

Please find attached a Portfolio of three sections exploring Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need.

1. Infographic exploring Maslow’s model in depth
2. The concept of holistic child development with links to Maslow’s model
3. Three Case studies from early years practice

Declaration:

I have asked Co-Pilot to give me theorists who have similar views to Maslow.
Prompt: Give me theorists with similar views to Maslow.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

In-Depth Analysis

Introduction

Abraham Maslow first introduced his Hierarchy of Needs in his 1943 paper A Theory of Human Motivation, He later expanded and refined it in his books Motivation and Personality (1954) and Toward a Psychology of Being (1962). This essay explores the historical context of Maslow’s work, outlines the structure of the hierarchy and examines its application across education, healthcare and workplace settings. It also discusses the origins of the widely recognised pyramid diagram and provides critical evaluation of the theory’s limitations.

Historical Context and Development

Maslow developed his ideas during a period in psychology which was dominated by behaviourism and psychoanalysis. Behaviourists including John B Watson and B F Skinner argued that human behaviour could be explained through observing actions and external conditions dismissing internal mental thoughts or motivation as unscientific (Feist and Feist, 2008). In contrast psychoanalytic theorists such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung focused on unconscious drives instincts and internal conflicts as the primary determinants of behaviour (Feist and Feist, 2008). Maslow (1954) challenged the limitations of both these perspectives by introducing a humanistic approach emphasising free will, personal growth and positive aspects of human nature. His focus on fulfilment and self-actualisation represented a major shift from deterministic views and positioned individuals as motivated by their potential rather than solely by deficits or unconscious forces from the prevailing theories of the time.

The Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow suggested that human behaviour is motivated by a series of hierarchal needs arranged in five levels progressing from basic physiological requirements to higher psychological growth (Maslow, 1943). At the base of the hierarchy are psychological needs such as food, water, air and shelter which are essential for survival. Once these needs are met individuals seek safety needs which include protection, stability and freedom from fear or harm. The next level is belongingness, and love needs these reflect the human desire for social connection, intimacy and acceptance. The level above this is, esteem needs, which includes the pursuit of self-respect confidence, recognition from others and fostering a sense of competence and worth. At the top of the hierarchy lies self-actualisation which is an individual’s on-going motivation to grow, develop and move closer to their full potential. It involves continually striving to become the most capable and authentic version of themselves (Maslow, 1954). Importantly the term self-actualisation was originally mentioned by neurologist Kurt Goldstein (1939) referring to the innate drive towards the realisation of one’s potential. Maslow acknowledged this influence stating “It is true that self-actualization, the ultimate need, is defined by Goldstein and in this book in a highly individualistic way” (Maslow, 1954, pg. 68). According to Eyal (2024) Maslow explained peak experiences as brief moments of intense joy, clarity and transcendence in which individuals feel unity, awe and deep meaning, highlighting the highest human potential and underpinning self-actualisation. These experiences dissolve the ego, create profound interconnectedness and offer insight into optimal functioning and personal growth.



Brodie (2024)

Application in Education, Workplace and Healthcare Adaptions

Maslow’s hierarchy remains influential across several professional fields (Gould,2024). Cherry (2020) states the hierarchy offers insights into how unmet needs impact motivation and behaviour within learning environments. Therefore, learners who lack safety or a sense belonging may struggle to focus on learning. The practitioner plays an important role in creating an inclusive environment that support these foundational needs. This enables learners to progress towards higher level academic and personal development.

Kremer and Hammond (2013) also examine the evolution of the hierarchy’s interpretation in workplace settings, noting that Maslow’s ideas have often been commercialised and adapted for business and Self-help contexts. They suggest that while this popularity has watered down some of the theory’s depth, it has made it accessible and relevant in modern discussions about well-being and organisational behaviour.

Maslow also influenced modern healthcare practise, where understanding patients physical, emotional and psychological needs support a person-centred approach and holistic care. Applying the hierarchy in clinical settings help practitioners identify unmet needs to help promote recovery and well-being (Feist and Feist, 2008).

How the Pyramid Came to Be

Although Maslow is traditionally credited with the hierarchy of needs pyramid, historical analysis shows that Maslow never produced a pyramid diagram (Bridgman, Cummings and Ballard, 2020). Bridgman et al, (2020) trace the origin of the visual model to Charles McDermid a consulting psychologist who published an article in Business Horizons ‘How Money Motivates Men’ in 1960. McDermid presented the first recognisable pyramid shaped interpretation of Maslow’s theory effectively transforming his more fluid and descriptive ideas into a structured tiered visual model. Bridgman et al. (2020), explain that this simplified pyramid gained traction throughout management, education and business training becoming the dominant representation of Maslow’s work despite not appearing in any of his original texts. Kaufman (2019) further states this widespread adoption of McDermid’s version contributed to a long-standing misconception with the public and many educational resources mistakenly attributing the pyramid to Maslow himself. Kaufman (2019) also argues Maslow’s writing was less rigid he acknowledged that needs overlap and that individuals can move back and forth between levels depending on circumstances.

Criticisms and Limitations

Maslow’s hierarchy has been widely criticised for lacking strong empirical evidence as the model does not provide scientific evidence to support the idea that individuals move through needs in a strict step by step order. Scholars argue that human motivation is far more fluid with people pursuing several needs simultaneously rather than following the fixed sequence suggested by Maslow (King-Hill, 2015). Cultural variation also challenges the universality of the hierarchy as values and priorities differ across cultures and societies something that Maslow’s model does not account for (Winter, 2016). Bridgman, Cummings et al, (2020) further critique the hierarchy by demonstrating that the widely recognised pyramid does not originate from Maslow’s own work but from later interpretations that simplified and reshaped his ideas. Their analysis show that these reinterpretations reduced the complexity of his theory leading to a rigid and overly structured model that does not reflect his original more flexible understanding of human motivation. Together these limitations highlight that while the hierarchy remains influential it does not fully capture the dynamic and context dependent nature of human behaviour. And according to Winter (2016) the most major criticism of Maslow’s hierarchy is the unscientific approach the use of unreliable sources as well as the unspecific research methods used for his conclusions such as personal observations and biographical analysis and not on credible empirical research.

Conclusion

Despite the hierarchy being widely criticised for its rigid structure, limited empirical evidence and cultural bias, Maslow’s ideas continue to provide a meaningful framework for understanding how unmet needs influence behaviour. When applied critically and flexibly the model remains a useful tool for supporting wellbeing, motivation and holistic development across different professional settings.

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Introduction

Child development refers to the intricate, interwoven process which children go through growing physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally (Lindon, 2012). Early childhood is especially significant because this is the period of rapid brain growth as much as 90% of the brain develops by age 5, influencing future learning and wellbeing (First Things First, 2018). A holistic approach recognises these areas of development are interconnected (HEI Schools, 2022). This essay explores holistic development, links with Maslow’s model of needs and its critiques, a look at classical theorist such Piaget, Vygotsky, Montessori, Froebel and the McMillan sister alongside contemporary approaches like HighScope, Reggio Emilia, Te Whariki and Scandinavian models. This essay will also consider how Welsh policy promotes holistic growth and whole child development through the Curriculum for Wales.

What is Child Development?

Child development encompasses the progression of children’s physical, cognitive emotional and social abilities of children as they grow (NSPCC, 2023). It also highlights that these developmental areas are shaped by the quality of relationships, the environment children live in and the experiences they encounter. NSPCC (2023) further goes on to explain that a child’s mental health including their thinking, behaviour, social functioning is shaped by this development and by additional influences such as trauma or instability, therefore every area of a child’s health is interconnected collectively contributing to their overall wellbeing. Care Learning (2024) explain that Maslow’s model shows children need their basic emotional and physical needs met before they can focus on learning. Gould (2024) adds that when children feel safe, valued and supported they are more able to engage in education and develop confidently across different areas.

What is Holistic Development?

Holistic development focuses on meeting all aspects of a child’s growth and development, recognising that emotional, physical, social and cognitive skills are intertwined (HEI Schools, 2022). HEI Schools (2022) also emphasise that children develop as whole individuals and that progress in one area effects another, therefore a holistic approach to education means covering all areas of a child's growth. Queen Margaret University (2023) also notes that holistic approaches help children build confidence, resilience and self-esteem by supporting biological, cognitive and social-emotional growth. HighScope (2024) explain that active engagement in learning allows children to explore make choices, solve problems which in turn strengthen both their confidence and independence. Queen Margaret University (2023) highlight that when multiple developmental areas are supported at the same time children reach their full learning potential. A holistic approach therefore supports healthy growth and long-term wellbeing, shaping strong foundations for future education.

Maslow’s Hierarchy and Holistic Development

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs helps explain how children's motivation and learning depend on whether their needs are met (Gould, 2024). The theory however has also been criticised for being too simplified in how it views human needs (Pass,2024). Gould (2024) describes the five categories of Maslow’s model 1) Physiological needs 2) Safety 3) Love and belonging 4) Esteem 5) Self- actualisation and explains that children may move between these levels as their circumstances change. In contrast Pass (2024) argues that Maslow’s hierarchy assumes needs follow a fixed order even though people often experience several needs at the same time. Care Learning (2024) highlights that unmet needs such as tiredness or emotional insecurity can make it difficult for children to engage in learning showing how the model helps practitioners identify barriers. Pass (2024) adds that children’s needs do not always fit neatly into one level of the hierarchy, meaning the model should be used as a flexible guide rather than a strict sequence. By using Maslow’s hierarchy in a balanced way, practitioners can support holistic development by considering a wide range of children’s needs whilst also being able to recognise that development does not always follow a simple straight path.

Other Theorists Similar and Opposing Views

Several classical theorists support principles that align with holistic development. Froebel saw play, nature and relationships as central to learning, viewing developmental as interconnected (Froebel Trust, 2022). Montessori prioritised independence, sensory experiences and hands on learning to build confidence and understanding (Lindon, 2012). The McMillan sisters who pioneered the first open air Nursery School in the deprived area of Deptford, London in 1914, their aim was to help support the young children living in poverty and hardship by giving them the benefit of outdoor learning, healthy food and a community environment that stimulated their exploration and development (Leibovich, 2014). Academy (2022) explain that each theorist’s approach is guided by their values and beliefs which is why theories focus on different aspects of development. Moreover Pacey (2016) explains that Piaget theory believed children develop understanding through schemas, using the processes such as assimilation, accommodation, equilibrium and disequilibrium, whilst stating that Vygotsky believed children learn through adult or peer support giving importance to social interactions and language within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) the gap between what a child a can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance. Together these perspectives help practitioners understand how to support children holistically across social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains.

The Role of Play in Holistic Development

Play is crucial for holistic development because it allows children to develop physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills (Lindley, 2025). Lindley (2025) explains that children feel happier and more confident when they have opportunities to play which in turn help support motor skills, wellbeing and coordination. McMahon and Dyer (2018) add that child led play develops independence, agency and a sense of competence. Froebel, Montessori and the McMillan sisters all viewed play as central to learning linking it with exploration, routine and real-life experiences (Lindon, 2012). Reggio Emilia encourages children to co-construct knowledge through exploration (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006). Te Whariki identifies play as essential for belonging and wellbeing (Te Whariki, 2021). Scandinavian approaches emphasise outdoor and natured based play to build resilience and social skills (HEI Schools, 2022). Across all these models play supports the whole child by connecting all areas of learning and development.

Wales and the Curriculum for Wales

The Welsh educational policy strongly supports holistic development. Curriculum for Wales (2020) outlines four purposes designed to develop ambitious learners, creative contributors, ethical citizens and healthy and confident individuals. Welsh Government (2022a) emphasises child-centred practise, play-based learning, secure relationships and exploration in early years settings all of which reflect holistic principles. These policies ensure early education in Wales nurtures every aspect of children’s development.

Conclusion

Holistic development emphasises the interconnected nature of children’s development. Theorists such as Froebel, Montessori, Vygotsky and Maslow highlight the importance of meeting needs, supporting relationships and offering rich play experiences. The McMillan sisters further demonstrate how health, outdoor environments and community care contribute to whole child wellbeing. Contemporary models and Welsh policy reinforce these principles. By applying holistic approaches practitioners can support wellbeing, motivation and learning, helping children reach their full potential.

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Case Studies

This report explores three case studies, examining how individual experiences, transitions and relationships influence children’s development. Drawing on key theories and national guidance. It highlights the importance of attachment, play, emotional wellbeing and effective partnerships working in supporting children’s holistic needs across diverse circumstances.

Case Overview:

Jack aged three is starting nursery after limited social contact during covid, requiring support with separation, routines and social play.

Supporting Jack Through Play-Based Learning Using Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky

Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory helps explain how Jack’s early home environment shaped his development. His microsystem was limited to his home during Covid, meaning he had very little interaction with peers or adults outside his immediate family (Brodie, 2024). Because of this a strong collaboration between home and the nursery is essential so that information can be shared and practitioners can use careful observation and monitoring to understand his needs (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). Play will be central to this process as it is widely recognised as a deeply holistic experience that supports the whole child (Brodie, 2018) and is regarded internationally as a vital part of childhood (UNCRC,1990).

Vygotsky’s social development theory highlights that children learn through interaction with others and may require guidance when developing new abilities (Teach HQ, 2023). Since Jack missed early peer experiences, he may require adult scaffolding to join shared play, understand social cues and learn cooperative skills. By giving him that support to work through his zone of proximal development (ZPD), will help to gradually build confidence and independence (Teach HQ, 2023). Jack’s key worker plays a vital part in this process. The key person’s role aims to provide emotional security, build a trusting relationship with families and to ensure children feel understood and supported within the setting (Birth to 5 Matters, 2021). By responding and providing a play-based approach the key worker can support him in building emotional, social and behavioural skills in helping him to learn how to engage confidently in play situations (Education Endowment Foundation, 2023). As Jack is experiencing a major vertical transition, he will need time and guidance to understand new routines and social expectations. If these are unclear, they may affect how easily he engages in learning (Welsh Government, 2017). Practitioners must be responsive to his play ideas without taking over, offering support that guides without restricting his exploration (Bruce, 2020). Through nurturing relationships and rich play opportunities, Jack can develop confidence, build resilience and positive social connections within the nursery environment (Welsh Government, 2024).

Case Overview:

Zaina is experiencing post-natal depression, isolation and bonding difficulties with her baby Omar, who is unsettled and crying frequently. Her husband is away a lot due to work.

Supporting Zaina and baby Omar Using Maslow Bowlby and Bronfenbrenner

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs helps explain how Zaina’s wellbeing affects her ability to care for Omar. Her own needs for rest, safety, connection and emotional stability are not being fully met due to her traumatic birth, lack of family nearby and her husband’s long shifts. When these needs remain unmet parents often struggle to feel confident or emotionally present (Care Learning, 2024). Post-natal depression can also influence caregiving behaviour as some parents become tense or overly reactive, while others may withdraw emotionally finding it difficult to engage with their baby’s cues (Santana et al, 2015). Supporting Zaina must therefore begin with restoring her sense of safety and reducing isolation and strengthening her emotional wellbeing.

Bowlby’s attachment theory highlights the importance of early bonding (Main, 2023). Difficulties can occur when a parent is experiencing mental health problems or lacks a reliable support network (NSPCC, 2021). Encouraging gentle interactions such as skin-to-skin contact, eye contact, soft vocal play and low-pressure bonding activities can help Zaina and Omar gradually strengthen their connections (UNICEF (2024).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Brodie, 2024) emphasises how Zaina’s wider environment shapes both her mental health and caregiving. Access to counselling or therapeutic support can help her explore her emotional needs at a time when she may be feeling depleted and alone (Association of Child Psychotherapists,2020). Linking her with health visitors, perinatal mental health teams and culturally sensitive community groups can reduce isolation and build resilience (Association of Child Psychotherapists, 2020)

With Ongoing observation and responsive support Zaina can gradually gain confidence rebuild emotional strength and form a secure, nurturing relationship with Omar.

Case Overview

Jasmine attended nursery from six months old and was confident and settled, but after transitioning to school aged five she became distressed, withdrawn and overwhelmed.

Supporting Jasmine Through Transition Using Bowlby, Bronfenbrenner and Welsh Governments Holistic approach.

Bowlby’s work suggests that early attachment and cognitive growth develop alongside each other as children grow more aware of people, places and relationships their emotional bonds also deepen (Bowlby, 1979). For Jasmine, nursery had become a familiar and emotionally secure base. Having spent most of her early years there, the sudden separation from trusted adults and peers created a sense of loss that she struggled to process. Her reactions, distress, regression and anxiety can be understood as grief linked to the abrupt break in attachment (Main, 2023).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory helps explain how Jasmine’s wider environment shaped her response. Nursery was part of core microsystem offering stability routine and a strong sense of belonging (Brodie, 2024). The Welsh concept of cynefin reflects this kind of rooted familiarity, the place where a child feels at home socially, emotionally and culturally (Welsh Government, 2023). Moving abruptly into a different environment disrupted this security leaving Jasmine feeling disoriented.

Effective information sharing between settings is essential in managing transitions. Sharing relevant details early, supports practitioners to identify emerging needs, prevents delay in help and ensures continuity of care across agencies (Welsh Government, 2017). Strong communication also strengthens partnerships with families, helping educators provide consistent support across home and school (Brodie, 2024).

Jasmine’s involvement with the GP, local authority’s ALN team and play therapists shows the importance of a coordinated response. Play therapy and supportive relationships can help children express emotions safely, rebuild confidence and reconnect with the coping skills they previously relied on (Koukourikos et al, 2021).

Conclusion

These case studies demonstrate how children’s wellbeing is shaped by environments, relationships and transitions. Applying theory to practise, alongside strong professional collaboration enables early identification and targeted support. Through nurturing relationships, play experiences and effective information sharing practitioners can help children rebuild confidence, resilience and secure foundations for learning.

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