
- Parents want to do the very best for their children but circumstances mean that it is harder for some parents than others.
- More can be done to help create the conditions for families in Wales to flourish
- Good mental health and social support act as buffers, helping parents manage challenges and minimise impact for their children.

¹ Developing a Public Health Approach to Supporting Parents, Public Health Wales, 2022
<https://phw.nhs.wales/publications/publications1/developing-a-public-health-approach-to-supporting-parents-technical-report/>

Parenting in the first 1000 days

Parenting plays a key role in influencing children's current and long term outcomes and the wellbeing of future generations. The first 1000 days is a period of rapid brain development and there is a strong body of evidence that our earliest experiences shape our developing brain and create the foundations for future health, wellbeing and learning. (Center on The Developing Child, Harvard University, 2016). During the first 1000 days a child's experiences and interactions with the environment are predominantly provided and mediated by their parents. As a result parents are the primary influence on their child's early exposures, experiences and development.

Parents want to do their very best for their children and most parents will find it difficult at times. It is not just about knowledge and skills; parenting requires emotional, social, material and financial resources. The availability of these resources is influenced by the wider socio-economic context, parents own upbringing, and their position in society. There are unfair differences in the resources that parents have to support them in their parenting role. As a result, parenting is an important mechanism by which disadvantage can be passed from one generation to the next and a route through which intergenerational cycles of disadvantage can be broken.

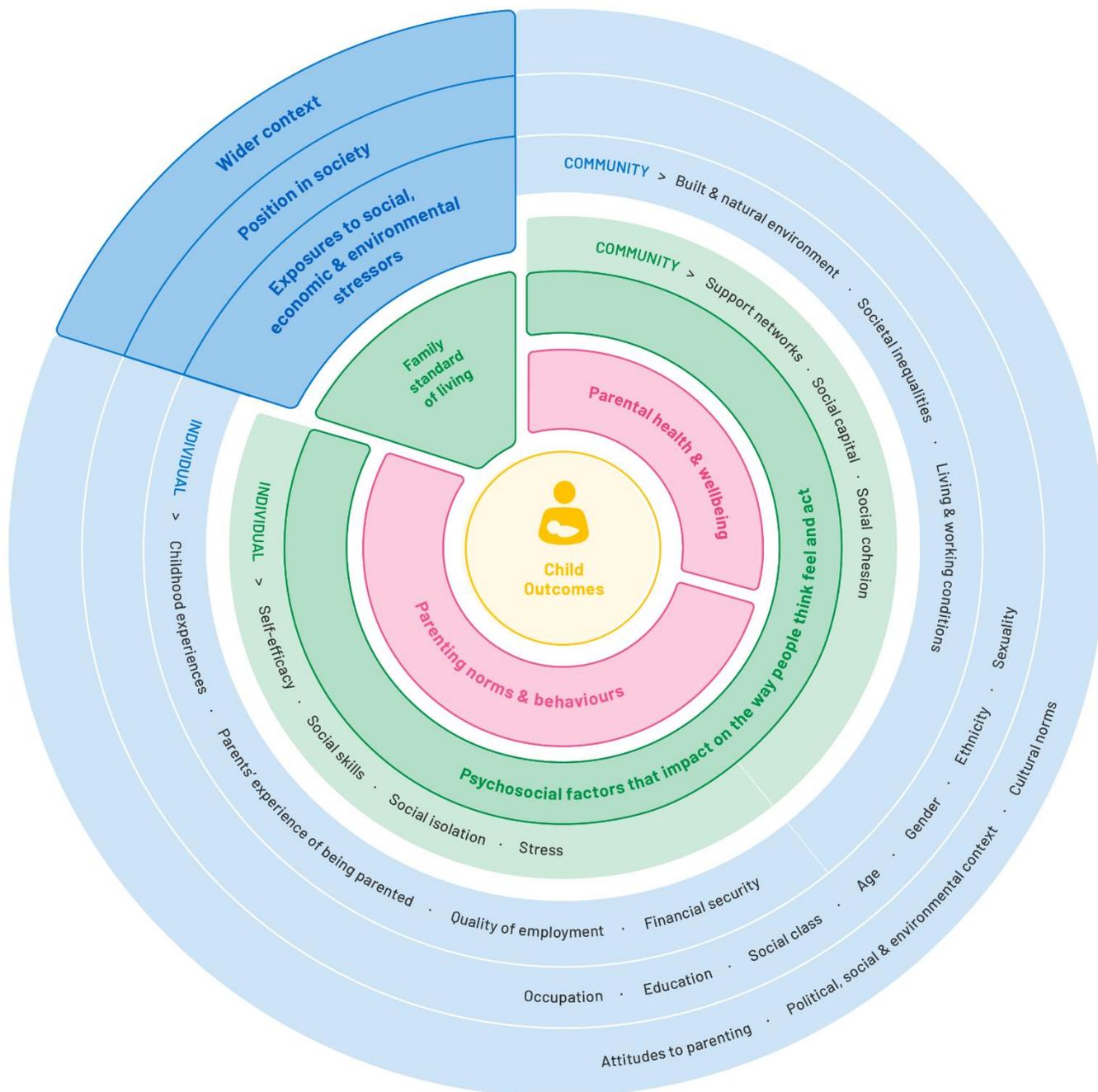
'the way mothers, fathers and other caregivers nurture and support children in the early years is among the most decisive factors for healthy child development, with lifelong and intergenerational benefits for health, productivity and social cohesion.' (The Lancet, 2016)

Figure 1 illustrates the routes through which the availability of these social, emotional, material and financial resources act to impact the circumstances in which parents undertake their parenting role, and as a result, influence children's earliest experiences and outcomes. It brings together thinking on how structural, community and individual factors influence parenting and outcomes for children into a single framework.

The framework highlights that though socio-economic factors will impact on young children's outcomes directly, the primary route through which they impact is through their influence on parents, and the impact these factors have on parent's health and wellbeing and parenting norms and behaviours.

It also highlights the important buffering role psychosocial factors can play as they influence how parents think, feel and act. Whether individual or community based, positive experience of these factors can help parents manage challenges and minimise the impact of wider structural factors on their children's earliest experiences.

Figure 1: Routes of influence - how structural factors and psychosocial pathways impact outcomes in the first 1000 days

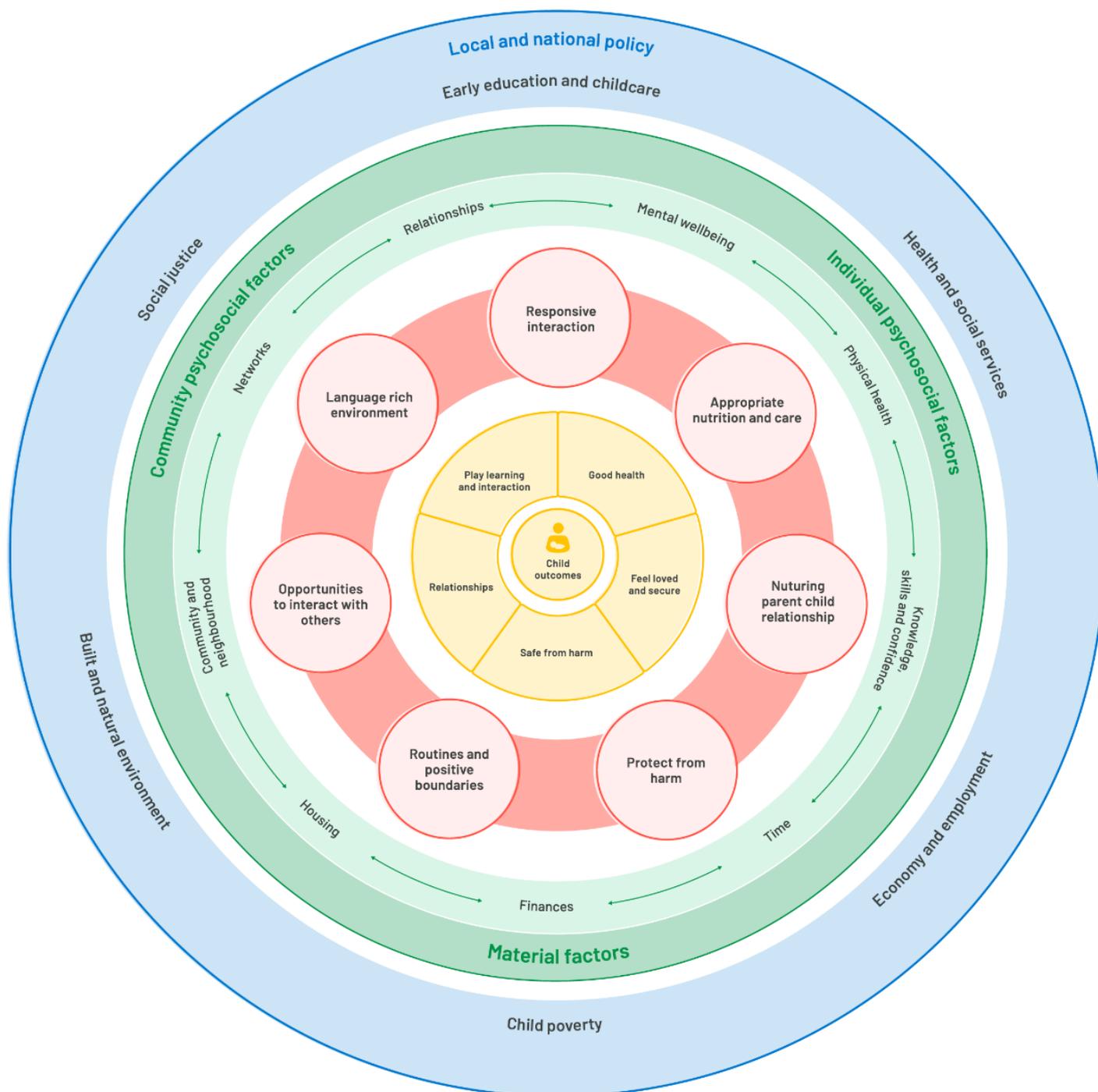


Adapted from: (UCL Institute of Health Equity, 2017), (Barton & Grant, 2006) and (Bronfenbrenner, 1977)

A public health model of parenting support

The public health model of parenting support describes how parents, communities and wider society can work together to give children in Wales the best start in life. The model builds on the routes of influence framework by drawing on research and the views and experiences of parents and professionals to identify the specific structural, community and individual building blocks that enable parents to thrive in their parenting role.

Figure 2: A Public Health Model of Parenting Support



What children need for the best start in life



The child and what they need for the best start in life is central to the model.

There has traditionally been a focus on making sure that children under two are safe and healthy. However, play, relationships and feeling loved are just as important and create the foundations for future health, wellbeing and learning.

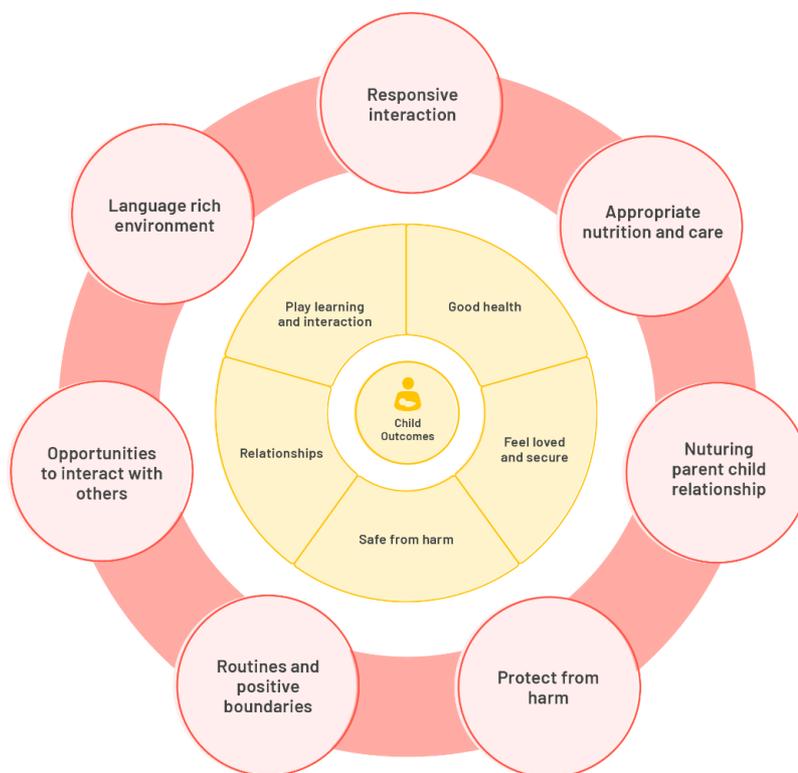
This model explicitly recognises the critical role these wider elements play in improving outcomes and reducing inequalities.

- **Good health:** Babies need adequate nutrition, warmth, exercise and sleep to grow and develop. They need to be protected from infectious diseases and environmental hazards like cigarette smoke.
- **Loved and secure:** Feeling safe and loved in infancy enables children to learn and explore the world with confidence and influences the way children see and interact with the world into adulthood.
- **Safe from harm:** This includes both physical and psychological harm. Experience of severe, prolonged or repetitive stress can shape the developing brain.
- **Relationships:** While there is no 'perfect' family structure, the relationship between parent and child, between the child's parents and also the family's relationships with their wider family and social network are important for children's wellbeing.
- **Play, learning and interaction:** Opportunities to interact, play and learn are important in themselves and build the foundation for future development.

How parents can give children the best start in life

The second layer of the model describes what we know about how parents give children the best start in life. Each circle represents an important ingredient of confident, resilient and positive parenting.

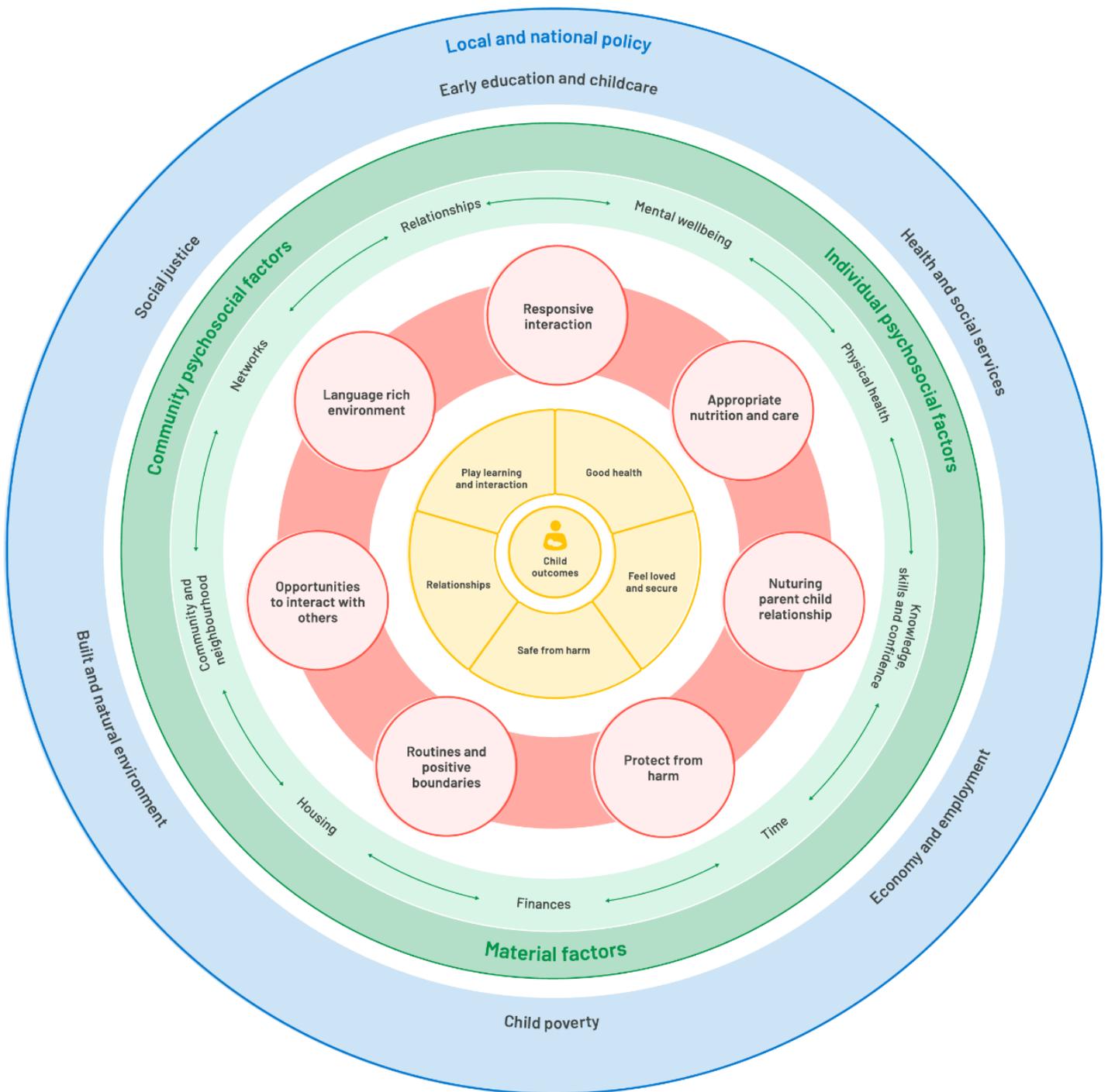
Approaches to parenting are strongly influenced by family and culture. Although views on how to parent may vary, there is notable agreement on the key ingredients of parenting to give children the best start in life. This layer of the model is informed by evidence reviews to identify the risk and protective factors influencing children's outcomes and insight work with parents and professionals in Wales.



- **Responsive interaction:** Interaction between babies and adults, including babbling, expressions and gestures, supports brain development and mental wellbeing. It helps build relationships, security and confidence.
- **Appropriate nutrition and care:** This is important for physical health and development and includes access to the health care children need to prevent or treat illness.
- **Nurturing parent child relationship:** A secure trusting relationship between parent and baby develops naturally for the vast majority of parents, but sometimes additional support is needed. It is important for a child's mental wellbeing now and in the future.
- **Protect from harm:** Harm includes illness and both physical and psychological injury as well as witnessing violence and abuse.
- **Routines and positive boundaries:** Familiar routines, emotional support, and consistent guidance and boundaries help children make sense of the world. Parents must not use physical punishment.
- **Opportunities to interact:** Positive experiences with a variety of people, places and objects helps learning and development as well as building confidence.
- **Language rich environment:** This includes chatting with the child about daily activities, family conversations, singing, reading out loud, and playing with books. Engaging with spoken and written language is important for early language, communication and social development.

Enabling parents to give their child the best start

The two outer layers of the model describe the factors that influence the circumstances in which parents undertake their parenting role. The context in which parents live, work and socialise influences their health, how they feel, and what they are able to do. These include the extent to which they are able to draw on individual, community and material assets as well as their experience of wider structural factors.



The foundations that support parenting

The green layer of the model highlights the material and the individual and community psychosocial factors that influence how parents think, feel and act. Psychosocial factors can be negative, for example stressful working conditions or positive, for example supportive social networks. Positive psychosocial factors can act as a buffer and help people manage challenges and minimise their negative impact on both the parent and their child.

- **Mental Wellbeing:** Becoming a parent is a significant life change, bringing responsibilities and experiences that challenge the emotional resilience of parents. Parents who are feeling low may find the demands of parenting more challenging.
- **Physical Health:** During pregnancy the health of a baby is directly affected by the health of the mother. Parenting can be more difficult if parents face challenges with their own physical health.
- **Knowledge, skills and confidence:** Parents generally learn how to parent from watching family and friends and their own experience of being parented as a child. Parenting support has traditionally focussed on developing knowledge and skills. Parenting effectively requires a broad set of skills including planning, awareness, self-control and flexibility.
- **Time:** Parents need to balance competing demands for their time; to look after their own needs, to provide for their family and to parent their children. Work and additional caring responsibilities can directly impact the time parents have to spend with their children.
- **Finances:** Families need sufficient income to provide a clean, warm home, nutritious food, clothing, activities and equipment. Financial concerns can impact on wellbeing and relationships.
- **Housing:** Babies and young children are particularly vulnerable to health issues related to damp, cold or unsafe homes. Housing issues, including housing insecurity can be stressful for parents and make daily childcare activities more difficult.
- **Community and neighbourhoods:** The communities and local environments in which families live can influence parents' own health and wellbeing, their parenting norms and their ability to access activities, services and support.
- **Relationships and networks:** The transition to parenthood sees parents negotiate a fundamental shift in roles and responsibilities. This can sometimes be challenging. While not all conflict is damaging, frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict can harm children. Relationships between parents, the wider family and with professionals are an important influence on parenting, providing emotional support, advice, and practical help.

The evidence suggests that psychosocial pathways are important to health inequalities and should be explicitly considered in efforts to reduce these inequalities. (UCL institute of Health Equity, 2017)

Creating the conditions for families to thrive

The blue layer of the model describes how the local and national policy context creates the conditions in which parents undertake their parenting role. Policy decisions at a local and national level have an impact on parents and the resources they have for parenting. They create the conditions that shape people's daily actions, behaviours, perceptions and feelings in positive or negative ways. A fair society with good living and working conditions and supportive health and childcare services provides a solid foundation for families to give children the best start in life.

This is a population based, public health model of parenting support. It aims to explain how a shift in the focus from what individual parents 'should do' towards creating the right conditions for families to flourish can address the root causes of poor outcomes and inequalities.

The development of local and national policy provides an opportunity to strengthen the foundations that support parents to give their child the best start in life. In identifying the key policy areas that influence the circumstances in which parents live, work and socialise the model illustrates the important relationship between broader policy areas and children's outcomes.

- **Child Poverty:** Children growing up in poverty experience many disadvantages which accumulate across the life-course. Poverty directly impacts a parent's ability to provide activities and material goods to support their child. It also indirectly influences early experiences through the additional stress living in poverty places on parents, which in turn influences parenting norms and behaviours.
- **Economy and Employment:** Being in fair work protects health and wellbeing. Poor working conditions can, however, damage health and family life. Fair work offers a decent living wage and the flexibility to balance work and family life.
- **Health and Social Services:** These services play a critical role in keeping families safe and healthy. Effective identification of need and appropriate support at the right time can prevent further problems.
- **Early Childhood Education & Childcare:** High quality early childhood education and childcare create positive early learning opportunities and can be particularly helpful for families that find it difficult to engage in these activities.
- **Social Justice:** More equal societies support health and mental wellbeing. People have fairer access to goods and services and are more likely to support each other.
- **Built and Natural Environment:** The places that we live shape our behaviour, perceptions and feelings in a variety of ways. Safe, clean and attractive neighbourhoods with easy access to social networks, facilities and services support both physical and mental health.

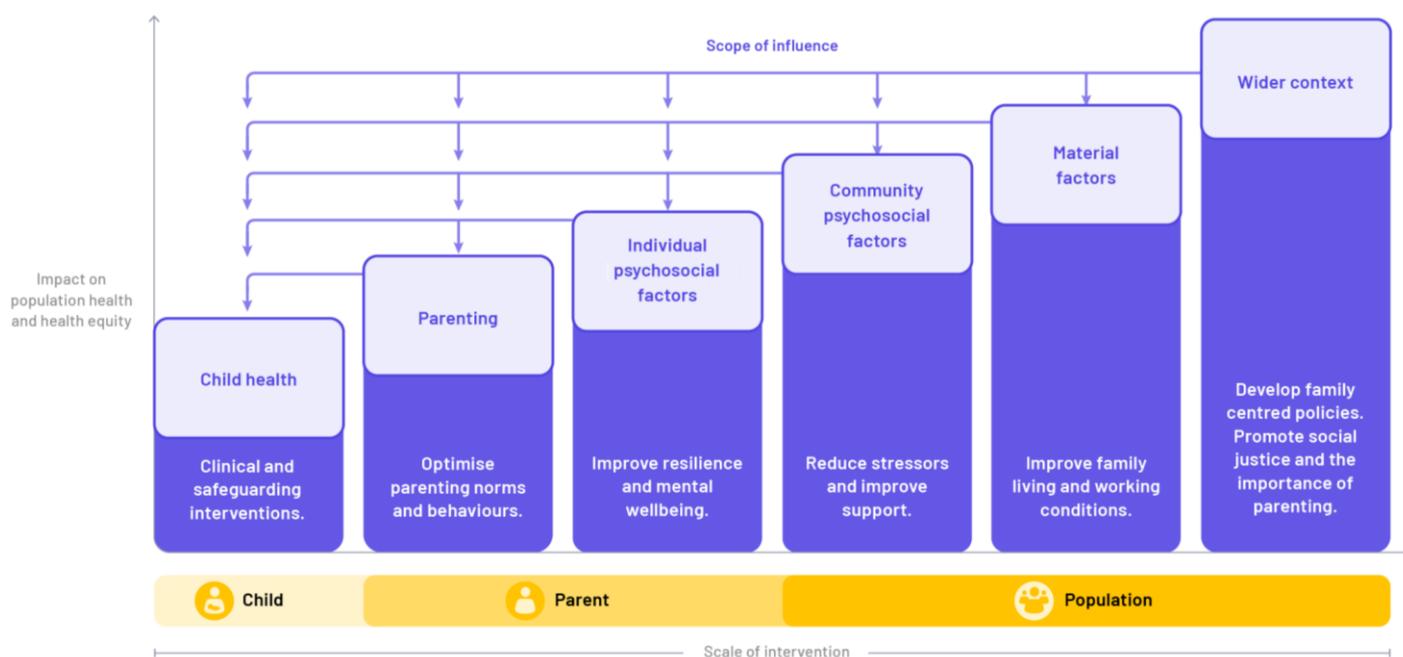
Creating system wide support for parenting

The public health model of parenting support illustrates the range of influences on parenting. It helps explain why information and advice is often insufficient on its own to change behaviour and why some families are more able to benefit from support than others. The model highlights the importance of creating a whole system that supports parents. Action at local and national policy level, in the places where parents live, work and access services is needed to create the conditions for families to thrive.

There are unfair differences in the support and resources that parents have and the circumstances they face. Some children don't get the best start in life and are more likely to have poorer health and wellbeing as they grow up. Action to support parenting has the potential to influence long term outcomes for children and the wellbeing of future generations.

The framework for action in Figure 3, describes potential action areas to support parents in their parenting role and their relative potential for population impact. It illustrates why action at a policy level is key to improving outcomes and reducing inequalities in Wales. Policy level action to create supportive conditions for parents and families benefits a greater number of people and also has the potential to positively influence psychosocial factors at a community and individual level. Action at the individual level is likely to reach fewer people and their potential for impact is subject to the influence of the wider context in which families live. That is not to say action at the individual level is not important, but it needs to form part of a comprehensive approach to supporting parents that seeks to act at each level of the framework for action.

Figure 3. Supporting parenting to give every child the best start: a framework for action



Implications for policy and practice

Giving every child the best start in life and reducing inequalities have been longstanding policy objectives in Wales. While positive steps have been taken, more could be done to help create the conditions for families in Wales to flourish. The public health approach to supporting parents set out in this report illustrates the need for a system wide response to improving outcomes in the first 1000 days. It has highlighted the important role wider stakeholders have in reducing the inequalities.

The implications for policy and practice set out below are informed by the factors identified within the model of parenting support as key routes to improving outcomes. In some areas applying a family lens will be a new approach. In others action may already be underway, but opportunities will still exist to increase the scale or consistency of delivery and maximise impact.

Policy and strategy development

- **Reducing inequalities in outcomes** in the first 1000 days matters for children's current and future health and wellbeing.
- Action to **improve outcomes in the first 1000 days and reduce child poverty** should be a strategic priority across the system in Wales.
- Adopt inclusive, **family centred approaches** to local and national policy development to **identify and minimise any negative impacts for families**.
- A **common set of system wide indicators** are required to better evidence and understand the impact of adopting a public health approach to supporting parents.
- Health visiting and midwifery services, as the universal support services in the first 1000 days, are uniquely placed to systematically **assess families' needs and facilitate early access to a broad range of support**
- **Continuity of care** is critical to the development of trusting relationships necessary for effective family support.
- **Consistent, high quality, evidence based parenting information and support** should be available to all families, with targeted support available where additional needs are identified.
- Identify and address gaps in the provision of support to **help families manage common family stressors** such as relationship problems, debt and housing.

Improving population outcomes and reducing inequalities requires action at scale with universal support and assessment of risk for all, with targeted intervention proportionate to the level of disadvantage (Marmot, 2010)

Service development and delivery

- Support midwifery, health visiting and those working with families to **understand and act on the psychosocial and structural factors** that influence parents' opportunity to thrive in their parenting role.
- **Work in partnership with families to develop and evaluate services** to prevent unintended psychosocial and structural consequences.
- **Ensure parental confidence and wellbeing are included as outcome measures** in the evaluation of interventions in the first 1000 days.
- Create opportunities to **build and strengthen networks between practitioners** across the breadth of workforces that support families in the first 1000 days.
- Design and deliver services for families that better enable the **development of trusting relationships between parents and professionals**.
- Provide families **with high quality, consistent and supportive advice and information** about common family stressors.
- Maximise opportunities for families to **build and strengthen informal support networks**.