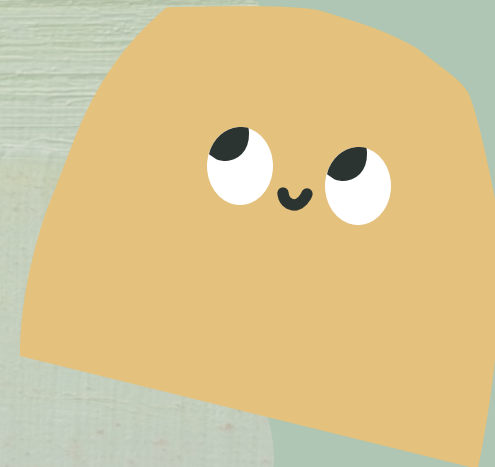
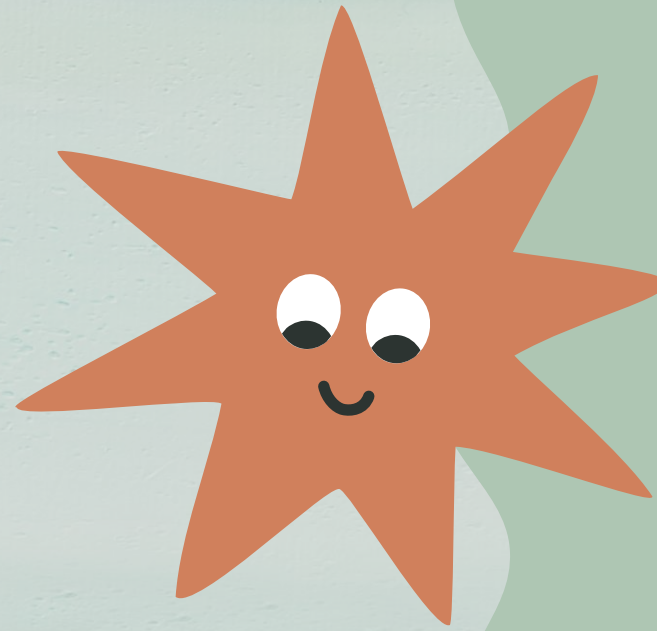


# Health, Well-being and Lifestyles

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I have not used AI in this assignment.



# Health, Well-being and Lifestyles

Health, lifestyle, and well-being are key to children's development in the early years, as they shape physical growth, emotional security, and long-term outcomes. The early years, from birth to age five, are a crucial period during which early experiences shape brain development, learning, and future health (World Health Organisation, 2018).

Early childhood health covers both physical and mental areas, like nutrition, exercise, sleep, and emotional well-being. Lifestyle means the daily routines, behaviours, and surroundings that affect children's development. Well-being is about a child's overall emotional, social, and psychological state (Department for Education, 2025b).

Research shows that positive early experiences help children build resilience and develop holistically. On the other hand, facing adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) early on can lead to long-term health inequalities. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) focuses on supporting children's health, safety, and well-being, and understands that children learn best when they feel safe, supported, and cared for (Department for Education, 2024c).

Strong and caring relationships are key to emotional well-being in the early years. Bowlby (1988) points out that attachment helps children manage their emotions and feel secure. Early years practitioners play an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles and well-being by employing inclusive practices, creating supportive environments, and working with families (Early Years Alliance, 2025).

## Health

Good physical health in early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong wellbeing. It helps children grow, strengthens their immune system, and supports motor, cognitive, and emotional development. The first five years are a time of fast physical and brain growth, when habits around activity, nutrition, sleep, and rest start to form and shape future health (World Health Organization, 2019a).

### Nutrition and Healthy Eating

Good nutrition is key to healthy growth and development. Early years settings should offer balanced meals and snacks that give children the nutrients they need for strong bones, healthy brains, and good immune and metabolic health (Department for Education, 2025a). Eating well early in life helps children maintain a healthy weight and reduces the risk of obesity and other diseases later in life (British Nutrition Foundation, n.d.). Practitioners can encourage healthy eating by setting a good example, supporting children as they learn to eat, and helping them try different foods to build healthy habits (Fox, Corbett, and Duffey, 2018).

### Physical Activity and Active Play

Regular physical activity helps children develop motor skills, coordination, play abilities, and heart health. In the UK, it is recommended that toddlers and preschoolers get at least 180 minutes of activity each day, spread throughout the day (Department of Health & Social Care, 2019; NHS, 2025). Studies show that children are often more active in early years settings than at home, highlighting the value of free play and planned movement activities in these environments (University of Bristol, n.d.).

### Sleep, Sedentary Behaviour and Routine

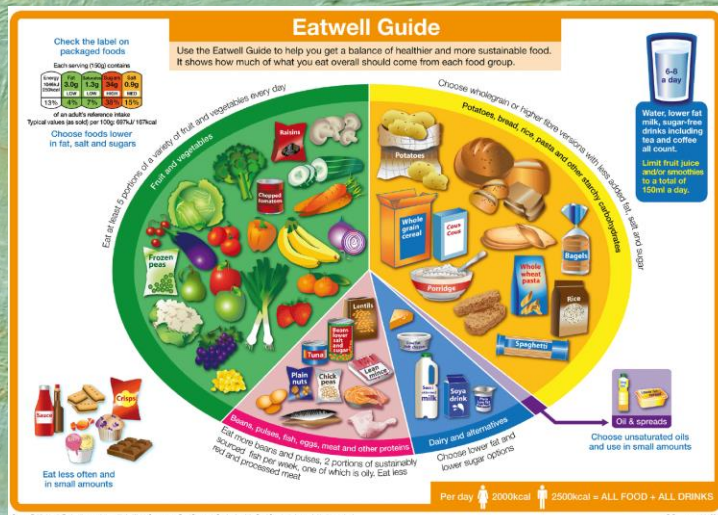
Getting enough sleep and limiting time spent sitting still, especially in front of screens, are important for children's physical health, growth, and brain development. The WHO provides age-based sleep recommendations and warns that excessive sedentary time, including screen use, can be harmful. Practitioners can help by creating routines that balance active play, rest, and reduced sitting, thereby supporting children's overall well-being (World Health Organization, 2019).

### Weight, Obesity Prevention, and Environment

The early years are a critical period for preventing obesity. Research shows that eating a lot of ultra-processed foods and sugar in early childhood is linked to being overweight and having health risks later on (British Nutrition Foundation, n.d.). Practitioners can support healthy eating habits by offering children a variety of foods, textures and flavours. Early exposure to a variety of foods can increase children's willingness to try new foods and promote a more diverse diet, supporting healthy growth and development and encouraging healthier eating behaviours later in childhood (Department for Education, 2025d).

Studies show that planned healthy eating and activity programs in childcare settings can improve children's diets and physical activity, but results vary, and additional support is often needed (Giombi and Rains, 2024).

In short, supporting physical health in early childhood takes a well-rounded, evidence-based, and team-focused approach. Early years practitioners play a significant role in shaping children's lifelong wellbeing by encouraging healthy eating, active play, good sleep, and less sitting, both in their settings and through their work with families.



Wellbeing in the early years refers to children’s emotional, social, and psychological health and is fundamental to their overall development (NICE, 2012a). Children’s well-being influences their ability to form relationships, engage in learning, and develop resilience. Evidence suggests that experiences in early childhood have a lasting impact on mental health, emotional regulation, and social functioning across the life course (UNICEF, 2021; Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2020).

**Emotional Wellbeing and Early Relationships**

Strong, caring relationships are vital for children’s well-being. Studies show that when children receive warm and steady care, their brains develop well and they feel emotionally secure. This helps them handle stress and manage their feelings (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, 2020). In early years settings, practitioners can become important attachment figures because the key person approach fosters continuous, responsive relationships that provide emotional security and support for children, particularly those facing challenges at home (Nutbrown, n.d.; Brodie, n.d.; McDermott, 2016).

**Wellbeing, Belonging and Inclusion**

Feeling like they belong is important for children’s well-being. When children feel valued and included, they gain confidence, self-esteem, and good social skills (Counted et al., 2025; Australian Education Research Organisation, 2023). Environments that respect each child’s needs, background, and abilities help them feel safe and accepted, supporting their emotional and social well-being (Marzak and Belghmi, 2024).

**Emotional Regulation and Mental Health**

Learning to manage emotions is an important part of well-being in early childhood. Research shows that children who get help understanding and managing their feelings are less likely to develop behaviour or mental health problems later (Thümmler, Engel and Bartz, 2022). NICE guidance (2022b) also emphasises the importance of early support for social and emotional development to prevent future mental health issues. Practitioners can help by keeping routines predictable, creating calm spaces, and showing positive ways to handle emotions (NICE, 2022b).

**Impact of Stress and Adversity**

When children face stress, trauma, or difficult experiences, their well-being can suffer, and they may have more emotional or behavioural problems (Choi, Wang and Jackson, 2019). The Marmot Review points out that early childhood is a key time to reduce health inequalities, and that early support can help lessen the impact of disadvantage on wellbeing (Marmot et al., 2020). Early years settings play an important role by spotting concerns early and offering caring, supportive help (Pernebo, Anderberg and Massoudi, 2025).

**Role of the Early Years Practitioner**

Early years practitioners help children’s well-being by building trust, creating supportive environments, and working closely with families and other professionals. Research shows that early, relationship-based support can boost emotional well-being and lower the risk of future mental health problems (Murray et al., 2025).

Early childhood habits, such as diet, physical activity, sleep, and screen time, all play a role in children’s health and development. Family routines, socio-economic background, and daily environments influence these habits. Research shows that early patterns often last into later childhood, affecting physical, cognitive, and emotional outcomes (Arafa et al., 2024).

**Diet and Eating Behaviours**

A healthy diet in early childhood is important for good health. Poor eating habits can raise the risk of obesity and other health problems, while healthy diets help children grow and support their immune systems. Studies find that food preferences and how often children eat healthy foods can be seen by age 5 and are linked to later health (Mattsson et al., 2021). Patterns in diet, sedentary time, and physical activity often occur together, underscoring the importance of building healthy habits across all areas (Saldanha-Gomes et al., 2020).

**Physical Activity and Active Play**

Regular physical activity helps children grow, develop motor skills, and feel better emotionally. Studies show that children who are active at age 3 often remain active at age 5 and later, underscoring why starting active play early matters (Martin et al., 2022). Being active, along with other healthy habits, is also linked to better social and emotional development (Descarpentrie et al., 2022).

**Screen Time and Sedentary Behaviour**

Too much screen time in early childhood is linked to negative effects on development and well-being. Research shows that increased screen use is associated with behaviour problems, delayed language development, and slower progress toward milestones. Spending a lot of time on screens can also take away from active play and social time, which are important for healthy growth. These findings support advice to limit screen time in young children and balance it with active play and social activities to support healthy lifestyles and well-being (Xiang et al., 2022; McArthur, Tough and Madigan, 2021; World Health Organization, 2019b).

**Sleep and Rest Routines**

Research shows that balanced daily routines are important for healthy sleep in early childhood. A study in BMC Pediatrics found that getting enough sleep (about 11 hours), along with physical activity and less sedentary time, was linked to better cognitive outcomes, especially working memory, in preschoolers (Zahran et al., 2024). Another review found that greater screen time was associated with shorter, poorer-quality sleep in children under five, whereas physical activity and outdoor play were associated with better sleep (Janssen et al., 2019). These studies suggest that healthy sleep and rest routines are best supported by structured daily routines that balance sufficient sleep with active play and reduced screen time, underscoring the important role of early childhood settings in promoting good sleep habits.

**Family and Socio-Economic Influences**

Parents and caregivers have a strong influence on children’s lifestyle habits. A systematic review shows that parents’ own eating, activity, sleep, and screen use are closely linked to their children’s behaviours and health (Maia et al., 2025). Family routines and socio-economic background also matter, and children in less advantaged situations may have less healthy diets and activity levels (Delahunt et al., 2022).

**Why Early Intervention Matters**

These lifestyle factors often appear together early in life and affect long-term health. Early childhood settings and families can help by encouraging healthy habits such as eating nutritious food, being active, limiting screen time, and maintaining regular sleep routines. These steps support children’s development and reduce the risk of obesity and other health problems later in life (Arafa et al., 2024).

## Role of the Early Years Practitioner

Early years practitioners help promote children's health, lifestyles, and wellbeing through their daily work, relationships, and routines. They encourage healthy habits by establishing daily schedules that include time for physical activity, rest, sleep, and adequate nutrition. These routines give children a sense of security and predictability, which supports their physical health and emotional well-being (World Health Organization, 2018).

Practitioners can model healthy behaviours and offer learning experiences that fit each child's stage of development. This includes encouraging active play, supporting healthy food choices, and limiting time spent sitting or using screens. By creating an inclusive, supportive environment, practitioners help children feel safe, valued, and confident, which is important for their social and emotional growth (Harvard University, 2020).

Health, lifestyles, and well-being in early childhood are closely linked and lay the groundwork for children's future development. When children have positive experiences, healthy routines, active lifestyles, and caring relationships, it helps their physical, emotional, and social well-being (WHO, 2018; Marmot et al., 2020). Early years practitioners are key in shaping these experiences by creating supportive environments, encouraging healthy habits, and working with families. Taking a holistic, preventive approach helps children build resilience, confidence, and healthy habits for life (Nutbrown, 2012; Murray et al., 2025).

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# Presentation Script

Today, I will discuss the importance of well-being in early childhood and its significant impact on lifelong development, with a focus on holistic development. Holistic development means supporting children as whole individuals by encouraging growth across all areas, including physical, cognitive, and social-emotional domains. These areas are interconnected, and progress in one can influence others. Rather than addressing each aspect separately, a holistic approach nurtures all areas together, promoting overall health and well-being (Queen Margaret University, 2023). I will also examine how well-being affects children and the essential role early years practitioners play in supporting it. The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines well-being as a positive state experienced by individuals and communities. Like good health, it supports daily life and is shaped by social, economic, and environmental factors. For children, emotional health and well-being are vital for cognitive development and learning, and they also affect physical health, social relationships, and mental health (Department for Education, 2023). Practitioners are central to supporting the well-being of babies, children, and young people. Their work is key to safeguarding, promoting healthy development, and achieving positive long-term outcomes (NSPCC, 2021).

The first vital contributor to well-being I'd like to mention is Play. The Welsh Government (2021) recognises that self-directed play significantly benefits children's health, well-being, and development. Play not only provides enjoyment but also supports emotional, social, cognitive, physical, and behavioural growth. Imaginative and creative play supports cognitive development, while activities like art and craft develop fine motor skills needed for handwriting. Play also supports language development, problem-solving, memory, and creativity. Physical play promotes fitness and health. Through play, children become emotionally engaged and use it to explore and understand their own feelings and those of others (Play Scotland, 2025).

Play enables children to communicate experiences and emotions they may not yet express verbally. By re-enacting challenging events in imaginative play, children try to understand what has happened and its emotional impact (UNICEF, 2022). Supporting development through play is most effective when the child leads. Children should have opportunities to explore their environment while feeling safe under the supervision of a trusted adult. Caregivers should be attentive to children's cues and respond appropriately during play. This responsive approach builds secure attachment, which is important for healthy development (Anna Freud, n.d.).

Attachment theory emphasises the critical role of secure relationships. When children lack regular play and do not experience safe, stable, and nurturing relationships, exposure to stress can disrupt the development of executive functioning and prosocial behaviours (Yogman et al., 2018). Bowlby (1969) highlights the importance of secure caregiver-child bonds in helping children feel safe and supported. During play, caregivers and children share joy, engage in reciprocal communication, and participate in emotionally attuned "serve-and-return" interactions, which help regulate stress and strengthen attachment. These interactions buffer against stress and show why play is essential for healthy emotional, social, and cognitive development (Yogman et al., 2018; Bowlby, 1969). Play-based learning environments foster social, emotional, and cognitive growth. When supportive adults guide play, children can build positive peer relationships, feel secure in learning settings, and practice managing their emotions. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory states that learning occurs through social interactions and guidance from more knowledgeable others. Adult-facilitated play provides the scaffolding children need to extend their thinking, regulate their behaviour, and thrive socially and academically. Early years practitioners play a crucial role in creating emotionally supportive play spaces that promote holistic development (Arda Tuncdemir, 2025; Vygotsky, 1978).

Having established the importance of well-being and holistic development in early childhood, the discussion will now examine Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. This section will outline Maslow's hierarchy, analyse how each level influences children's development and well-being, and discuss strategies practitioners can use to address diverse needs in care and learning environments.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a widely recognised theory about basic human needs. Developed within humanistic psychology, it emphasises well-being and personal growth, contrasting with behaviourist and psychoanalytic approaches. The theory suggests that individuals must have their basic needs met before reaching their full potential, making it useful for understanding how to support children's development and well-being (Montag et al., 2020). Maslow's hierarchy includes five levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. He proposed that people must first meet basic biological needs before focusing on security, relationships, and self-worth. Once these needs are met, individuals can work toward their full potential. The hierarchy shows that each level builds on the previous one, highlighting the importance of supporting foundational needs before higher-level growth can occur (Desmet and Fokkinga, 2020).

Maslow's theory has been criticised for limited empirical support and vague definitions of key concepts. Researchers have questioned its practicality, the progression through levels, and its relevance today. Despite these criticisms, the theory has introduced influential ideas that remain valuable for research and practice (Desmet and Fokkinga, 2020).

Maslow's hierarchy has limitations when applied to children. Individual differences mean that not all children's needs fit the hierarchy, as cultural background, experiences, and circumstances influence priorities. Needs often overlap, so children may require support in multiple areas at once. External factors such as family situations, poverty, and societal inequalities also affect well-being and the ability to meet needs, highlighting the importance of context. Children's needs change over time, requiring flexible educational approaches. The theory may also overemphasise higher-level needs, such as self-actualisation, while foundational needs, such as safety and physiological requirements, which are essential for learning and development, may be overlooked (Naaz, H. and Khalid, S., 2023).

Early years practitioners cannot fully meet all children's physiological needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, and sleep. While programs like free school meals (Welsh Government, 2022) help address hunger, other basic needs may remain unmet, affecting children's ability to focus on learning. Practitioners can provide access to school programs that support these needs. For safety, creating a predictable, structured learning environment is essential. Establishing routines, clear rules, and a daily agenda helps children feel secure and in control. Emotional and psychological safety is also important, allowing children to take risks in learning and build trust with practitioners. To support love, belonging, and self-esteem, children need to feel valued and cared for. Practitioners can reinforce positive behaviour, acknowledge effort, and show appreciation, helping children develop a positive self-image. These needs are central to supporting learning and achievement. Practitioners primarily influence the lower four levels of Maslow's hierarchy: physiological, safety, love and belonging, and self-esteem. Understanding each child's needs and their current level on the hierarchy allows practitioners to remove obstacles to learning and provide targeted support. When necessary, external resources or programs can help address unmet lower-level needs, enabling children to progress and maximise their learning potential (Burlinson and Thoron, 2014). The discussion will now move on to inclusivity and equality, and how inclusive early years practice supports children's wellbeing. Early experiences play a vital role in shaping children's development, and high-quality early years education benefits both children and families. However, families from different cultural, racial, and social backgrounds may experience early years settings differently due to language barriers, cultural differences in childcare, past negative experiences with services, or a lack of recognition of diverse family structures. Valuing diversity and promoting inclusive practice helps ensure all families feel respected and supported, particularly those who may have experienced marginalisation. This approach supports children's well-being and encourages positive, inclusive attitudes within early years settings (Anna Freud, n.d.).

Inclusive education has the potential to transform how children learn when practitioners feel confident in their ability to support all learners. A major challenge to inclusive practice is a lack of understanding about what inclusive teaching truly involves. Inclusive teaching focuses on creating fair, engaging learning environments where all children are supported to develop as whole individuals through flexible approaches to teaching and assessment. Practitioners working within inclusive settings recognise and value diversity and believe that, with appropriate support, every child is capable of learning (Rad et al., 2022).

Resilience in the early years is a vital part of children's wellbeing, as it helps children manage difficulties, develop confidence, and adapt to new situations. Evidence shows that when children take part in creative activities, they often develop higher self-esteem, a sense of achievement, feelings of empowerment, and stronger social skills and connections. These positive characteristics are closely linked to resilience, which supports children's mental well-being by enabling them to cope with challenges, develop their abilities, and engage

Storytelling is widely recognised as an effective way to encourage positive behaviour in children, providing a unique approach to address challenging topics while supporting their overall development and wellbeing. It also reflects how families communicate their identities and create functional dynamics through shared narratives. Research shows that storytelling can strengthen children's resilience, reduce anxiety, depression, and behavioural difficulties, and support emotional regulation and conflict resolution. Additionally, storytelling enhances protective psychological factors, such as coping skills and self-confidence, helping children maintain good mental health and manage challenges effectively (Ramamurthy et al., 2023).

Another theory yet to be discussed is Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory explains that a child's development is shaped by multiple interconnected systems that surround and interact with them. This theory emphasises bidirectional influences, meaning that environments affect the child, while the child also influences those environments, alongside indirect influences through wider social contexts. Ecological systems theory highlights that different aspects of a child's social world have varying levels of impact on their learning and development (Rahman, 2025).

Early years practitioners play a vital role in supporting children's wellbeing across all levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Within the microsystem, practitioners support children's emotional well-being by nurturing resilience, confidence and a positive sense of self through warm, responsive interactions and play. Through close partnerships with families in the mesosystem, practitioners help promote secure attachments, consistent routines and emotionally supportive environments, all of which are essential for children's emotional security and healthy relationships. Wellbeing is further enhanced within the exosystem through access to high-quality early years settings, health services and safe outdoor spaces, where practitioners create play-based environments that support children's mental health and overall development. At the wider macrosystem level, early years practice is guided by safeguarding legislation and children's rights, which protect children from harm and reduce the risk of adverse childhood experiences. Together, these interconnected systems highlight how practitioners holistically support children's wellbeing, ensuring they feel safe, valued, and supported in their early years (The Open University, 2020).

In conclusion, children's well-being in the early years is best understood through a holistic approach that recognises the many factors influencing their development. Maslow's hierarchy of needs highlights the importance of meeting children's basic and emotional needs as a foundation for learning, growth and self-confidence. Bowlby's attachment theory further emphasises that secure, nurturing relationships with consistent caregivers are essential for children's emotional security, resilience and ability to form healthy relationships. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory reinforces that children's wellbeing is shaped not only by close relationships, but also by wider family, community and societal influences, including early years settings and policy frameworks. Play is central to supporting wellbeing across all of these theories, as it allows children to express emotions, build resilience, develop social skills and make sense of their experiences in a safe and meaningful way. Inclusive and equitable practice ensures that all children, regardless of background, ability or circumstance, feel valued, respected and supported, promoting a strong sense of belonging. By creating nurturing, inclusive, play-based environments and building secure relationships, early years practitioners play a vital role in supporting children's wellbeing, resilience and positive outcomes both in childhood and later life.

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