**Unlocking Early Development: The First 1000 Days with Claire Stead S5|128**

Welcome to the 128th episode of Sense by Meg Faur. Today we are diving deep into the fascinating world of early childhood development with our guest Claire Stead. She's the innovative mind behind Oliki.

We kicked off today looking at the pre-birth foundations for optimal development and discussed the significant role that a stress-free and joyful gestation period plays in shaping a child's future. So we really did a deep dive into why pregnancy is so important. It goes way beyond just having a healthy pregnancy and eating well but we also focused on the intriguing concept of epigenetics and that is really what turns on and off genes and how your pregnancy impacts that and why this is such important information for expectant parents.

One of the very interesting pieces that Claire threw in was that actually it can have an impact through four generations and that's what epigenetic does. So if you want to know how to impact not just your children but also your grandchildren and great-grandchildren, this is something that you really don't want to miss. In the episode we then shift our focus to each of our three favorite developmental milestones.

So I got to mention my three, Claire did hers and this opened up a rich conversation about why each of these incredible milestones is so pivotal across the social-emotional motor and cognitive categories. So you don't want to miss out on these insights because it gives you such a deep understanding of child development and why certain milestones really should not be missed. And then lastly, Claire provides invaluable practical tips that every parent can use to nurture optimal development for those first thousand days of life.

And these strategies are designed to give your little ones a strong and healthy foundation, setting the stage for a thriving future. So join us as we uncover the essential elements that contribute to a child's early development. Armed with Claire's expert advice and her passionate approach, I promise you this is one you don't want to miss.

Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora, the podcast that's brought to you by Parent Sense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting. If you're a new parent, then you are in good company. Your host Meg Fora is a well-known OT, infant specialist and the author of eight parenting books.

Each week we're going to spend time with new mums and dads, just like you, to chat about the week's wins, the challenges and the questions of the moment. Subscribe to the podcast, download the Parent Sense app and catch Meg here every week to make the most of that first year of your little one's life. And now meet your host.

Welcome back, mums and dads. Lovely to have you join us here today. I am Meg Fora and this is Sense by Meg Fora.

And today I'm absolutely thrilled to welcome Claire Stead to join us. Welcome, Claire. Thank you so much for having me.

It's a delight to be here with you all. It is so good to have you join me. And we've actually been chatting over the course of the last couple of years because we share an absolute passion for early childhood development.

And Claire is really very outspoken on LinkedIn around all the subject matter that surrounds parenting or all the subjects that surround parenting. And I love following her on LinkedIn and she's also the founder of Oiliki, which is an app that is designed to support parents in fostering their child's development from pregnancy through to the first two years of life. So not dissimilar to Parent Sense, a little bit of a different angle, but really space for both of us in this amazing space.

And she has a rich background in education and a passion for empowering parents with practical and research based tools. So I'm really excited because today's topic is one that is very close to my heart. We are going to be talking about the first critical thousand days of a child's life.

So, Claire, let's get started. I'm super excited to chat about this. So I guess a lot of parents haven't heard about the concept of the first thousand days.

I mean, it sounds logical. It's about a three year period. But can you explain why the first thousand days are just so critically important for a child's learning and development? Absolutely.

So when I learned about it, I'm a teacher by training and I used to work with the upper age ranges. And when I learned about the science of the first thousand days, it literally transformed my career. And I stopped doing what I was doing, working with the older children and started working with parents, with babies in this first thousand days, because I realized that if we wanted to transform life outcomes, actually, a load of it is happening in this very, very early period of time.

So let's start with the basics. When does it start? It starts from conception and goes through until two. And the reason it's so, so important is it's the time when the brain is building itself.

It's building the foundations on which the whole of the rest of life is laid on. And it doesn't just impact your academic outcomes. It literally impacts every part of life from your cancer markers to your emotional development, the relationships you're going to build, even possibly even how much money you're going to earn.

It literally impacts everything. And it happens through the environment in which we grow up in and the experiences we have. So the first thousand days is the time when we're building this foundation of everything that's going forward.

And you have this massive spike in the brain development that doesn't get repeated any other time in life, because this is when we're building effectively the architecture of the brain, as Harvard call it. And they describe it as building the foundations of a house. And when you have great foundations, the walls go on, the windows go in nice and tidily, the roof goes on and the wiring all goes in the right position.

So when you turn the lights on downstairs, they turn on upstairs and as they should do. And it's the same for our babies. When we give them the right experiences and we give them the right opportunities during this first thousand days, we literally build them a really strong, firm foundation on which they can progress through life and build on.

And one of the things that I think is so fundamentally important to understand is that for your baby, simple is never simple. It's literally brain building. And we need to build the foundations of everything.

And I like to think about learning as a pyramid. And if we think of a pyramid, a pyramid's got a really wide base. And then that wide base is built up of blocks that are all about the same size.

And they form the foundation for the next set of blocks that go around. All of that is then ultimately leading to supporting the finished child, whatever a finished child looks like. And the blocks are actually the experiences that we offer our babies on a daily basis.

So when we have a pyramid, what we need is we need all of those blocks to be built on the first layer. And then those form the foundations for all of the blocks going the next layer. And if we get our learning right and the experiences we offer our babies right, we're building all the way around the first square and then all the way around the next square, rather than going up on one side and having a baby.

Sometimes parents will say, oh, my baby's really good at playing with footballs. So we do loads and loads and loads of playing with footballs, which is great. But what about the bits that they're not doing because they're playing with footballs all the time? And we need to build that strong, firm foundation all the way around so that we support the learning across the whole base of that pyramid to support that tiny piece on the top, the finished child.

Yeah, absolutely. So if we think about those building blocks, obviously one of the things that you've spoken to is things that parents are doing and the environment is doing. How much space is there for what genes the baby brings to the party? So are there things that happen before we even get started? And let's start there and then let's work out what else we have to add in as parents.

So let's talk about genetics, epigenetics, congenital, everything that nature delivers us and that parents are not very in control of. Can you talk a little bit about that? Yeah, epigenetics is a fascinating subject that when we get into this, I was just like, wow, my mind was completely blown. So studies have shown that what we experience gets recorded in our genes and transported through the generations.

And I think it's what, is it four generations back? I think it's been recorded that the experiences we have and our, the experiences we have, our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will see the expressions of in their genes. And so some of the things that we have in our makeup come from the history of our family and our lineage. So they did a study in, with the famine victims in the Netherlands, and they found that those children, the grandchildren of those people who had been in the famine had the expressions of stress and hunger in their genes represented in their bodies going forward.

Now that does not mean that because you've got those bits in your genes that you have, you, for example, cancer markers would be turned on. What it means is you have markers so that it says there is a possibility of things happening that you may or may not have, in your life, depending on all the other bits going on from there on in. Am I understanding that clearly? Yeah.

And actually it's very interesting because that, what you're referring to is the Dutch winter hunger, Dutch hunger winter, sorry. And what was very interesting is that people who came through that Dutch hunger winter, who were in utero at that time and were born very small, obviously, because their moms weren't able to eat, because what had happened was that the Germans had moved through Holland and burnt everything as they left. And so there was a, it was a terrible, terrible famine.

And those babies were born small and then it coded for their children also being born small. So it actually changed the code for the size of human being. And as you said, also for stress sensitivity.

But in the context of really good nutrition, that wasn't necessarily expressed in those grandchildren. So epigenetics is an absolutely fascinating field and it is part of what kind of codes for our path in life. Absolutely.

And then you follow on from that with things like the fetal origins in theory, which is, I always call him Daniel Almond, but I can't remember his name off the economist who talks about, he looked at what happens, he feels everything's come, he should come back to the fetus. And he wants to see, well, what happens if you go back far enough to find a population survey that's big enough to say, well, that something massive happened to the population and we can look at on a big scale. So he went back to the influenza, the Spanish influenza crisis.

And at that time, America happened to also have a census going on, a population census. So he looked at the babies who were in utero. Some of those mothers got influenza and died.

Some of those mothers got influenza and didn't die. Some of those mothers did not get influenza. And then they tracked those babies right through until they were in their 80s.

And what they found was that those babies, because the mothers had had stress and concern during the influenza period while being pregnant, those babies in the main had lower academic outcomes, earned less, did less well, had more disabilities, had more challenges in life. And then that came back up. The graph went back up to normality after that period passed, that stress passed.

So what it's showing us is that the environment in which we grow our babies matters. And if I'm a pregnant man, taking care of me and making my environment calm, nurturing, loving, tranquil, sitting down with a cup of tea at the end of the day and being a vegetable is not being self-indulgent. In fact, it's providing an environment in which my baby also experiences that calmness, that loving, nurturing environment, so that my baby is experiencing the optimal environment in which to grow and thrive.

Because if I'm running on empty, if I'm pushing myself, certainly when I was pregnant with number one, I was going to be a superhero. I was working till the day I gave birth, nothing wrong with me. And then I had car crash at 38 weeks.

And all because I was just pushing the envelope way too much. Now my baby ended up, of all my children, she's the Mrs. Stressy Pants. And I did not help her because I did not help me.

And I now realize if I could go back again and do it right, the chilled, calm, loving, nurturing time that you give yourself is also being given to your because that core level crosses into the baby, into their environment. So when we calm ourselves, we provide that calm environment for our babies. And that for me was like a light bulb.

I hadn't realized that the environment that I provided for me nurtured the environment for my baby. Yeah. I love that.

Yeah. So, I mean, it's amazing how we've touched on a couple of things here. We've touched on the fact that yes, genes are things that are the blueprint or the foundation that your baby's born with, but that actually they're not completely cast in stone and that things that happen in our pregnancies and things going back four generations, very interestingly, can impact the potential expression of those genes.

But it's what happens next that is really, really important, isn't it? And that's the nurturing of ourselves through pregnancy and then nurturing of our babies from then onwards. So what would you say are the key things? I had to say to you, you know, obviously in pregnancy, we're going to think about a good diet, not catching influenza or other potential teratogenic illnesses and not having toxic stress. So those three things have kind of come out a little bit in what you've been saying.

And we know that that would be a good thing to do in pregnancy. What comes next? Your baby's born, you've got another 2,000 days to another, you know, two thirds of the thousand days to work with. What should we be focusing on? Can we go back? Absolutely.

You want to go back to pregnancy. Great. I think one of the things that we miss out on big time is having a conversation about this massive change that's about to take place, that we are going to go from being potentially a couple or ourselves on our own, running our own show to becoming a family, whatever that family looks like.

And that means a shift in dynamics and a shift in relationships. And what we have experienced growing up, very often we repeat and we bring to how we bring up our babies. But if you're in a couple relationship, you didn't both grow up in the same environment.

So you don't both have the same expectations. So it's really important to start having conversations about who do you want to be as a parent? What does success look like for you? What would the outcomes be that would be successful for you, for your child? If we start having these conversations now, there's no threat. No one's got anything wrong and there's a whole heap of judgment around being a new parent and whether or not we're getting it right.

Well, there's nothing to get right at this point because the baby hasn't even come here. We're just having a set of conversations that say what I'm scared of, what I want to do, what would be successful. All those bits that are really, really important.

What bits of my childhood do I want to bring to my parenting? What bits don't I want? And I think having those conversations from the beginning really, really can transform the later bit when all the stress levels are really high and the baby's crying. No one knows why the baby's crying and we don't know what to do. And if you've had those conversations, you both realized actually neither of you know.

There isn't one person who's got all the answers holding. So that then just brings the tension down because inevitably we're all on a learning journey when we have our babies, all of our babies, because all of our babies are different. So even if you're on your third, it's going to be different to your first.

And I think having those conversations early, often, and thinking it through just slightly transforms this sort of myth that one of you has got all the answers and the other hasn't. And it provides space for both of you in that relationship. And if you're doing this alone, it provides space for you to ask for help from those trusted people that you're taking on this journey with you.

Yeah, absolutely. Very interesting. So we've now got this relationship base that obviously will create a secure space in which your child will then be developing, which is very, very important.

I wanted to turn my attention to some of the milestones that you think are important. You know, it's quite interesting. You know, all milestones are important because all milestones happen on a trajectory and are usually the foundation for a future milestone.

But I do actually have a couple of pet favorite milestones. I don't know if I should have that. Yes, I do.

And I'd love to share those with you. But I'd also love to know what yours are. So would you like me to go first or do you want to go first? Tell me, we'll pick them up.

Okay, brilliant. So my very first pet milestone is. This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all in one baby and parenting app that helps you make the most of your baby's first year.

Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them, and why they won't sleep? ParentSense app is like having a baby expert on your phone, guiding you to parent with confidence. Get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download ParentSense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting.

My very first pet milestone is smiling because it is such an important engagement milestone. And my second pet milestone is crawling because of the foundation that it gives to so many aspects of gross motor and cognitive development. And my third favorite one, I'm only going to mention three, is pointing.

And the reason that pointing is so important is because it shows that I have mind mindedness, that I know that I have something in my head that I want to communicate with another person. So before I even start to speak, I'm actually showing the will to communicate. So I have one that's emotional, one that is kind of motor cognitive, and one that is communication.

What do you think about that? And do you have any pet favorites? Well, I think that's absolutely lovely. And I really like them, particularly your smiling one, because I think it's so, so important for that connection and then engagement, which brings us to the attachment and attunement. So getting attached to one single person is really, really important.

In fact, Dr. Bruce Perry says in his research that the first 60 days is really, really important for building that support and foundation of love and connectedness. And when we get that right in that first 60 days with at least one person. So if you've been suffering from postnatal depression and your partner has been doing it, that's OK.

It's not all gone wrong and it's never too late. But the earlier we do it, the better. It's really important.

So engagement and connection is just fundamental for me. I want to add to that smiling one that the times when you do that skin to skin connectedness and you put the baby on your tummy or your chest and they lift up and look at you and you connect together and you get that eye connection, that bond in the eye where they're feeding and you connect with them eye to eye. The phone's gone away.

There is no one else in that moment. There is you and that baby. And what's staggering is that baby is literally programmed to connect with you and they are tracking your face in a triangle from across the eyes down to the mouth and back up again.

And at different times during the first two years, they'll spend more time looking at different bits, depending on which bit their brain is currently developing. But in the beginning, it's right into the eyes, really close and connected. And that connection sort of burrows into your heart and soul.

And that is where you are building a lifetime's bond and taking that time to drink in your baby, their smell, that skin to skin connectedness. Everybody comes in line together. You breathe deep and you pause and you take time and slow down.

I think we rush through everything and slowing down is just so, so important for connectedness. So that for me would be my connection one. Then the next one would be that backwards and forwards babble that happens.

The, that if we're a tuned in parent, we catch and we repeat. And then you see those, those memes online or those beautiful videos that just blow up and go into the millions where parents are having amazing chit-chat conversations with their babies, but they're not utter nonsense. That is literally the foundation of conversation happening right there.

You're teaching your baby that not only do they matter, their sounds matter, that you have space in your life for them. And you want to make physical space, actual space for their voice to be heard, but not just hear it. Then you respond to it.

It's called serve and return. And it is literally brain building when you do that, when you take the time to repeat back the babble and you have that conversation to inflow. I absolutely love that one.

And then yeah, where would I go with my next one? Crawling? Absolutely. Fundamental. Like in America, it's been taken off the milestones.

I heard that. I think you and I had this conversation in fact. Yeah, I know.

Panic. Like if your baby's not crawling, we need to find a way to encourage your baby to play in a way that enables them to crawl. Because so much happens through crawling.

Absolutely. They connect their brain on both sides. They find out where their arms and their legs are in the world.

They build their tummy muscles and their back muscles, their neck muscles, so much going on. So I'm fascinated that because children in America are not all crawling, taking it off the milestones. Like have we developmentally changed? Don't understand.

No, I am 100% on your page. And you know, I think parents will often say to me as an occupational therapist, my baby's not crawling or my baby didn't crawl. My baby went straight from sitting into bum shuffling and then walking.

Is this a major thing? And I always say to them, look, just get them down on the floor, even if they're toddlers, even if they're three years old, give them obstacle courses to go through, give them tables to crawl underneath, tunnels to go through because actually being down on all fours and moving across the earth with those reciprocal movements up and through and under is actually very important for them. So I am on your page. And also what happens, I mean, for me, I hadn't really understood.

My mom always said, my mom's a physio and she'd always said, and my sister's a physio and my niece is a physio. I mean, it's like a physio family. And they all talk about crawling and how it was important.

And I didn't really as a teacher understand that until I looked at what happens if you don't crawl, what can happen if you don't crawl. And I think that's the upsetting. I was talking to a family the other day where this 11, 12 year old cannot crawl.

She can't do it yet. And I think that's one thing that's really important, it's yet, because it is, the brain is able, it's plastic, it's able to learn new skills. So it's not all lost.

If your baby hasn't done it yet, as you say, get down on the floor and start doing it. And, but what was happening was this child was struggling at school. She wasn't able to write very well.

Her spelling wasn't great. She wasn't able to make friends. She wasn't able, there were so many things that she was full overwhelmed that her primitive reflexes absolutely hadn't integrated.

And she was not yet able to access all of her brain optimally. And therefore her life was really, really, really hard for her just to get through the day, let alone try and learn something. So, you know, I think giving your babies the opportunities to do the development steps that they need to do through play and not rushing them onto the next one is really, really important.

So things like jumper roos, those, those things where we put our babies in for spinning around or bouncing up and down, we don't need them. Get them on the floor, give them as much time, get them out of those, get them out of containers. We've got so many babies in containers, they're in car seats, they go from a car seat to a padded, shaky thing that makes them sleep, chair thing, and then they go into bumbos and then they go into high chairs.

They're not on the floor and they need to be on the floor in order to be able to build the muscle set that they need to be able to stand up, run and jump and play, but also access the higher order thinking that we're going to need them to have for success in life outcomes. So remember, we're going back to that foundation. What we're building right now is the foundation on which we will build later.

If we have not given them the opportunity to wake up the muscles in their toes, wake up the muscles in their glutes and their back and their tummy and their postural muscles, and we haven't given them the access to understanding what their bodies can do and where their body is in space, we literally are preventing them from being able to access all of their capabilities later in life in their learning and beyond. Yeah, no, absolutely. And you know, I think, I mean, we're kind of touching on two topics here which are very close to my heart and they are tied in closely to modern parenting and the one is parenting with a cell phone in your hand and the other one is parenting in devices and in seating devices.

And both of those are very, really can inhibit development right at the beginning. And I want to leave moms with two very practical tips on the back of this, right in the beginning of your baby's journey. And it doesn't, it's not just those first 60 days, it goes beyond those as well, making eye contact, connecting, reading their signals and reciprocal interactions of, as you've described a beautiful scenario of serve and return, you do something, your baby does something, you wait, you slow down, that is inhibited with the use of technology.

And so that's probably one of the practical tips I would leave a mom with now is be very conscious as you handle your tech devices. And of course, bearing in mind that both you and I have apps, which means that parents' heads would be in technology at times, but be conscious about it. So that was the first thing that I picked up on what you said.

And then the second thing is get your babies on the floor. It's the most simple fundamental rule from day one, from tummy time in the early days all the way through to opportunities to crawl. I guess before we leave, it would be really awesome if you could add to those.

I mean, if you thought about the modern mom and one of your daughter was having a baby and those were two pieces of advice, what other piece of advice would you say to her that you think would be very protective for their child's development, whether it's emotional or motor or communication? What should moms be thinking? Building on the device thing, turn off the TV, have some time in the day where there's no distractions. Love it. Get down on the floor face-to-face with your child and commit to being there for 10 minutes.

I promise you 30 will pass, but commit to being there for 10 minutes to connect and play and really focus on what your baby is currently finding fascinating. And play on that, be in that space because that's where your baby knows they need to build their brain. And the other thing is there is no perfect.

No parent needs to be perfect. No baby wants you to be perfect. But what I think for me is so fundamental is understanding when you as a parent understand the power of the tiniest thing that you do.

So if all you've done today is you've sung a little song, if that's all you've done, if you understood quite how brain building that is, you would do more of it. And because you do more of it, you give your baby the opportunity to learn more. And because you give them the opportunity to learn more of these tiny, simple things, they learn more.

And because you then connect today's activity with tomorrow's activity, then what happens is you join up the dots for them along the way. And because you consistently do that day after day after day for the first thousand days, maybe starting from conception, going right the way through to and beyond, you literally are building your baby, the scaffolding on which they can form the foundations for the rest of life going forward. And I think perfect isn't perfect.

Good enough is what we're looking for. 10 minutes of connected time, really connected with everything else turned off will be transformational for your baby. I love it.

Such incredible words of wisdom. Really, really amazing. Claire, thank you.

I know that we haven't had time to touch on half the subjects I wanted to delve down with you. One of them was play and we're not gonna have time today, but I think we'll have to do another session. But if moms are interested to know more about how to play with their child, which is a lot of what you've spoken about there, what milestones are important, how to foster optimal development, where can they find you and what do you recommend as resources? Okay, so I am all over the socials except Twitter because that's way above my pay grade.

On the socials under Aliki, which is O-L-I-I-K-I. And that is because it's observe closely, listen to what your baby's saying, investigate their interests, initiate conversation, Kindle connection, and instill love of learning. I love it.

It's the way to be with your baby for successful foundations. So I'm all over the socials under Aliki. My main place is TikTok and LinkedIn.

Okay, excellent. So go and find Claire there. You'll find out lots more about her app and also more about her strategies for really helping you to stimulate your little one optimally.

So Claire, thank you so much. It has been a fascinating conversation. I cannot believe our time is up.

You and I could go on for hours and hours, but let's schedule another one and make sure we get to tap each other's brains again. Thank you very much, Claire. Thank you so much for having me.

Thanks to everyone who joined us. We will see you the same time next week. Until then, download ParentSense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.