

EXPLORING MASLOW’S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS IN EARLY YEARS EDUCATION

What is Maslow Hierarchy of needs?

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs was developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943. Maslow explained that people are motivated by a series of needs, starting with basic physical needs and moving up to personal growth and self-fulfilment. The theory includes five main levels: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation. Meeting these needs helps children feel safe, supported, and valued, so children can learn, explore, and grow. (Department of Education, 2022) Addressing all levels helps create nurturing environments that develop confident, motivated, and resilient learners (Care Learning, 2023)



Understanding how children’s needs shape learning and development

PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS

Physiological Needs are based on essential needs for human survival such as food, water, warmth and rest. According to McLoed (2020) Maslow explains the first level of Maslow’s pyramid must be met before an individual can focus on the other levels such as learning and relationships. McLeod (2020) emphasises that if these needs are not met, the human body cannot operate effectively. Food, water and warmth are fundamental requirements for survival (Watson,2025). This is important for children’s physiological needs because their bodies and brains are developing. They need good nutrition to help build strong bones and muscles. National Institutes of Health (2022) state that children need adequate sleep to support physical growth. To further support this, they need proper warmth and shelter to protect their bodies from harm and grow. Without these needs being met, children can face growth delay and experience health issues that will affect their learning and development. Without enough food, hydration or sleep the brain cannot work effectively (De Sanctis et al., 2021). Children will show difficulty concentrating, memory problems and slow thinking in their learning. Warmth is important to keep the brain in a stable temperature to allow to function correctly (Wu et al., 2025). When children do not have their basic needs, their bodies become stressed and it will be harder for them to stay calm, focused and in control of their emotions.



SAFETY NEEDS

The second level of Maslow Hierarchy of Needs is Safety Needs. This includes physical safety, health and wellbeing, stability and emotional security. In early years education, these needs mean providing a safe environment, consistent routines, warm and dependable relationships. When safety needs are met, children are more likely to explore, engage, and learn, because they do not feel anxious or threatened (Care Learning, 2024). This connection is vital: without a foundation of safety, higher-level needs like belonging and self-esteem cannot be effectively addressed. Meeting safety needs in early childhood is essential because it underpins all aspects of a child’s development. When children feel safe, they are able to focus on learning, exploring, and problem-solving, as the absence of safety can activate stress responses that negatively affect brain development (Shonkoff et al., 2021). Overall, addressing safety needs in early childhood does not just prevent distress; it actively enables learning by giving children the security to grow.



LOVE AND BELONGING

Maslow’s third level of motivation includes the human need for affection, friendship, intimacy and a sense of belonging. The feeling of being accepted by others such as a school and being part of a community. Ye (2024) argues that supporting children’s love and belonging needs is essential for healthy development because strong, positive relationships provide the emotional safety required for learning, exploration, and social growth. Allen et al.,(2021) research shows that children sense of belonging at home, with peers and at school display higher emotional wellbeing, greater confidence, and stronger motivation to participate and persevere in learning tasks. When belonging needs are unmet, children are more likely to experience loneliness, anxiety, and behavioural difficulties, which can negatively impact cognitive development and academic engagement (Korpershoek et al., 2020).



ESTEEM NEEDS

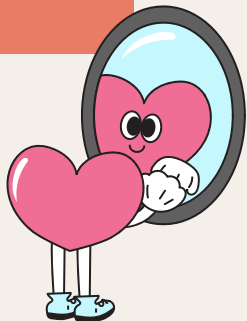
Maslow’s esteem needs, the fourth level in his hierarchy, involve the human desire for self-respect, competence, achievement, and recognition from others. In early childhood, these needs are critical because young children are developing a sense of self-worth, confidence, and agency. When children receive positive feedback, encouragement, and recognition for their effort this may be at home and in early learning settings, they develop emotional security, motivation to explore, and persistence in learning task. (Bennett-Pierre, et al. 2024) Equally, when esteem needs are unmet, children may experience low self-confidence, feelings of weakness, and reluctance to participate, which can impede social, emotional, and cognitive development (Rubin, 2023). Educators and caregivers are crucial in supporting children’s esteem needs by offering opportunities to develop skills, acknowledging accomplishments, and nurturing a sense of capability. This not only enhances academic engagement but also strengthens resilience, promotes independence, and encourages positive social relationships. Fulfilling esteem needs in the early years is therefore vital for helping children build the confidence and motivation they need to succeed both in school and later in life.



SELF ACTUALISATION

Self-actualisation is the highest level in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and refers to a person’s drive to achieve their full potential. Supported by United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child article 29, education should develop a child’s personality, talents, and abilities to their fullest. Maslow argued that once lower-level needs largely satisfied, self-actualisation becomes a dominant motivator in early childhood. Children are motivated to explore, be creative and grow to develop motivation independent of external rewards. Brooks & Kirk (2024) say that early years settings support self – actualisation by giving children agency, choice and independence, helping them to pursue their interests and reaching their goal. This means children are active participants in their learning. This will boost motivation, creativity, and problem-solving skills. For a child who loves building with blocks, curiosity and the desire to create may be their dominant motivator. Children aren’t learning just to get praise or a reward but are driven by intrinsic interest. So, supporting self-actualisation in early childhood helps children stay motivated, be creative, and solve problems, giving them the confidence and independence they need to enjoy learning now and succeed in the future.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs shows that children’s learning and development depend on meeting a sequence of essential needs. From physiological needs like food and sleep, to safety, belonging, esteem, and finally self-actualisation, each level builds the foundation for the next. By addressing these needs, educators and caregivers create nurturing environments where children feel safe, supported, and valued. This enables them to focus, explore, be creative, and develop confidence and resilience, laying the groundwork for lifelong learning and personal growth.



REFERENCES

Allen, K., Kern, M., Vella-Brodrick, D., Hattie, J., & Waters, L. (2021). What schools need to know about belonging: A meta-analysis. *Educational Psychology Review*, 33(1), 1–34.

Brooks and Kirk, 2024. Understanding Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in Education. Brooks and Kirk. Available at: <https://brooksandkirk.co.uk/understanding-maslows-hierarchy-of-needs-in-education/> [Accessed 20 November 2025].

CareLearning. Examples of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in Early Years. (2024)

Cui, X. (2023). Unraveling Students’ Socio-Psychological Needs ... *East south Journal*.

De Sanctis, V., Soliman, A., Alaaraj, N., Ahmed, S., Alyafei, F. & Hamed, N. (2021) ‘Early and Long-term Consequences of Nutritional Stunting: From Childhood to Adulthood’, *Acta Biomedica: Atenei Parmensis Department of Education*. (2022) *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia – Version 2*. Canberra: Australian Government. Available at: <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-01/EYLF-2022-V2.0.pdf> (Accessed: 20 November 2025).

Korpershoek, H., Harms, T., & Doolaard, S. (2020). Relationship between sense of belonging and academic/social outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Educational Research Review*, 31, 100–139

McLeod, S. (2020). Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. *Simply Psychology*

National Institutes of Health. (2022) Children’s sleep linked to brain development. *NIH Research Matters*.

Norazman, D.N. (2023). The Importance of Self-Esteem Among Students. *European Proceedings*.

Qutishat, M. (2025). Challenges in the Application of Maslow's Hierarchy ... *MECP*

Rubin, O. (2023) ‘Self-Esteem in Early Childhood: The Importance of Appearance’, *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 11(11), pp. 92–104.

Saif, G. B. D. (2024). A Critical Analysis of Maslow’s Hierarchy. *IJMARS*.

Shonkoff, J. P., et al. (2021). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 147(1).

Watson, G. (2024) *Maslow Hierarchy: Understanding Needs to Inspire*. MTC Training, 18 December. Available at: <https://www.mtc-training.co.uk/news/maslow-hierarchy-understanding-needs-to-inspire/> (Accessed: 20 November 2025).

Wu, W., Yang, Z., Kim, J. H. & Yue, A. (2025) ‘Effects of temperature exposures on early childhood cognitive development and home environment’, *Journal of Environmental Economics and Management*

Ye, Z.Y. (2024) ‘Secure base and mental health in children: a narrative review’, *Behavioural Sciences*