



Responsive Care a foundation for Healthy Happy Learning Children – The First 1000 days

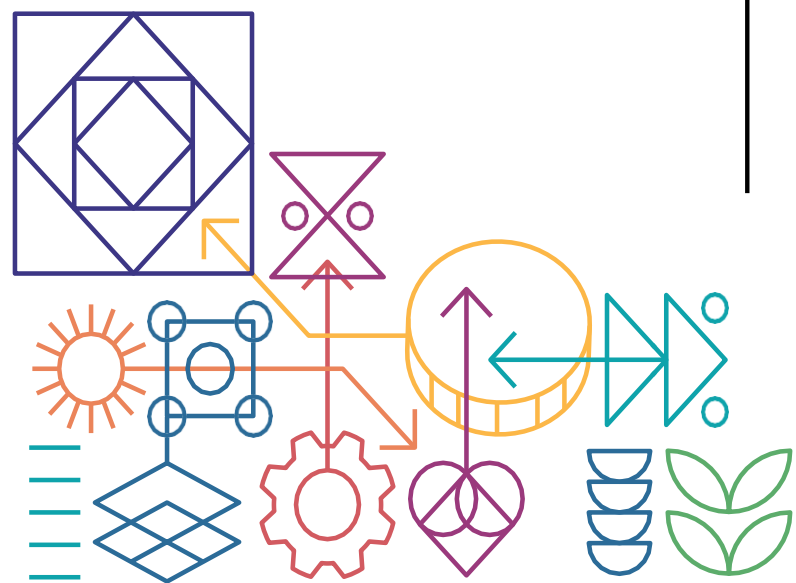
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Ilifa Labantwana works towards a South Africa where everyone contributes to children reaching their full potential.



Responsive Care Protecting the First 1000 days

Objective of my presentation

1. Reframe Responsive Care as foundational for child health and development
2. Infant and Young Child Feeding natural steps of responsive care
3. Response care protecting the first 1000 days



Package of care for child <5 years

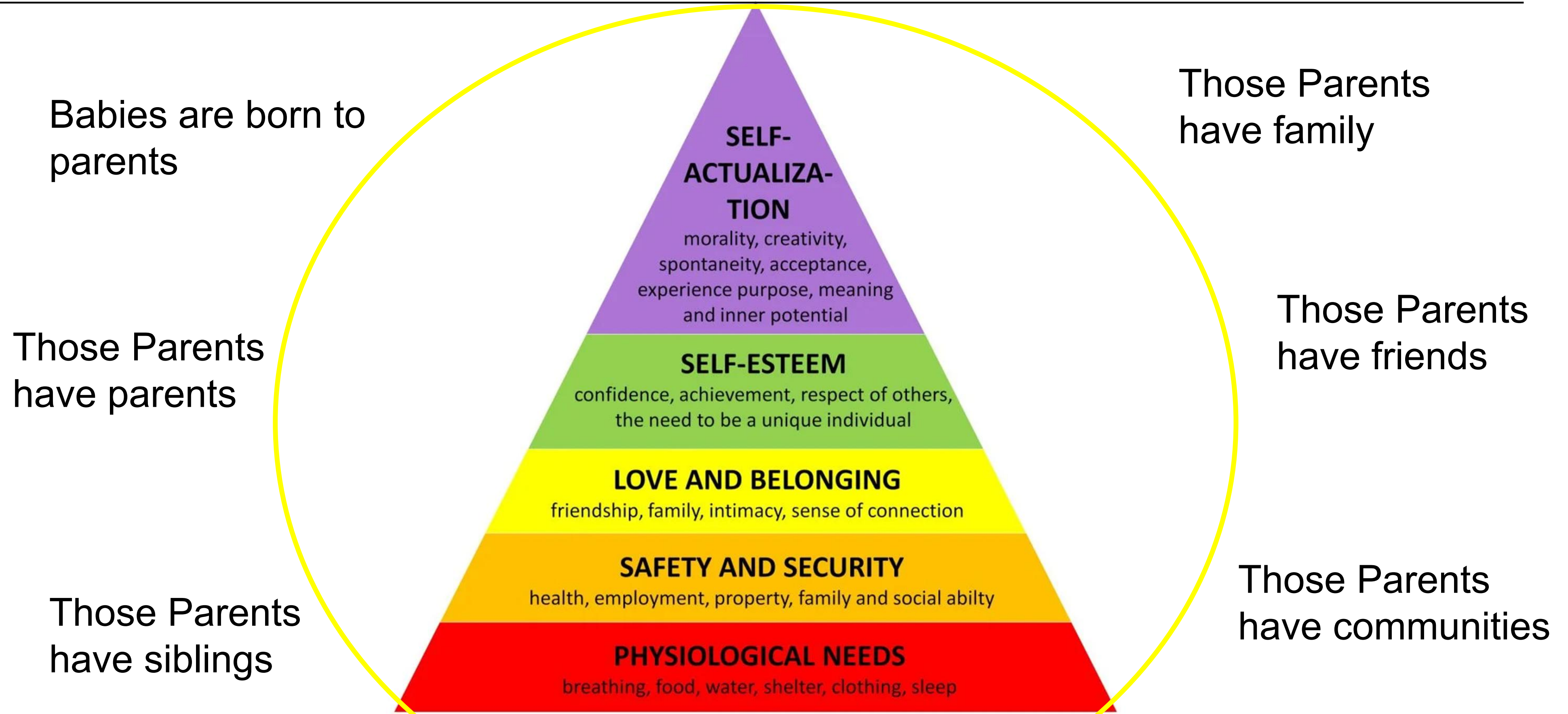


National Communication strategy



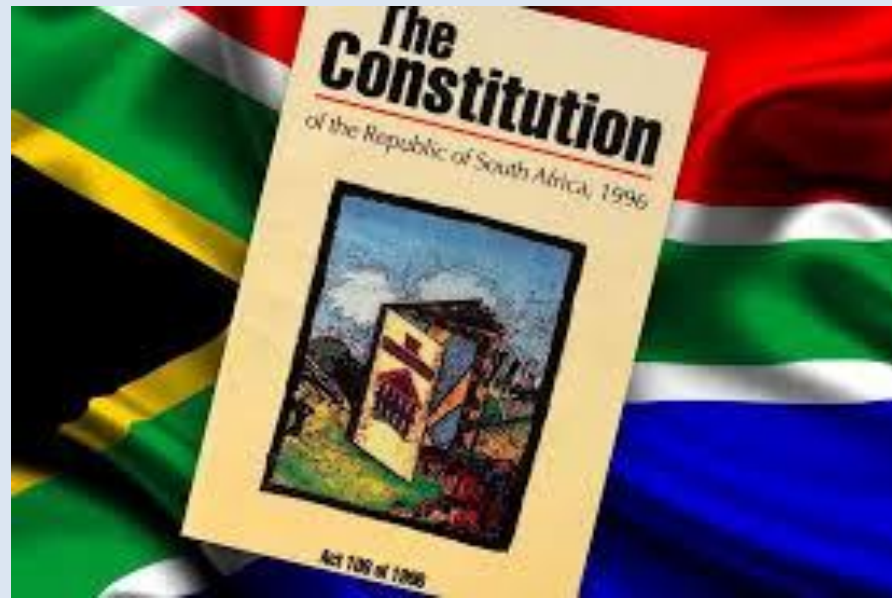
Support DBE-NDoH 0-2 strategy alignment

Circles of care



Policy anchors for Child Care and Protection

Bill of Rights (1996)



Section 28 1b-c afford all children:

- Family care; Parental care; or appropriate alternative care when removed from their family environment
- Basic nutrition (food); Shelter; Basic health care services
- Social services

2030 Strategy for ECD



National Parenting Programme

- Health and nutrition
- Play and creativity
- Positive discipline
- Child safety and protection
- Children's rights and responsibilities

Road to Health Book



Pillars

Nutrition



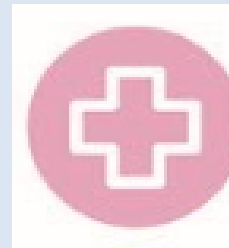
Love, Play, Talk



Protection



Health care



Extra Care

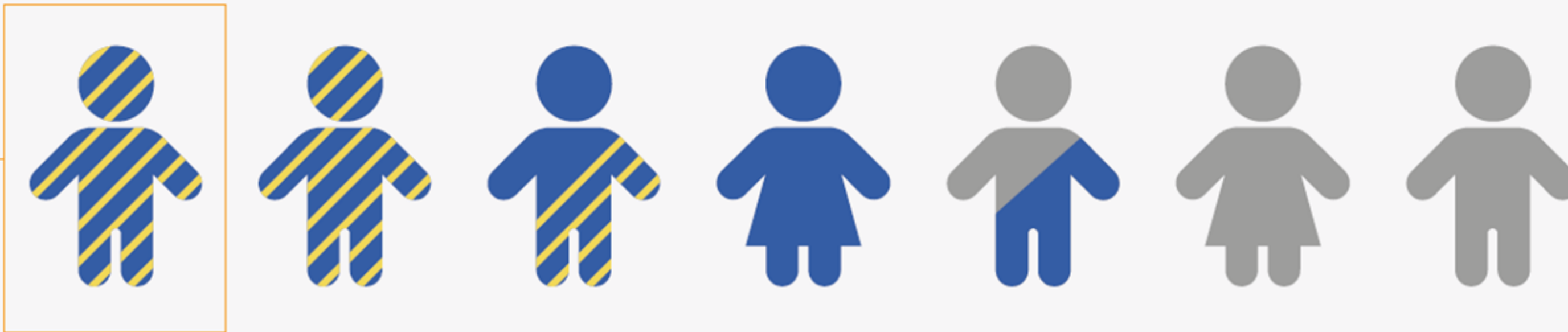


Key features

- Supporting mothers through home visits, group sessions, and community outreach.
- Promoting positive caregiving practices and mental health support.
- Integrating parenting support into health and social services

What is the living context of young children in South Africa?

There are nearly 7 million children aged 0-5 years old in South Africa.⁷



Nearly two-thirds of 0-5 year-olds (4.5 million children) live in the poorest 40% of households.⁸



2.5 million live in areas classified as rural or with poor infrastructure.¹⁰



1 million live in the poorest deep rural areas.¹⁰



- Deepening poverty
- Lack of maternity protection & support
- Rising cost of the essentials - food
- Increased rates child neglect and maltreatment
- Poor developmental and learning outcomes

Indicators of care and protection in the first 1000 days

- Maternal health (e.g. HIV)
- Maternal risk behavior
- Maternal nutrition

- * Delayed cord clamping
- * Immediate skin-to-skin
- * Immediate initiation of BF

- Exclusive BF <6mo
 - Continued BF to 2 yrs
 - CF only from age 6 mo
-



Antenatal care



After delivery



Post-partum care

World Bank, 2006, Lancet Maternal Health Series, 2008, 2016 and 2021

Evidence for fundamental care in Early Child Development

Framework / Institution	ECD Age Definition	How it is framed
The Lancet Series Maternal & Child Health (2013 and updated 2021)	First 1000 days (Conception to 2 years)	This paper is the foundational neurodevelopment paper in the Lancet Series on Early Childhood Development.
The Lancet -“Advancing Early Childhood Development: From Science to Scale” (2017)	First 1000 days	Brain structure and function are shaped by in-utero biological and psychosocial exposures adversity and nurturing during pregnancy influence long-term cognitive and socio-emotional outcome
The Lancet (ECD Series) 2016 and 2024	Birth to 5 years (under-5s)	A biological and developmental window critical for brain development and human capital formation
UNICEF (2017, 2024)	Birth to 8 years	A rights-based and education continuum, spanning early childhood and the early primary years
South Africa (DBE – Vision 2030, NIECDP, 2015)	Birth to the year before formal schooling (≈ 0–5 years)	A service-delivery and governance definition linked to ECD programmes

Nutrition is fundamental –physiological need – throughout life

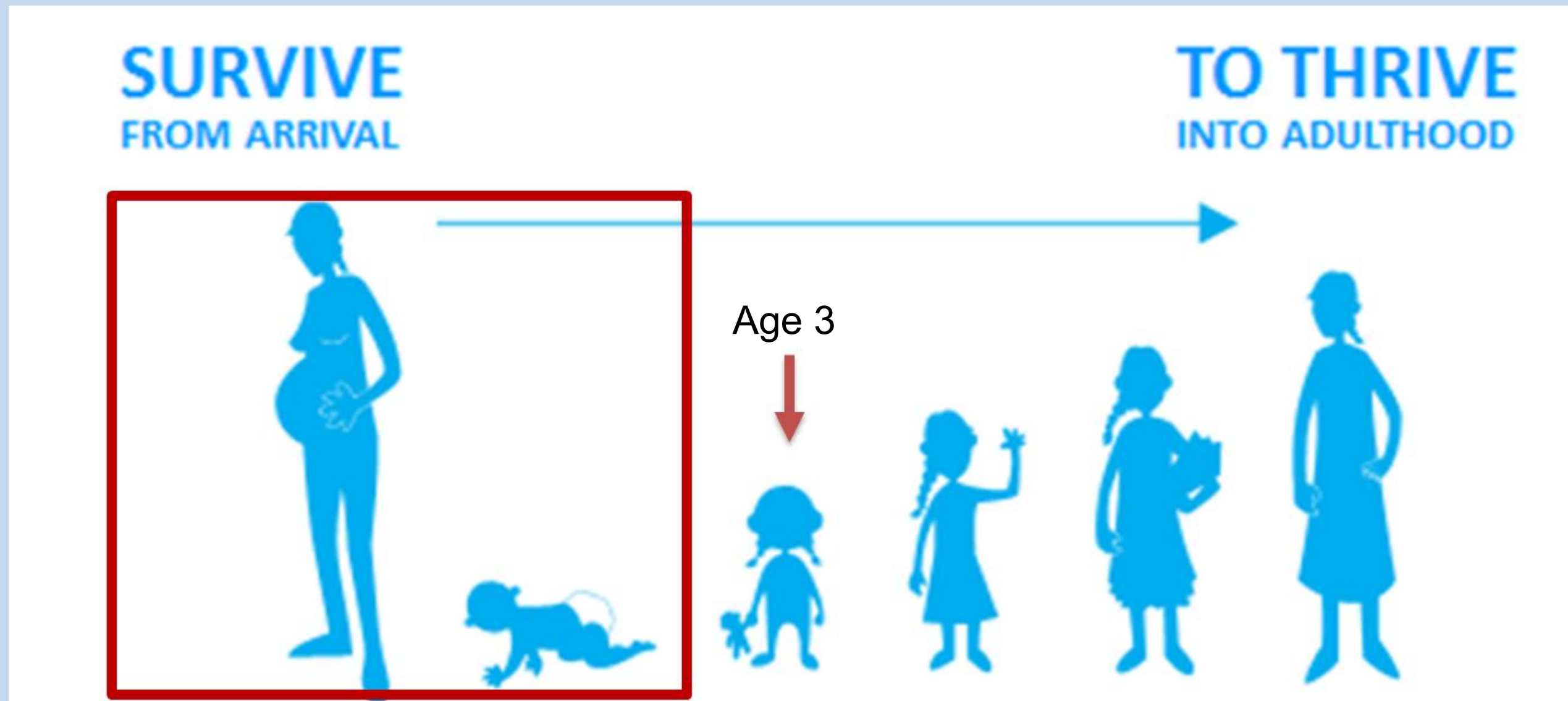
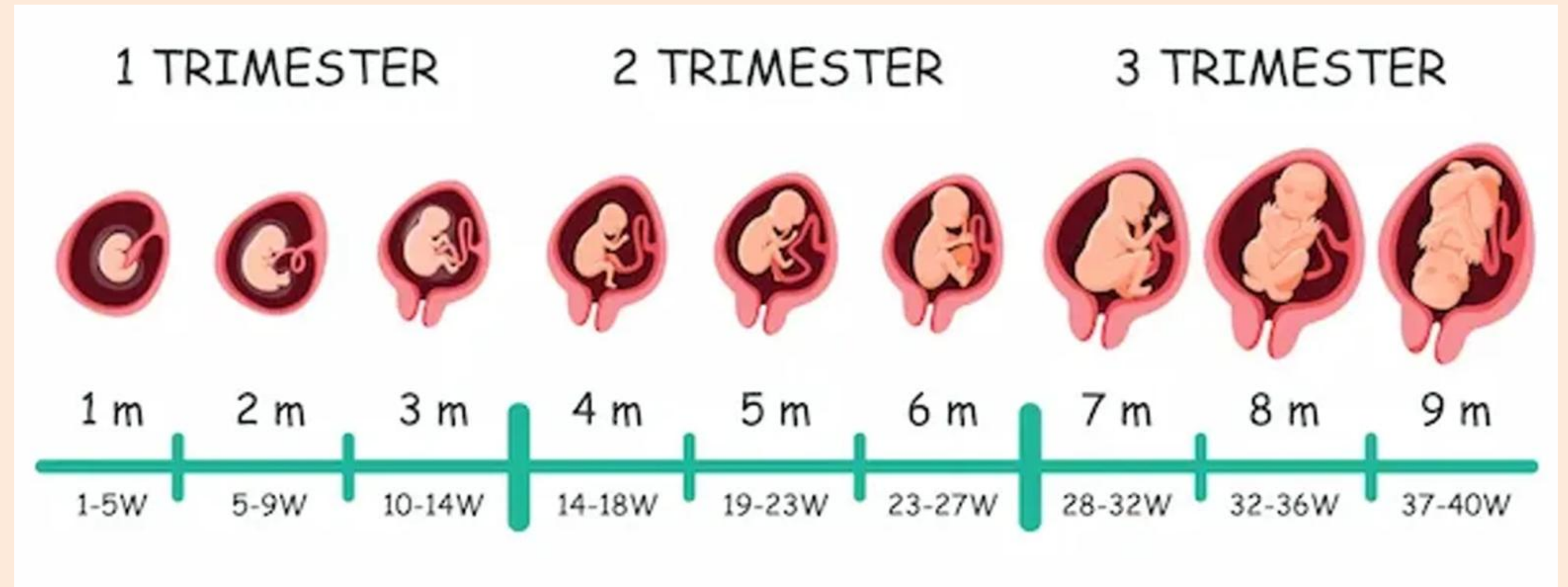


Image source: UNICEF, 2025

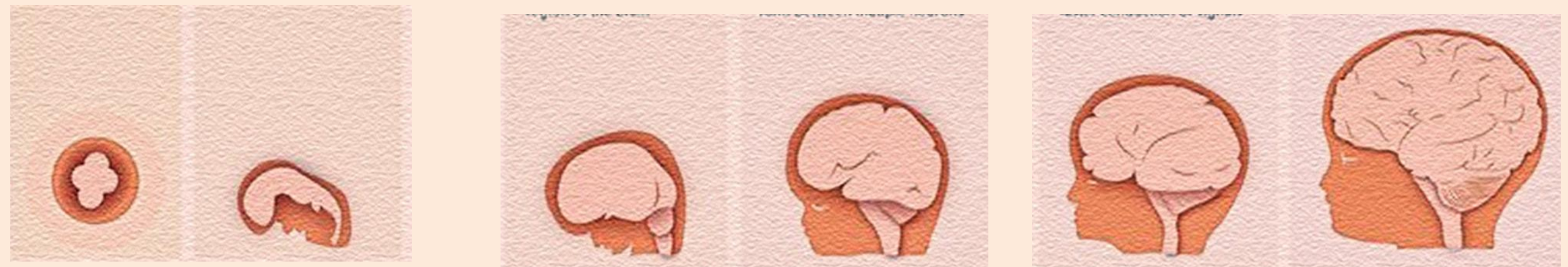
- First 1000 days is the critical limited window to ACT!
- Nutrition in the first 1000 days is predicative of future health – Noncommunicable Diseases / Life expectancy
- Building healthy bodies, building functional brains depends on good nutrition
- Children are future parents – Healthy Children, Healthy future parents

Fetal brain development is shaped in utero by maternal nutrition and wellbeing (first 270 days)

Healthy Maternal weight gain, optimal nutrition and wellbeing (mental health) →



Healthy fetal growth in weight, and morphology (form and structure) →

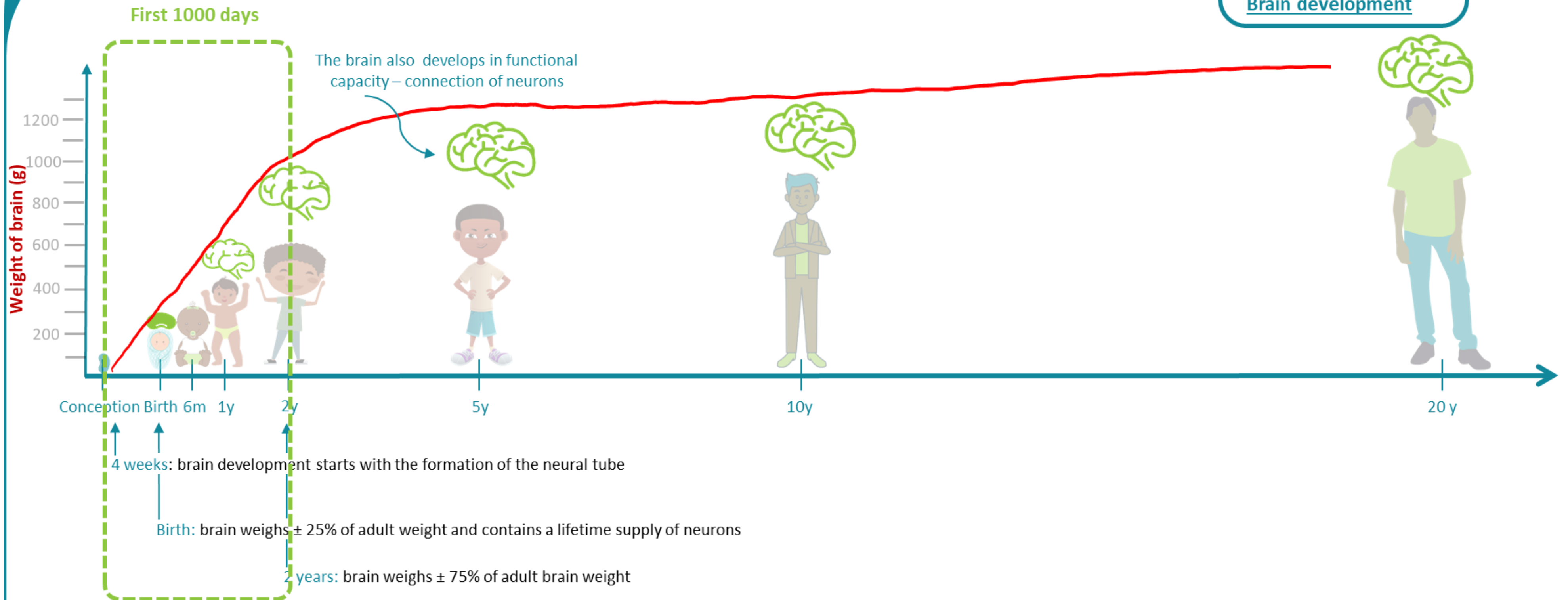


Why is optimal nutrition so important?

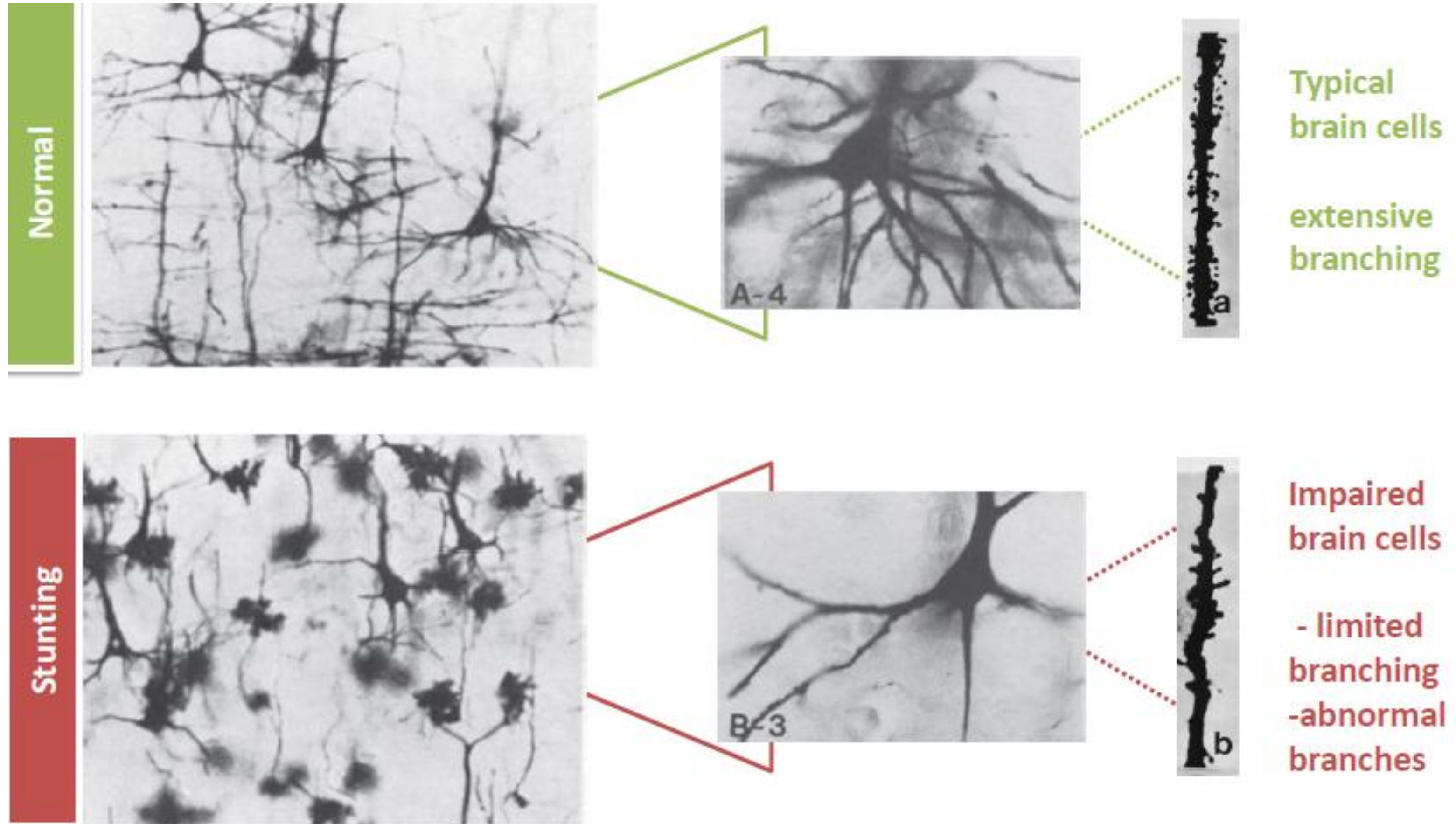
The first 1000 days

Life course | [Growth and development](#) | Requirements

Biological milestones
Growth
Brain development



Effects of stunted growth on the brain



Skin-to-skin and touch

Emotional comfort and support

Voice and soothing words



Safe physical environment –
Temperature
Hygiene
Toxins

Optimal infant and young child feeding

Immunization

Developmental parameters	0-3	3-6	6-9	9-12	1-2 years	3-5 years
	Food adequate in quantity and quality that is safe and age-appropriate					
Optimal growth	Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF)	Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF)	Continued BF + Complementary Feeding	Continued BF + Complementary Feeding	Continued BF + Complementary Feeding	Adequate Quantity & Quality
Feeding transition	Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF)	Exclusive Breastfeeding (EBF)	Pureed to semi-solid foods	Textured to whole finger foods	Whole family foods	Whole family foods
Developmental feeding milestones	Sip, suck and swallow	Sip, suck and swallow	Reaching and holding foods, Sitting and eating	Sucking from a straw; chewing rotary motion	Self-feeding cup and spoon	Self-selecting foods and self independent feeding
Developmental movement	Gaze and gestures	Turn head in direction of familiar sounds	Sitting and active play, crawling	Standing with support, may start to walk	Stronger independent movement, walking	Walking and running, climbing, clambering
Developmental sounds and language	Gurgling , blowing bubbles and spiting	Gurgling, babbling	-Turns towards sounds and voices -Responds to name	Understands - simple instructions/ commands - No -pause	Able to: - follow one-step directions - - Points to named body parts	Able to: - follow two-step directions - Answer simple questions

Unlocking systems to improve care and support for children

Independent of the instruments there's a human right and policy obligation to ensure children have:

- Parental care and support
- Basic nutrition (Breastfeeding, Complementary Feeding)
- Economic access for food and nutrition (e.g. CSG, ECD subsidy)
- Safety and security – unaccompanied minors
- Protection and harm reduction e.g. alcohol consumption and access during pregnancy and children under 18 years
- Physical harm and dangerous settings – harmful toys for choking

Adequate nutrition and consistent, supportive adult caregiving are the best ways to offset the effects of multiple adversity and to support healthy brain development.

The human brain is wired to search for experiences, expecting certain stimuli during time windows — some very short. When the expectation for sensitive and stimulating caretaking is not met, the brain does not know what to do or how to assemble itself, because it relies on the cues from caregiving to create neural connections.

Building Better Brains:
New Frontiers in Early Childhood Development



