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Cover sheet

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Health and Well-being in Early Years

Introduction

This poster explores the importance of health, wellbeing, and lifestyle in early childhood, linking each area to key theories of the Curriculum for Wales. It highlights how children's development is shaped by more than just physical health, including emotional, social, and environmental factors. Theories such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Bowlby's attachment theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model help explain how these areas are connected and why early intervention is vital. By identifying risks and supporting children early, practitioners can help improve long-term outcomes and reduce inequalities. The poster also links these ideas to real-life practice and curriculum expectations, showing how early years settings can play a key role in promoting positive health and wellbeing from the start.

Health

According to (Musgrave, 2017) health is difficult to define, with no universal agreement. Health has traditionally been defined mainly in terms of physical health, a narrow focus that has been criticised by professionals (Leonardi, 2018; Oleribe *et al.*, 2018). However, more recent definitions recognise that health is influenced by sociological, environmental, societal, and economic factors, expanding the concept beyond just physical health (Oleribe *et al.*, 2018). Schramme (2023) supports this view, stating that health includes mental, social, and even financial aspects. Although, the World Health Organisation (WHO) (2022) defines health as a complete state of physical, mental, and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of illness. Oleribe *et al.* (2018) and Schramme (2023) call for a broader and more realistic definition that reflects the complexities of modern life, incorporating physical, emotional, mental, financial, and social wellbeing, with an emphasis on a person's ability to contribute positively to society. This holistic view aligns with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Reynolds, 2025), which highlights that health and wellbeing depends on fulfilling multiple levels of human needs, from basic needs to social and self-actualisation, showing health is more than the absence of illness, it is about how someone lives day to day and whether they have equal chance to be healthy.

Hunter (2019) Dahlgren-Whitehead 'Rainbow Model' of health.



Reynolds (2025) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



The Dahlgren and Whitehead model, also known as the rainbow model, has been influential in understanding the social determinants of health for over 30 years (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). This model highlights how social factors, including income, education, and community, significantly affect health outcomes (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). Mamot *et al.* (2020) and Mamot (2010) emphasise that health inequalities are deeply connected to life conditions, such as income, power, and access to resources, rather than healthcare services alone. The Mamot 19-year review (2020) shows a decline in overall health, especially in poorer areas, where people tend to live shorter lives than those in wealthier communities, and the health gap has widened over time. This shows that where someone lives and what they have access to, can have a big impact on their health. However, some argue that lifestyle choices also play a crucial role in health which cannot be overlooked (Belet *et al.*, 2024; Saleem, 2023). This shows that personal choices still matter too, although they are not the only reason people stay healthy or not. Mamot (2010) stresses the importance of early childhood interventions and the need to support families and communities to provide healthy and stable environments to improve health and reduce inequalities. This suggests that helping children and families early on can make a big difference later in life. Additionally, there is a need for more research and action to tackle health inequalities, especially in the light of covid 19 pandemic Checkland *et al.*, 2025; Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). To tackle this effectively, policies and plan needs to be clearer so that support can go where it is really needed (Checkland *et al.*, 2025).

Wellbeing

According to Musgrave (2017), wellbeing is a broad concept influenced by many factors, including society and health. However, Musgrave (2017) also states that it is a difficult concept to define. The Oxford Dictionary defines wellbeing as being comfortable, healthy, and happy. However, this gives only a basic understanding. Wellbeing is widely seen as multidimensional (Bradshaw, 2016; Kellock, 2020; Alexandrova, 2017 cited in Bagatini, 2019), meaning it includes more than just physical or emotional health and highlights the importance of considering a wide range of factors when assessing or supporting wellbeing. It can be understood as the quality of people's lives, often measured by health and other objective factors (Statham and Chase, 2010 cited in Musgrave, 2017). Understanding how different social and economic factors affect a child's wellbeing helps target support where it is most needed (Berlinski and Norbert, 2015). Musgrave (2017) highlights that the WHO (1986) definition of health includes emotional wellbeing, not just physical health. Emotional wellbeing, according to Musgrave (2017), depends on both our relationships with others and our relationship with ourselves. This links to the Bowlby's attachment theory where positive early experience and strong relationship supports children development (Bowlby, 2007 cited in Wiscoll, Baratt-Pugh and Knaus, 2019). Secure and trusting early relationship between children and their caregivers form the foundation for emotional wellbeing.

Sulkala (n.d.) Word cloud with the word well-being and connected tags.



The importance of wellbeing in the early years is highlighted by Berlinski and Norbert (2015), who argue that investing in children's wellbeing early helps them grow into successful adults. Supporting children's wellbeing early on brings long term benefits for both the children and the society (Berlinski and Norbert, 2015). The foundations for a child's wellbeing begin during pregnancy, and improving their early experiences supports this development (Berlinski and Norbert, 2015; GO Science, 2008). This shows the importance of early intervention, even before birth, in shaping a child's future well-being. Berlinski and Norbert (2015) add that a child's wellbeing is shaped by a range of interconnected factors, including health, nutrition, communication, thinking, emotions, and physical skills. Poor health in children can negatively affect their overall wellbeing (Berlinski and Norbert, 2015). Furthermore, the experiences provided by parents, carers, teachers, and government all influence a child's wellbeing and development (Berlinski and Norbert, 2015). However, the wellbeing of the adult is equally as important, as it impacts how well they can support the children in their care (Mann, 2018 cited in Kellock, 2020). One of the ways to support adult wellbeing is by applying the principles 'Make every contact count' (Public Health England, 2022). For example, a practitioner may notice a colleague appear stressed. Instead of ignoring, the practitioner can offer them a break and listen to them.

Lifestyle

According to Brivio *et al.* (2023), lifestyle is a broad concept that can be understood differently depending on the context. WHO (1986) cited in Brivio *et al.* (2023) explains that lifestyle is about the choices people make in how they live; however, these choices depend on what options are available to them. This can include factors such as income and their background. Children's health lifestyles are influenced by their social background and the resources available in their home (Malbern *et al.*, 2014). Children from lower-income families often face limited access to healthy food which can negatively affect their health issues like obesity (Ziso, Chun and Puglisi, 2022).

The Government Office for Science (GO Science) (2008) defines mental capital as a person's thinking and emotional skills, including learning abilities, problem solving, resilience, and social skills. GO Science (2008) also adds that mental capital and mental wellbeing are closely linked and can strongly influence a person's lifestyle. Mental capital and thinking skills are needed for people to understand the value of social relationships and to take part in them (Bauer *et al.*, 2021). Without this mental capital, children may struggle to see the value of social relationships and avoid engaging with others. Prolonged loneliness and lack of social interaction can lead to further isolation and can affect wellbeing (Bauer *et al.*, 2021).

Berk and Roberts (2009) cited in Expat child (n.d.) Bronfenbrenner's ecological system.



Children develop lifestyle behaviours from a young age, which can impact their long-term health (Arafat *et al.*, 2024). Yu and Zou (2023) agree, adding that these behaviours can reduce the risk of long-term health problems later in life. Therefore, early childhood represents a crucial period for encouraging healthy habits such as balanced nutrition, sleep, and physical activity (Dafat *et al.*, 2022). Schools and the wider community play a strong role in influencing how healthy a child's lifestyle is (Arafat *et al.*, 2024). Schools can influence lifestyle through the promoting healthy eating and physical activity, while community settings can offer additional support through programmes that encourage social engagement and active living.

It is also important to recognise that lifestyle is shaped by wider social and economic determinants, including access to education, healthcare, and safe environments. These factors affect the opportunities people have, to make healthy choices (Chetak and Chakole, 2023). As Brivio *et al.* (2023) highlight, lifestyle cannot be understood solely as personal choice but must be considered within the context of available resources and social conditions. Bronfenbrenner's theory can link to lifestyle choices being influenced by multiple layers (Berk and Roberts, 2009 cited in Expat child, n.d.) Close relationships like family are important, but so are the wider factors such as government policies. These policies of the macrosystem, can affect children's lives and their ability to make healthy choices, highlighting how lifestyle is not affected by individual but also government decisions.

Application for Practice

Global issues such as unhealthy lifestyles are linked to a decline in overall health (Oleribe *et al.*, 2019). Encouraging individuals to make informed lifestyle choices supports responsibility for their own health (Saleem, 2023). In an early year setting, this could be promoted through discussions during snack time about healthy food, or by including movement breaks and outdoor play to increase physical activity (Saleem, 2023). The Curriculum for Wales supports this by including area of learning Health and Well-being into the curriculum (Welsh Government, 2020) which encourages the children to understand how physical health and mental health are connected. However, while promoting healthy lifestyles is important, parents' own disadvantages and limited resources may affect their children's health habits (Molborn *et al.*, 2014); some children may not have access to healthy food at home, making it difficult to reinforce these messages consistently. To mitigate this, practitioner can signpost parents to the Healthy Start scheme, which if eligible, can provide additional money to support buying healthy food and milk (NHS, 2024). However, Dundas *et al.* (2023) argues that this support is not enough to make an actual difference. This suggest, while signposting families to these schemes, it may not be enough to make a meaningful difference, and further support may be needed.

Feeding Liverpool (2022) Healthy Start Programme.



Impact Wales (n.d.) Curriculum for Wales.



Promoting self-reliance and resilience supports children's wellbeing (Musgrave, 2017). The Curriculum for Wales reflects this through its aim for children to become healthy, confident individuals (Welsh Government, 2020). Early years settings encourage independence through daily routines, such as children putting on their coats or tidying up. While these small tasks can build confidence and support well-being in a nurturing environment, Leek *et al.* (2024) argue that if routines become overly rigid due to curriculum demands, they can reduce autonomy and limit meaningful learning. This highlights the need for balance, as overly structured settings may restrict practitioners' flexibility to meet individual needs, impacting children's wellbeing. Additionally, supporting positive social interactions also contributes to well-being (Musgrave, 2017), for example, through planned group activities that encourage talking and interaction with peers. Furthermore, promoting children's wellbeing includes respecting their rights, such as making decisions in their best interest and listening to their views (UNCRC, 1989 cited in Bradshaw, 2016). In practice, this may involve offering children choices in their activities or taking their preferences into account during planning. Practitioners are in a key position to support wellbeing because they know the children well and can identify individual needs (Thomas *et al.*, 2016). For example, recognising when a child may need additional support with transitions or routines allows for timely intervention. It is important that children get support to build their wellbeing and learn the skills they need to cope in life (Kellock, 2020). Listening to children and acting on their views supports short and long-term outcomes (Kellock, 2020), such as asking for feedback on activities or playtime choices. Although 96% of teachers see life skills as equally or more important than qualifications, 1 in 5 in government-funded schools feel their setting lacks opportunities to develop them. Cassidy, Franco and Mee (2016) show that embedding life skills into informal moments, like lunchtimes, can still prioritise this area despite time pressures.

Conclusion

In conclusion, health, wellbeing, and lifestyle are closely linked and shaped by a range of personal and social factors. Children's experiences in their early years lay the foundations for future health, and early intervention can make a lasting difference. By using theory to understand these links and applying them in practice, early years professionals can support all children to thrive. The Curriculum for Wales encourages this by promoting healthy, confident individuals, but real change also depends on wider support and resources. Practitioners must remain flexible, listen to children, and work with families to meet individual needs and create environments where every child can live, learn, and grow in a healthy way.

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