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The Concept of Holistic Child Development

Introduction

This essay will define the concept of holistic child development and explore three key areas: relationships, safety, and play, and how they contribute to the child's overall growth, linking them to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The word 'concept' is defined as **“an idea, theory, etc. about a particular subject” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019)**. The concept of holistic development must be understood in the context of early years education and care. According to Lindon and Brodie (2016), children naturally use all areas of development together. For example, when children explore a forest school, they engage in a variety of skills that support their overall development. Physically, they move and explore the environment; socially, they interact and communicate with others; emotionally, they build confidence; and cognitively, they solve problems. This combination of skills aids their overall holistic development. David *et al.* (2003), cited in Brodie (2018), agree that children's development is interconnected across all areas, and they develop and learn holistically.

Relationships

In the concept of holistic development, consideration must be given to how relationships play a key role in a child's overall growth. According to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory, children who receive support and care from their parents by building trust and confidence are better equipped to explore their environment. Bowlby (1969) adds that these early positive relationship experiences develop children's confidence and resilience, which improves their ability to handle challenges.

In early years practice, children are given opportunities to interact through circle time discussions, small group tasks, and access to the role-play area, all of which build on their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Practitioners encourage children to build on their social interaction during playtime, modelling positive interaction such as sharing and encouraging each other through praise, as well as showing empathy when a child is upset and supporting them. Trust and

confidence are developed through consistent support and positive reinforcement, allowing children to feel confident and secure as they learn.

This approach links to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as safety, belonging, and esteem provide the foundation for social, emotional, and cognitive development, supporting their holistic development to reach self-actualisation—the ability to problem-solve and reach their potential. In contrast, practitioners must understand that negative or inconsistent interaction can negatively impact relationships. According to Weinberg (2012), when an adult does not understand a child's needs, it disrupts their desire for connection. Undesirable behaviours, such as attention-seeking, may occur when a child is trying to gain attention. This links to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs third layer for connection and belonging. Children who do not form positive relationships can become stuck at this stage, as their need for connection is unmet, which can negatively impact their holistic development.

Safety

In addition to relationships, emphasis must be given to safety within holistic development. According to McMahon and Dyer (2018), practitioners have a duty to safeguard children, and this should be central to their approach. Vain (2023) points out that a safe environment is important for children's brain development as it supports their social and cognitive skills and keeps them physically and emotionally safe.

In early years practice, to keep children safe, the environment is secured with gates and lock systems to protect against outside threats. Risk assessments are conducted to identify and reduce potential hazards. Additionally, adult supervision ensures safe interactions amongst children, while safeguarding procedures are in place to identify and report any concerns. Furthermore, predictable routines help a child feel secure, reducing anxiety and promoting positive behaviour.

In contrast, while a secure environment supports a child's holistic development, the situation may be different in an unsafe environment. According to Weinberg (2012), when a child's life is unstable due to family issues like conflict or violence, the focus is solely on feeling safe, impacting their holistic development. Rankins (2019) states that Bowlby called this an 'insecure base,' which can affect how the brain develops and disrupt new connections in the brain from being formed.

In early years practice, supporting the child using a trauma-informed approach means creating a secure base to help build relationships. The Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (2022) states trauma-informed approaches help to reduce the negative effects of traumatic experiences and support both mental and physical health. In Maslow's first layer of hierarchy, health is a key part of a basic need. By applying the trauma-informed approach, well-being is supported, building a foundation to grow and move forward in other areas that contribute to their holistic development.

Play

Finally, according to Nijhof *et al.* (2018), play is an important part of supporting children's holistic development and is crucial for their overall healthy growth.

“Froebel described play as the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul”

(Stella and Powell, 2020, para 3). The Welsh Government (2022) adds that play experiences should be engaging, incorporate children's preferences and interests, and support their holistic development.

In early years practice, a variety of choices are provided through continuous provision, and children's play is observed to identify their interests and level of play or play schemas. According to Louis (2016) play schemas are repetitive actions seen in children's play, and these actions help support children's cognitive development. Adult observation can aid future planning by identifying gaps to enhance continuous provision to scaffold learning and support holistic development. According to Alghamdi (2024), Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development focuses on helping children build on previous learning, while gradually moving from guided to independent learning. In early years specialist settings, this involves offering enough help, such as demonstrations, to bridge a gap and gradually reducing support as children gain confidence and can complete tasks independently. However, while prompting children and bridging gaps can support their holistic development, it is important to consider that not all children will be ready to engage in new ideas. In this context, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs may be considered. According to Capes (2024), for children to thrive in their learning, their fundamental needs must be met. In early years practice, to support children's holistic development, practitioners ensure children's basic needs are met, such as providing food, safety, showing

empathy, praising effort, and creating a nurturing environment where children feel safe and ready to learn, working toward Maslow's self-actualisation.

Conclusion

To conclude, holistic development requires positive relationships, safety, and play, which are all essential for overall growth. By linking them to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, meeting basic needs gives children the foundation to grow and reach their potential.

Maslow's significance in understanding child development

The following case studies will explore the significance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, specifically for children with autism in understanding child development in early years practice. The case studies will focus on meeting basic needs, supporting transitions, and providing alternative communication for non-verbal children. They will explore how these areas link to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and support child development within early years settings.

Case study 1 - Meeting basic needs for a child with autism

Meeting a child's basic needs is essential as it forms the foundation of Maslow's first layer of needs, which supports their ability to progress to higher levels and engage in their environment. According to Sprouts (2017), Maslow's theory points out that the priority is meeting the physiological needs. Once met, focus shifts to the next level. For children with autism, sensory sensitivities can often interfere with meeting these needs effectively. Griffin (2021) states children who are sensitive to sensory input have low tolerance and become easily overwhelmed by food. Child A struggles with mealtimes due to sensory sensitivities and finds food textures and smells overwhelming. This results in behavioural responses, which in turn affect their availability to learn.

To support Child A, the school developed a personalised plan to ensure basic needs are met. Staff collaborated with parents to provide preferred food that Child A would eat. Child A did not transition to the dinner hall as the smells and environment were overwhelming. Instead, they remained in the classroom in a low-stimulating environment. Additionally, Child A struggled with sleep. Devnani and Hedge (2015) pointed out that sleep difficulties are common among children with ASD. Staff worked with Child A's family to create a structured bedtime routine, using schedules and calming strategies such as sensory aids and deep-pressure massage to promote better sleep.

By addressing these basic needs, Child A was able to progress to higher levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Child A was feeling safe and secure in routines without becoming overwhelmed or entering fight-or-flight mode. This also supported

the development of building positive relationships during mealtimes and helped build confidence as well as increased their availability for learning.

Case study 2 - Supporting transitions for a child with autism

Transitions within an early year's setting can be particularly challenging for children with autism due to difficulties in processing unexpected changes in routine.

According to Martinelli (2016), Dr Rosenthal highlights that children with autism find it challenging to transition from one activity to another, particularly when changes are unexpected. Child B experiences anxiety when transitioning from one activity to another or transitioning between physical spaces, such as the classroom and the hall.

Child B's difficulty lies in understanding the concept of time and anticipating what comes next. Casassus *et al.* (2019) highlight that difficulties with time perception are common characteristics of autism spectrum conditions. This often leads to Child B feeling anxious, resulting in heightened behaviours.

Child B has a combination of strategies to support transitions and reduce stress. Visual aids are implemented to help ensure smooth transitions and anticipate what is coming next. At the end of an activity, a visual sand timer acts as a visual cue to indicate how much time is left, which provides Child B with a clear, predictable countdown, aiding in processing when an activity comes to an end. Once the timer ends, Child B is guided to check their visual schedule, which displays pictures for the next transition. This approach offers predictability and reduces anxiety, leading to effective transitions throughout the day.

Maslow's second layer of needs: safety, is met by applying these strategies. Additionally, predictability builds trust in adults and confidence in meeting the third and fourth layers of Maslow's Hierarchy, which then results in readiness for developing and learning.

Case study 3 - Supporting communication for non-verbal children with autism

Consideration must be given when supporting non-verbal children with autism to communicate effectively to meet their needs and develop their independence. Child C experiences difficulties expressing themselves when requiring a break, being hungry, or needing the toilet. These challenges often result in heightened behaviours such as crying and hitting.

To address this, staff implemented a range of communication aids around their environment, including Picture Exchange Communication Systems. Bondy and Frost (2017) state that PECS utilises pictures to support communication while also fostering social development. When experiencing overstimulation, Child C uses a 'break' symbol to communicate their needs by passing it to a staff member. Staff respond by offering Child C a designated area to self-regulate before returning to activities.

During snack time, Child C uses PECS to request a desired food item, which reduces frustration and ensures their preference is understood. A study conducted by Malhotra *et al.* (2010) found that using PECS reduced specific behaviours while also increasing levels of independence.

Many of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs are addressed through this approach. Firstly, physiological needs are met by enabling communication for food, drink, and toileting. Secondly, safety is supported by reducing anxiety and enabling communication for breaks. Thirdly, the need for belonging is met by feeling included and understood by others, developing positive relationships. This in turn builds confidence and esteem, meeting Maslow's fourth layer and enabling children to progress towards self-actualisation and further development.

Conclusion

These case studies show how Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs aids practitioners in understanding how to effectively support the development of children with autism. By addressing basic needs, ensuring safe transitions, and building positive relationships through communication, children can develop confidence and increase their readiness to learn and develop.

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