

Mercy In Action and the First 1,000 Days

By Vicki Penwell, LM, CPM, MSM, MA

It seems to be a universal joy of every community midwife to run into a family months or years later and see them with the baby you so lovingly helped them bring into the world. I have been a midwife for more than 40 years at this point, so I have long known the joys of meeting families who now have grown children to show off to me, and the babies of those children I midwifed for them long ago! But imagine another outcome, one that has become too frequent and heartbreaking for me in my community in the Philippines over the years. Sometimes when I run into a woman on the street or in a neighboring village who had a baby in our birth center, she sadly tells me that her child died in early childhood. Often it is something entirely preventable, like measles, or diarrhea, or pneumonia, or one of the other diseases of deprivation that so often take the life of children in infancy or early childhood in low resource countries. Not infrequently, a level of malnutrition was also involved.

A few years ago, I read the book *First 1,000 Days*, and something clicked for me. I realized I did not have to feel helpless, but that we could extend our role as a midwife to include this vital period from conception to the 2nd birthday. In my reading, I learned that an entire nation's future is determined by the quality of nutrition and loving interaction in the first 1,000 days of life of its citizens, when the vast majority of brain cells are formed and connections are made. Childhood malnutrition is often called a silent emergency,

because it can be hard to see the damage it does to children around the world. The same is true of neglect and lack of stimulation. But our staff in our Philippine birth centers were in a perfect position to mitigate that damage, by educating all parents about the vital importance of the whole first 1,000 days, encompassing pregnancy, birth infancy, and early childhood.

Here are a few of the things that are happening in the first 1,000 days of life.

Building the child's brain:

Good nutrition during the first 1,000 days provides the building blocks for healthy brain development. Teach the parents and the entire family how to play with baby, read to the baby, and stimulate the baby in positive ways. This should include lots of holding, cuddling, and baby-wearing, starting at birth.

Building the child's health:

The first 1,000 days set the foundation for health for all the days that follow. Stress the vital importance of breastfeeding for the first year at least, and educate on how to make health choices for the first foods. Examine the possibility of the mother pumping breastmilk for the baby if she must go back to work.

Building a fair start for the child:

The first 1,000 days are a window of opportunity to enable all children to reach their potential. When I teach this to health professionals and parents, I often bring up images of a foot race. Children who did not have an optimal first 1,000 days of life are starting

farther back than the other racers. Focusing on the first 1,000 days is a powerful tool for helping a child get a fair start in life that will make a real difference throughout life.

In the birth centers we sponsor in the Philippines, the midwives work closely with our home health visitors (we call them Mercy Kasamas, meaning a companion in Tagalog) who follows up with all the babies, making a monthly home visit to weight the child, and make notes of growth and development milestones, along with any immunizations or illness, until the second birthday. These home visits throughout the first 1,000 days allow us to give ongoing breastfeeding support and education on proper weaning foods and toddler nutrition, as well as a chance to encourage to parents to stimulate their child's brain by reading books and playing games. We also give the children books and when needed, supplemental food.

Babies have only one start in life; at Mercy In Action, we take seriously our responsibility to make it a strong start for all. Please consider joining us by supporting our First 1,000 Days program in the Philippines.

*If you would like to know more, Mercy In Action has recently created an online accredited continuing education course on this subject entitled: **Midwives and the First 1,000 Days** available here: www.mercycollegeofmidwifery.edu/online-ceu*