

20 December 2013

As I sat down to write about the importance of the first 1,000 days for children, families, the community, a little girl of approximately 3 years of age came into my office and said, "Merry Christmas" and performed a little dance for me. She was at the Plunket rooms for playgroup and they were having their end of year Christmas party. She and her mother had been coming to the group for a number of years and were a real part of the community that came every Wednesday to support each other, form friendships and allow the children time to play, explore and learn. This little girl had been involved with Plunket and all the services offered from when she was only a few weeks old and was now around 1,000 days old.

The importance of the first 1,000 days of a child's life is understood by many and especially by Plunket teams. The clinical teams made up of Plunket nurses, health workers and supported by their Clinical Leaders, understand that during the first 1,000 days a baby needs plenty of nourishment, a healthy and secure environment and the right sort of stimulation to grow his or her brain fully. The clinical teams have advanced training, experience and knowledge in this area that allows them to deliver services and develop groups and programmes with other Plunket teams that are aimed to make these early years the best start for every child.

Everything a child experiences from what they see, hear, touch and smell has a significant impact on the growth and development of the brain, while the experience of secure and loving relationship develops strong emotional attachment and the ability to learn to trust and love. All of these factors will influence their thinking, their emotions, their ability to learn and how they will interact with family, friends and all of society right throughout their lives.

Thinking about my visiting 'party-going' three year old I reflected that she and her mother would have met her Plunket nurse at around four weeks of age. Her father and perhaps extended family/whanau may have been present at this initial introduction to Plunket. The Plunket nurse would have worked alongside the mother and whanau

to understand their unique situation, their understanding of the journey they were beginning, their family/whanau beliefs and values and what their dreams for this little girl were. Through conversation, health promotion, exploration and resources the Plunket nurse would have made a plan with the family that's intention was to enhance this child's experiences and relationships in her early years. The Plunket nurse would have offered additional support with the health worker, explained PlunketLine services and the support they could offer, described other support and social services in the area and outlined groups that could offer education, guidance and friendships. They may have required services where available through the Family Centre or the Plunket Postnatal Adjustment Programme.

The family's ongoing connection with Plunket would have included regular Plunket nurse and health worker visits and phone calls, may have included parenting education sessions volunteer activities and toy library membership and obviously did include playgroup participation.

All of these options are aimed to provide a strong and robust foundation for the family and the child. Plunket's ability to engage with families and stay connected through these first 1,000 days provides the opportunity to influence improving health outcomes that will impact throughout the child's life.

My office-visiting-toddler showed her sociability, her inquisitive nature, her sense of fun and belonging and her developing personality. I think her first 1,000 days have been well spent and that Plunket's support and service have had some positive influence.

Mania.