

What is Health, Well-Being and Lifestyle?

Introduction

This poster examines the interconnected concepts of health, well-being, and lifestyle, emphasizing their importance in early childhood development and their role in promoting holistic growth. It explores key definitions, underscores their significance, and discusses the crucial role of Early Years practitioners in fostering these elements. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a positive concept that highlights social and personal resources, underscoring the connection between health and emotional well-being (WHO, 1986). This definition suggests that emotional well-being depends on positive social interactions with others and is also tied to our relationship with ourselves. This highlights the importance of fostering self-reliance and resilience in children, emphasizing the role of practitioners in supporting these aspects of development (Musgrave, 2017).

Health, well-being, and lifestyle are closely interconnected concepts that significantly influence early childhood development (Cheung, 2018). These elements can be likened to the fire triangle, where changes in one directly impact the others. This poster explores these interconnections, underscores their importance for young children, and incorporates their perspectives. It also emphasizes the critical role of Early Years practitioners in nurturing these dimensions. Musgrave (2017) notes that an individual's understanding of health and well-being is often shaped by personal experiences, which may offer only a limited perspective. However, within the early years sector, practitioners have a unique opportunity to develop a broader, more comprehensive understanding by promoting and maintaining children's health while also learning from and sharing insights with one another.

Health

Concepts

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1948), health is defined as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, rather than merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This definition highlights the body's ability to perform daily functions, supported by proper nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate rest, and access to medical care. Mental health encompasses emotional, psychological, and social well-being, shaping how children think, feel, and act. Hong, Ra, and Jang (2015) support this perspective, emphasizing that a child's perception of happiness is essential for leading a fulfilling life. However, defining health is complex, as interpretations vary across different socio-cultural contexts (Rose, Gilbert, & Richards, 2016). Musgrave (2017) echoes this sentiment, suggesting that no single, universally accepted definition exists. The WHO's updated perspective (1998) expands on its original definition, describing health as the ability to realize aspirations, meet needs, cope with change, and manage one's environment. This view positions health as a resource for everyday life rather than an ultimate goal, emphasizing social and personal resources alongside physical capabilities. Musgrave (2017) acknowledges this definition as ambitious, as it seeks to provide an inclusive framework applicable across diverse contexts.

Impact on Early Years Development

Healthy development in early childhood lays the foundation for children's readiness and success in early years settings and future educational experiences (Currie, 2005). Currie (2005) also highlights that early life stress and adverse events can have lasting effects on children's mental and physical health. Specifically, early life stress can lead to developmental delays and negatively impact long-term health outcomes (Developing Child, 2010; Noble, Candliss, & Farah, 2007). Early childhood development and education programs play a crucial role in reducing educational disparities. For instance, *Flying Start*, a Welsh Government-funded initiative, provides support services for families with children under four in disadvantaged areas of Wales (Welsh Government, 2017). Positive early experiences are essential for building a child's brain architecture, forming the foundation for lifelong learning and skill development. The period from pregnancy to age three is particularly critical, as the brain is most sensitive to environmental influences during this time (UNICEF, n.d.). The Institute of Early Years Education (2024) emphasizes that a healthy, balanced diet in early childhood promotes growth, supports brain development, and reduces the risk of chronic diseases. They also highlight that, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, n.d.), good nutrition is a fundamental human right. This includes access to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and education to support a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, maternal health before and during pregnancy significantly impacts foetal health and brain development (WHO, 2020).

Role of Practitioner

The role of the Early Years practitioner is multifaceted, encompassing the responsibility of ensuring a safe and engaging physical environment. This includes facilitating both indoor and outdoor play opportunities and designing activities that support children's development of core strength, balance, and coordination. Practitioners also play a key role in promoting healthy eating by providing nutritious meals and snacks or offering guidance on balanced diets. Additionally, they encourage regular physical activity through structured and unstructured play (Department for Education, 2024; DfE, n.d.; McGowan, Chandler, & Gerde, 2023). High-quality childcare programs, such as *Flying Start*, support skill development, socialization, and children's ability to focus and play. Designed to address poverty and deprivation, *Flying Start* is a key initiative in implementing early years programs (Welsh Government, 2017). Moreover, practitioners are expected to exemplify healthy behaviours by demonstrating good hygiene practices, actively participating in physical activities, and modelling positive social interactions (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021; DfE, 2010).

Concepts

Well-being is a broad concept encompassing physical, mental, and emotional health. It reflects a state in which children build resilience, manage stress, and reach their potential. With emotional, social, and physical dimensions, well-being is fundamental to quality of life. Core elements include emotional stability, life satisfaction, positive relationships, and a sense of purpose.

Musgrave (2017) highlights that well-being is defined from multiple perspectives, including philosophical, economic, psychological, and health-related viewpoints. Statham and Chase (2010) define well-being as quality of life based on objective measures such as health. Rose, Gilbert, and Richards (2016) acknowledge the challenges in defining well-being, citing Pollard and Lee's (2002) five domains—physical, psychological, cognitive, social, and economic—which align with NICE's (2012) emotional, psychological, and social categories. Key components such as happiness, resilience, and emotional regulation further contribute to the concept of well-being.

Dodge *et al.* (2012) offer a dynamic definition of well-being, drawing on various theories. Headey and Wearing (1989) describe well-being as a balance of stable traits and situational changes, while Cummins (2010) emphasizes the impact of life challenges on homeostasis. Hendry and Kloep (2002) propose a lifespan model, considering well-being as an evolving process. Dodge *et al.* (2012) ultimately argue that well-being is best understood as a state of equilibrium, continuously shaped by life events and challenges.

[Image source: [Toddeasyeasy: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](#)]



Well-Being

Impact on Early Years Development

John Bowlby's attachment theory and research on early relationships and mental health highlight the significance of early experiences in shaping emotional well-being, resilience, and stress management. His work demonstrates that the emotional bond between a child and their primary caregivers is fundamental to emotional development and mental health (HM Government, 2016; NSPCC Learning, 2021).

Research by Sciaraffa, Zeanah, and Zeanah (2018) emphasizes that toxic stress, particularly from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), can physically alter brain development. Preventing these stressors is therefore crucial. Masten and Barnes (2018) support this view, noting that resilience science is gaining attention due to increasing concerns about the long-term effects of ACEs on development.

A stable emotional environment enhances cognitive functions and learning abilities. Ursache, Blair, and Raver (2012) explored the relationship between cognitive regulation and emotional reactivity, demonstrating how attention and physiological stress responses influence a child's ability to manage emotions and focus on learning.

Positive social interactions foster communication skills and empathy, while a sense of community enhances self-esteem and security. A nurturing environment is essential for promoting emotional well-being and development. Furthermore, positive social interactions help children develop emotional regulation and social skills, which are critical for forming healthy relationships and a strong sense of self (Musgrave, 2017; Roberts, 2010; Bradshaw, 2016).

Role of Practitioner

Understanding their own well-being helps practitioners recognize its importance for the children in their care (DfE, n.d.). Laevers (1994) defines children's well-being through qualities such as openness, confidence, self-esteem, vitality, and inner peace, linking high well-being to improved learning. This underscores the connection between emotional health and education. Practitioners can support well-being by creating safe, predictable environments and fostering trusting relationships.

Roberts (2010) emphasizes the importance of relationships, particularly the role of key persons in building strong connections with children and families while being mindful of family well-being. This dual focus promotes both emotional and overall development. Teaching emotional regulation and providing opportunities for children to express their feelings is sometimes necessary. Practitioners can help manage stress and anxiety by being attentive and intervening when needed (Rose, Gilbert, & Richards, 2016; Ursache, Blair, & Raver, 2011). A nurturing environment that supports emotional expression, regulation, and positive social interactions aligns with Vygotsky's theory, fostering both emotional and cognitive growth (Roberts, 2010; Rose, Gilbert, & Richards, 2016).



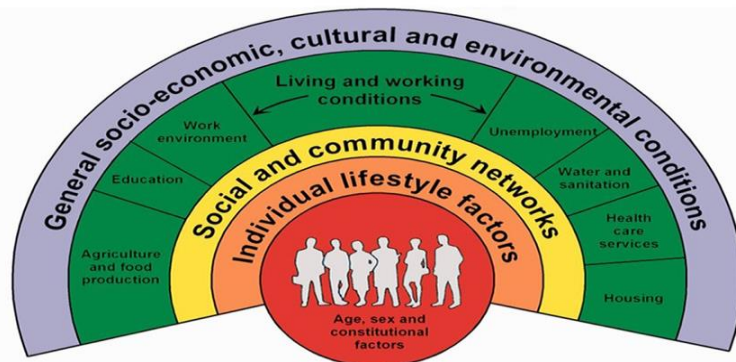
Credit: Mariam Mahmood

Concept

Lifestyle represents a way of living that reflects one's attitudes, habits, and values. For children, a healthy lifestyle includes proper nutrition, regular physical activity, sufficient sleep, and positive social interactions. Key factors influencing lifestyle include diet, exercise, sleep patterns, and recreational activities.

Lifestyle encompasses the habits, attitudes, and behaviours that shape overall health and well-being (Svenson & Halberg, 2011). The Welsh Government (2021) highlights that a person's lifestyle is influenced by multiple factors, including home environment, nutrition, financial situation, community influences, and parenting practices. Additionally, lifestyle is shaped by access to services, culture, work, and personal preferences.

Bagordo et al. (2017) emphasize that lifestyle choices made during childhood significantly impact long-term health and quality of life. According to the WHO (2024), many adult diseases can be prevented by identifying and modifying unhealthy behaviours early. Their research highlights the critical role of socio-economic status in shaping children's lifestyles, as it influences key health-related factors (Gautum et al., 2023; Bagordo et al., 2017). Furthermore, geographical location affects lifestyle choices, as environmental, cultural, and social conditions often dictate behaviours and opportunities (Warner, 2024; Rossello, 2025). For example, the National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) notes that environmental, cultural, and social factors in different geographical locations significantly influence behaviours and opportunities (Warner, 2024). Additionally, research published in Preventive Medicine Daily discusses how geographic location impacts health by determining available food options and typical physical and social activities (Rossello, 2025).



Source: Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991

Lifestyle

Impact on Early Years Development

Svenson and Hallberg (2011) discuss how lifestyle can be seen as either an independent variable, influencing unhealthy behaviours, or as a dependent variable, shaped by societal conditions. For example, children in urban areas might have more access to fast food, leading to unhealthy eating habits, whereas those in rural areas might have limited access to recreational facilities, affecting their physical activity levels. However, it is important to note that individual family practices can sometimes mitigate these broader societal influences (Morgan, 2011). The community and societal structures involved in raising a child play a crucial role during the early years. Tickell (2011) and Jirout *et al.* (2019) support this view, emphasizing that lifestyle factors such as diet, physical activity, and sleep hygiene significantly impact children's cognition and learning. Their research explored the relationships between nutrition, fitness, sleep, and broader cultural and socioeconomic influences, demonstrating how these factors intersect with cognitive development and educational outcomes.

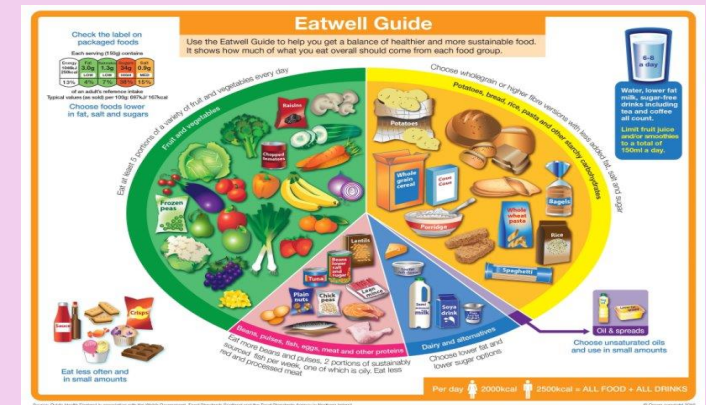
Encouraging healthy habits from an early age not only supports physical well-being but also fosters positive behaviours, instilling a lifelong appreciation for a balanced and healthy lifestyle (Vasundhara & Nagaraju, 2024). Community norms and expectations further shape lifestyle choices. For example, in communities where physical fitness is highly valued, individuals are more likely to adopt regular exercise routines and healthy eating habits (Wittels, 2020).

Role of Practitioner

Early Years practitioners collaborate with families to reinforce healthy habits at home by providing resources and guidance on nutrition and physical activity. For example, they may organize workshops for parents on preparing balanced meals and snacks. However, as highlighted by the DfE (2017), not all families have equal access to healthy food options, which can present challenges in implementing these practices effectively.

Practitioners promote healthy eating habits by offering balanced meals and snacks while encouraging regular physical activity through both structured and unstructured play (McGowan, Chandler, & Gerde, 2023). However, some children may have dietary restrictions or physical limitations that require tailored approaches to ensure inclusivity and accessibility (Public Health Wales, 2020).

By demonstrating healthy behaviours, practitioners serve as role models for children. This includes actively participating in physical activities, such as joining in a game of tag, and making nutritious food choices alongside the children. Engaging in these activities fosters a positive learning environment and encourages children to adopt similar habits. However, maintaining consistency in modelling these behaviours can be challenging due to practitioners' varying personal habits and preferences (Early Years Wales, 2021).



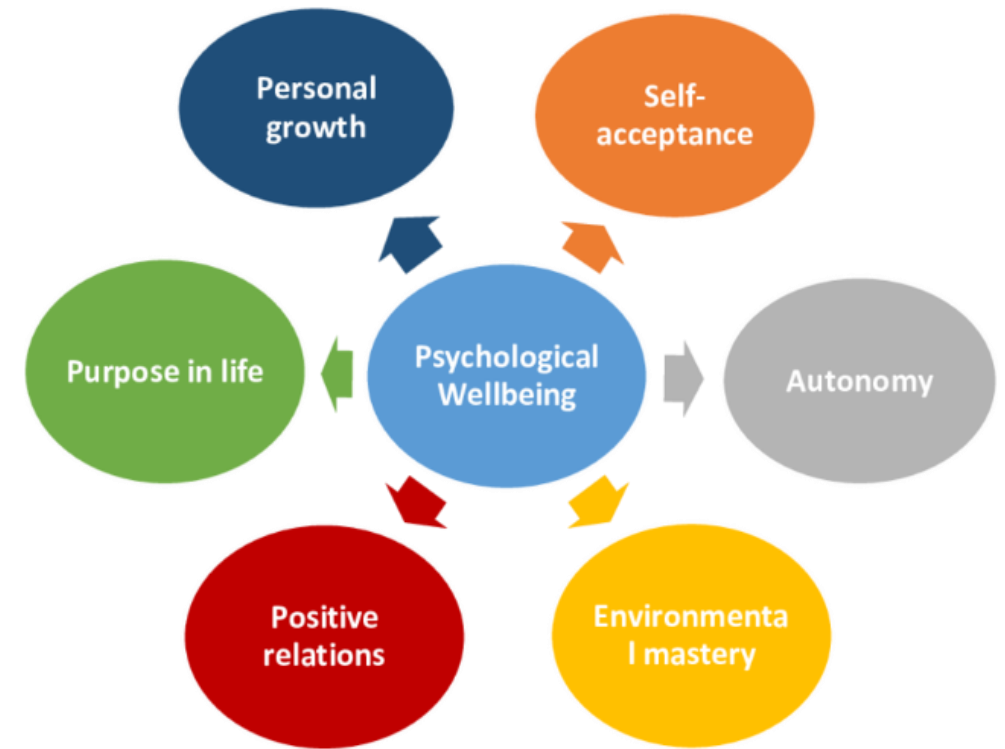
Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-eatwell-guide>

Conclusion

Health, well-being, and lifestyle are deeply interconnected and play a fundamental role in early childhood development. A holistic approach that considers physical, mental, and emotional well-being is essential in fostering resilience, cognitive growth, and overall life satisfaction (Musgrave, 2017; Rose, Gilbert, & Richards, 2016). The early years are a critical period for establishing healthy habits, as factors such as nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and social interactions significantly impact a child's development (Bagordo et al., 2017; Tickell, 2011; Jirout et al., 2019).

Early Years practitioners play a crucial role in promoting and maintaining children's well-being by creating supportive environments, acting as role models, and collaborating with families to reinforce healthy behaviours (DfE, 2017; McGowan, Chandler, & Gerde, 2023). However, challenges such as socio-economic disparities and accessibility to resources can affect the implementation of these practices (Public Health Wales, 2020; Welsh Government, 2021).

By adopting an inclusive and proactive approach, practitioners can help shape positive long-term outcomes for children, ensuring they develop the foundations for lifelong health and well-being. Understanding and addressing the diverse influences on a child's lifestyle, including environmental and socio-economic factors, is key to fostering equitable and sustainable early years development (Warner, 2024; Rossello, 2025).



The Six factor Model of Wellbeing from Carol Ryff (One Percent Wisdom, 2024).

