

Human Development

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Part One

Word Count: 875

Abraham **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs** is a widely recognized psychological theory that explains human motivation as a progression through five levels, from basic physiological needs to self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). The model suggests that individuals prioritize fundamental needs before pursuing higher-level goals (Cherry, 2024). However, research indicates that this sequence is not always fixed. As Cherry (2015) notes, while the hierarchy remains influential, empirical evidence for its strict order is limited. Individual motivations often vary based on personal circumstances and context. Recent studies support this view, showing that factors such as age, gender, and income influence how needs are prioritized. Interviews further reveal that social and economic conditions shape how people meet their needs, suggesting the hierarchy is more flexible than originally proposed (Yurdakul & Arar, 2023). This academic poster will explore each level of Maslow’s hierarchy and consider its application within early years education, highlighting how understanding these needs can support children’s development and learning.

Physiological needs are the first level and form the foundation of Maslow’s hierarchy. These essential requirements for survival include food, water, shelter, and sleep. Until these needs are met, individuals cannot fully focus on higher-level goals (Maslow, 1943). For example, a child who is hungry or sleep-deprived may struggle to concentrate in school. Maslow emphasized that physiological needs are the most fundamental, as all other needs become secondary until they are satisfied. Maslow (1943, cited in Weinberg, 2011) also highlighted that in societies affected by poverty and hunger, individuals’ energy is consumed by the search for basic necessities, leaving little room for personal growth or achievement. This deprivation not only limits individual potential but also represents a broader social loss of human talent and contribution. Once this level is fulfilled, attention and motivation shift to the next level of the hierarchy (Brodie, 2024).

Once basic physiological needs are satisfied, **safety needs** become important. These involve stability, security, and protection in areas such as health, finances, and personal safety (Cherry, 2024). A consistent, safe home environment helps children feel secure and emotionally supported (Brodie, 2024). Safety needs form the second level of Maslow’s hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Society and institutions such as families, schools, and healthcare services play a key role in meeting these needs (Brodie, 2024). In early years education, providing a safe and predictable environment allows children to explore and learn with confidence (Brodie, 2024).

With physiological and safety needs met, children naturally turn their attention to **social connections**, which Maslow identifies as the third level: love and belonging, reflects humans’ need for social connections, intimacy, and inclusion (Maslow, 1954). Children who have supportive peer relationships and feel accepted in their family or school community are more likely to develop emotionally and socially. In early-years education contexts, it is especially important to recognise that when children’s lower-level needs are met, their capacity for belonging and connection increases - and frameworks such as Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy provide useful guidance for practitioners (Brodie, 2024; Early Years TV, 2024).



Maslow’s hierarchy of needs

The fourth level of Maslow’s hierarchy is **esteem needs**, which become significant once the lower three levels - physiological, safety, and love/belonging - have been largely satisfied (Maslow, 1943; Verywell Mind, 2017). At this stage, individuals are motivated by the desire for recognition, respect, and a sense of achievement. Esteem needs encompass both external and internal aspects. Externally, people seek acknowledgment and appreciation from others for their accomplishments, whether in professional, academic, athletic, or personal pursuits (Verywell Mind, 2017). Internally, they strive for self-esteem and a sense of personal worth, which contribute to confidence and a feeling of competence (Maslow, 1943). Satisfying these needs enables individuals to feel valued and capable of making meaningful contributions. Conversely, unmet esteem needs can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-worth, or inferiority, potentially undermining motivation and personal growth (Maslow, 1943; Verywell Mind, 2017).

Finally, **self-actualization** represents the highest level of Maslow’s hierarchy, encompassing the fulfilment of one’s potential, personal growth, and engagement in creative, exploratory, or meaningful activities (Maslow, 1943). In early years settings, children who’s physiological, safety, social, and esteem needs are consistently met are more likely to demonstrate curiosity, independence, and confidence in exploring new skills or interests. For example, a child with a secure sense of belonging and emotional support may choose to engage in imaginative play, pursue challenging tasks, or take on leadership roles within group activities, fostering self-expression and personal development. By providing opportunities and encouragement for such experiences, practitioners enable children to progress toward self-actualization, illustrating how Maslow’s framework can guide early years practice to support holistic development

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs provides a useful framework for understanding human motivation and its relevance in early years education. While the strict hierarchy may not always reflect individual experiences, the model highlights the importance of addressing children’s basic physiological and safety needs before expecting them to fully engage in social, emotional, or cognitive development. Recognizing and supporting each level - physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization - enables practitioners to create environments that foster learning, confidence, and personal growth. By applying this understanding in practice, educators can better meet the diverse needs of children, helping them thrive both academically and socially.

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Part Two

Word Count: 1020

Explore the significance of Maslow's model to support holistic child development. This should include a critical discussion around the concept of holistic development.

Understanding how children grow and learn is central to effective early years practice. Rather than viewing development as a set of separate components, contemporary approaches emphasise holistic development, which considers the child as a whole. Holistic development recognises that children grow physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively, and that these domains are closely interconnected. Progress in one area can directly influence development in another, highlighting the importance of viewing learning as a dynamic and interrelated process (Queen Margaret University, n.d.).

A holistic approach is essential in early years education because, as Brodie (2018) explains, children learn and develop as whole human beings. From birth, their learning, growth, and developmental processes occur simultaneously and are fundamentally interdependent. This perspective reinforces the idea that no aspect of development happens in isolation; rather, advancement in one area continually supports and shapes progress in others. In practice, holistic development ensures that physical wellbeing, social and emotional security, cognitive growth, and creative expression are nurtured together.

Emotional wellbeing plays a critical role in children's ability to learn. When a child feels secure, valued, and emotionally supported, they are more able to concentrate, explore, and engage in learning experiences. In contrast, children who experience stress, insecurity, or low emotional wellbeing may struggle to regulate their emotions, focus attention, or take risks in learning. Johnston (2018) emphasises that healthy emotional development is supported through positive, secure relationships with caregivers and peers. This aligns closely with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which identifies emotional safety and a sense of belonging as essential foundations for learning. Secure, nurturing relationships allow children to feel safe and valued, enabling them to progress towards higher-order cognitive development, confidence, and ultimately self-actualisation. Maslow also notes that a child who appears hungry may in fact be seeking comfort or emotional security, highlighting that even the most basic needs are intertwined with emotional and social experiences. This reinforces a holistic view in which development occurs across interconnected domains.

Physical health is another critical component of holistic development, as it directly affects children's ability to engage and participate fully in learning experiences. Johnston (2018) explains that physical development is the process by which each child evolves from a helpless infant to an independent individual. Children who are physically healthy have more energy, stamina, and confidence to interact with peers, collaborate in group activities, and explore their environment. In contrast, children who experience chronic illness, fatigue, or poor nutrition may struggle to engage, withdraw from activities, or miss learning opportunities. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) also highlights the importance of meeting physiological needs such as sleep, nutrition, and rest as a prerequisite for children to feel safe, supported, and able to form positive relationships. This idea is further supported by Piaget, who explains how children's thinking evolves as they grow. He identifies four stages—sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational—through which children progress, moving from simple reflexive responses to increasingly complex reasoning and problem-solving abilities (Cherry, 2019). Moreover, children's physical wellbeing directly impacts their social engagement; those who are healthy and energetic are more likely to participate in group activities, communicate effectively with peers, and develop positive relationships, highlighting the interconnected nature of physical, cognitive, and social development in a holistic framework.

Social development is a crucial aspect of holistic development, encompassing how children form relationships, communicate, cooperate, and understand social norms. Confident social engagement enables children to participate fully in group activities, build friendships, develop empathy, and strengthen collaboration skills. According to Linon (2012, p.83), attachment is central to social development, as children who form secure bonds with caregivers feel safe to explore their environment and engage with peers. Bowlby (1969, 1979, 1982) further explains that consistent, responsive care from adults provides the foundation for children to form trusting relationships, regulate their emotions, and develop social competence.

Social development is also closely linked to emotional wellbeing and physical health. Children who are emotionally secure and physically healthy are more likely to participate actively in social interactions, share ideas, and cooperate in group learning experiences. Conversely, children experiencing stress, social anxiety, or poor health may withdraw from interactions, limiting opportunities for social and cognitive growth (Johnston et al., 2018).

This concept aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which highlights that a sense of belonging and social connection is a fundamental requirement before children can progress to higher-order learning, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. In practice, early years settings that nurture positive peer interactions, cooperative play, and supportive adult relationships create the conditions for holistic social, emotional, and cognitive development. Activities such as collaborative projects, role play, and group problem-solving encourage children to develop empathy, communication skills, and an understanding of social norms, demonstrating the interconnected nature of development across multiple domains.

In conclusion, Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers a useful framework for supporting holistic child development. By addressing children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs as interconnected domains, early years practitioners can create environments that foster safety, secure relationships, and confidence. Meeting these foundational needs enables children to engage fully in learning, develop social competence, and progress toward higher-order skills and self-actualisation. Applying Maslow's principles alongside frameworks like the Curriculum for Wales ensures a holistic, child-centred approach that supports lifelong learning and wellbeing.

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Part Three

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Offer three examples from early years practice to highlight Maslow's significance in understanding child development.

Understanding how children's needs influence their development is essential for effective early years practice. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) remains a widely used framework, suggesting that children can only engage fully in learning when their basic physical, emotional, and psychological needs are met. However, the theory has faced criticism. Cherry (2015) notes that most research has not been able to confirm that people's needs operate in a fixed order as Maslow proposed. Cherry also highlights that Maslow based his conclusions on a small group of individuals he knew personally or admired, which limits the generalisability of his findings.

Despite these criticisms, Maslow's framework continues to provide valuable insight into the conditions that support children's wellbeing, motivation, and readiness to learn. In early years settings, practitioners routinely respond to children's needs through daily routines, well-designed environments, and supportive interactions—often without explicitly referencing Maslow's theory.

This essay will illustrate the significance of Maslow's ideas in understanding child development through three examples from early years practice: meeting children's physical needs, supporting them through transitions, and fostering secure attachments.

The first example, physical needs, forms the foundation of Maslow's hierarchy and includes essential requirements such as food, rest, warmth, and comfort. In early years settings, practitioners support these needs through everyday routines. For instance, during breakfast club or morning snack, a practitioner can identify when a child is hungry and provide food to support their physiological wellbeing. Adequate nutrition not only enables children to concentrate and engage in learning but also supports their overall development and long-term health (World Health Organization, no date).

Meeting these needs also aligns with the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises holistic child development, including health, self-care, and physical wellbeing, as prerequisites for learning and progression (Welsh Government, 2022). By ensuring that children's basic physical needs are met, practitioners enable them to participate more fully in learning and enhance developmental outcomes.

This approach is reinforced by the Education Endowment Foundation (2024), which highlights the critical role early years practitioners play in supporting children's gross and fine motor development. One effective method, Promoting Physical Activity, focuses on creating a positive environment that encourages children to be active and enjoy physical play. This illustrates Maslow's principle that higher-level learning and social engagement rely on first addressing fundamental physiological needs.

Transitions, such as moving between activities, rooms, or settings, represent an important aspect of children's daily experiences in early years settings. According to Maslow's hierarchy, safety and security needs form the second level, coming after physiological needs. Children who feel secure in their environment are better able to explore, learn, and engage socially. In practice, early years practitioners in Wales support children through transitions by providing predictable routines, clear explanations, and consistent adult presence. For example, when a child moves from free play to circle time, a practitioner might give a verbal warning, use visual cues, or offer reassurance to reduce anxiety and maintain a sense of safety.

Research published in Early Child Development and Care (no date) highlight that transitions should not be overly seamless, as experiencing manageable challenges can support children's growth and resilience. From this perspective, role adjustment during transitions involves children developing behavioural, emotional, and social skills simultaneously, rather than treating each adjustment as an isolated step.

This approach aligns with the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises coherent progression, continuity, and emotional wellbeing as children move between activities, settings, and stages of learning (Welsh Government, 2022). By addressing safety and security needs while allowing children to face small challenges, practitioners enable them to engage more fully in learning activities, demonstrating the continued relevance of Maslow's theory in understanding child development.

Attachment is central to a child's social and emotional development. It refers to how children understand, express, and manage their emotions, and how they build relationships and interact with others. Bowlby's attachment theory (1969, 1979, 1982) emphasises the importance of secure and trusting relationships between young children and their caregivers, suggesting that humans are biologically programmed to form attachments for survival. The quality of these early relationships profoundly impacts children's development and influences lifelong social and emotional wellbeing (PositivePsychology.com, n.d.).

In early years settings, children who experience secure attachments are better able to engage in learning, exploration, and social interaction. Practitioners foster attachment by providing consistent, responsive, and nurturing relationships, such as through key-person systems, small group support, or one-to-one attention during activities. This aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which suggests that children must have their physiological, safety, and belonging needs met before higher-level learning and self-development can occur. Secure attachments help children feel safe, supported, and connected, enabling them to participate fully across all areas of development. This approach also reflects the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises holistic child development, emotional wellbeing, and nurturing relationships as essential foundations for learning (Welsh Government, 2022).

In conclusion, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a valuable framework for understanding the conditions necessary for children's development in early years settings. Meeting physical needs ensures children have the energy and wellbeing required to engage in learning, while supporting transitions promotes safety, stability, and confidence, enabling children to explore and interact socially. Fostering secure attachments addresses belonging needs and emotional security, allowing children to form positive relationships and engage fully in learning experiences. By applying these principles in everyday practice, early years practitioners help children progress through Maslow's hierarchy, supporting their cognitive, social, and emotional development. Integrating Maslow's insights with frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales ensures practice is holistic, responsive, and centred on the needs of each child. Overall, Maslow's theory remains a valuable guide for creating supportive and developmentally appropriate early years environments.

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