

Health, Well-being and Lifestyles

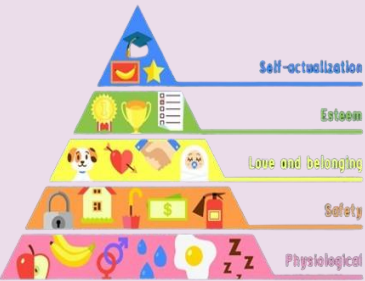
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Introduction

This poster presents a critical examination of the concepts of health, well-being, and lifestyle in early childhood, drawing on a range of theoretical models and national policy frameworks that inform early years practice. It highlights the importance of fostering holistic development in the early years and examines how practitioners support children’s physical, emotional, and social needs through inclusive and responsive approaches. By analysing frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022) and the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2024), the discussion illustrates how policy is translated into practice to reduce inequalities and promote positive developmental outcomes. As Naidoo and Wills (2016) assert, promoting children’s health and well-being from the earliest stage is essential to preventing long-term inequalities and supporting lifelong outcomes

Health

Health is widely regarded as a multifaceted and evolving concept that cannot be fully understood through the absence of illness alone (Naidoo and Wills, 2016). Earlier understandings were shaped by the biomedical model, which defined health in narrow physical terms and prioritised diagnosis and treatment over prevention (Schermer and Binney, 2024). This perspective has since been challenged by more inclusive definitions, such as that of the World Health Organisation (2025), which characterises health as a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being. According to the National Health Service [NHS] (2022), children’s health begins before birth, with appropriate prenatal care and folic acid intake helping to prevent conditions such as spina bifida, while harmful behaviours such as smoking increase the likelihood of low birth weight and respiratory issues (NHS, 2020).



(Source: Summit, 2023)

Nutrition

A holistic view of child health recognises the critical influence of nutrition and physical care during pregnancy and the first 1,000 days of life (UNICEF, no date). Adequate maternal and infant nutrition, including folic acid supplementation and breastfeeding, is widely associated with improved neonatal outcomes and enhanced cognitive and physical development (HM Government, 2021). Alongside nutrition, physical activity plays a key role in supporting early brain development and long-term cognitive health (Pickard and Maude, 2021). According to Stoianov (2017), this emphasis on nutritional care aligns with the foundational level of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, which identifies physiological needs, such as access to food, water, and adequate rest, as essential for survival and basic functioning. However, research by Public Health Wales (2023) highlights that the cost-of-living crisis creates significant barriers to healthy eating and overall wellbeing for children in low-income families, which may limit the impact of health promotion initiatives in early years settings. The Healthy Child Wales Programme (Welsh Government, 2022) affirms that practitioners should deliver preventative care and engage families to support children’s health and wellbeing. This approach is reinforced by the Welsh Government (2024), which highlights the importance of providing balanced snacks and embedding nutrition into the learning environment. For example, practitioners are encouraged to introduce regular water breaks and offer fruit and vegetables during snack time, using these opportunities to promote discussions about hydration and healthy eating (Department for Education, 2023). Such strategies not only support immediate physical wellbeing but also help to establish long-term healthy habits (Naidoo and Wills, 2016).

Emotional

Emotional health is nurtured through secure attachment, where consistent and sensitive caregiving fosters emotional regulation, resilience, and trust (Musgrave, 2017). Bowlby’s Attachment Theory, as presented by Laver-Bradbury et al. (2021), suggests that early relational experiences are foundational in shaping a child’s capacity to manage emotions and build future relationships. Extending this view, Laver-Bradbury et al. (2021) and Brodie (2018) explain that emotional health in early childhood encompasses the ability to form secure relationships, regulate emotions effectively, and adapt to challenges within developmentally supportive environments. Policies such as Flying Start in Wales (Welsh Government, 2024) reinforce this approach by offering parenting programmes, home visits, and access to multi-agency teams that strengthen family-child relationships, particularly in areas of deprivation. Additionally, Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019) affirms every child’s right to a standard of living that supports emotional, mental, and social development. This policy framework is reflected in practice through the Department for Education (2023) guidance, which promotes strategies including emotion coaching, visual aids, and storytelling to help children recognise and express their feelings, as well as the early identification of emotional distress to enable timely support. While Bowlby’s theory has been critiqued for overemphasising maternal care and underrepresenting cultural and environmental diversity (Mehdiabadi, 2023), its foundational principles continue to inform attachment-based practices that foster emotional security and contribute to long-term wellbeing (Laver-Bradbury et al., 2021).

Well-being

CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

In child-friendly language

www.unicef.org

Social and Emotional Well-being

Policy and Early Interventions

The Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood (Foundation, 2021) asserts that when caregivers experience emotional challenges, it can disrupt the relational and environmental stability essential for supporting children's healthy development and emotional well-being. Honda et al. (2023) support this by showing that parental mental health difficulties, such as depression, often result in heightened emotional symptoms and hyperactivity/inattention in children, highlighting the impact of caregiver well-being on child outcomes. In early years settings, practitioners may observe signs of emotional dysregulation in children who become easily distressed during routine activities, signalling the need for sensitive support and timely intervention (Boullier and Blair, 2018). Bradshaw (2016) notes that early, tailored support to the child and their family contributes to reducing the potential long-term developmental and emotional impacts associated with early life adversity. The Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework (Department for Education, 2024) reflects this by guiding practitioners in the early identification of children's needs through procedures that promote partnership with families, support the continuation of well-being practices at home, and mandate safeguarding training, thereby enabling practitioners to facilitate both high-quality learning and holistic well-being.

Lifestyle

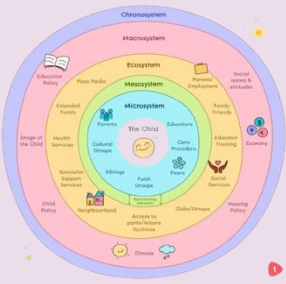
According to Marques et al. (2019), lifestyle encompasses the daily choices and behaviours that reflect an individual’s values, routines, and health-related habits. Rippe (2018) supports this by noting that healthy lifestyles contribute to disease prevention, mental resilience, and an improved quality of life. Marmot (2020) further observes that individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds often adopt varying lifestyles, which in turn influence their exposure to health risks and contribute to disparities in overall well-being and health outcomes. Within early childhood, Laver-Bradbury et al. (2021) highlight the role of parents in establishing healthy routines through balanced nutrition, physical activity, and social engagement, factors that lay the foundation for positive lifestyle habits. Mindell and Williamson (2017) emphasise that sufficient sleep is essential for children’s cognitive development and emotional regulation, while the National Health Service [NHS] (2024) stresses that maintaining good hygiene is key to reducing the risk of communicable diseases. The Department for Education (2024) supports this by encouraging hygiene-related activities, such as handwashing, to help children understand and adopt healthy habits. Cultural and religious factors also influence daily behaviours, as Knoblauch (2023) notes that traditions around diet, rest, and cleanliness shape children’s emerging lifestyles and contribute to their overall well-being. These perspectives align with Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (Hayes, O’Toole and Halpenny, 2017), which emphasises the interconnectedness of children’s home environments, cultural contexts, and early years settings in shaping development.

Limitations

Despite these benefits, UNICEF (2023) warns that parental mental health challenges may disrupt the ability to maintain stable routines, impacting children’s overall development and well-being. Burke Harris (2015) further illustrates that chronic exposure to stress, such as neglect or family instability, can impair brain development and increase the risk of long-term health conditions. These challenges are particularly prevalent in households affected by poverty, as noted by Children in Wales (2023), where families may also lack access to nutritious food or safe environments for physical activity.

Polices and Practice

To address this, early years practitioners are encouraged to work closely with families, promoting healthy routines through everyday practice and open communication (Brodie, 2018). Every Child Wales initiative (2016) provides clear guidance for encouraging healthy eating and physical activity in the early years, offering practitioners evidence-based strategies, such as portion size guides, to support families in developing positive lifestyle habits and preventing childhood obesity. This aligns with the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2022), which integrates physical and emotional well-being through play-based outdoor learning, supporting children’s resilience and motor development. Complementing this, the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2024), which places personal, social, and emotional development at the heart of early learning, recognises that secure relationships, consistent routines, and emotional regulation are essential foundations for healthy lifestyle habits and long-term well-being. Multi-agency collaboration, such as working with health visitors or nutrition specialists, allows practitioners to offer cohesive, family-centred support that promotes healthy routines and lifestyle habits from multiple angles (Barnardo’s, 2022). Furthermore, the Welsh Government’s Child Poverty Strategy (2024) emphasises the importance of inclusive and accessible services in mitigating the impact of poverty on children. This is reflected in the Flying Start programme (Welsh Government, 2023), which actively promotes healthy lifestyle development by providing free childcare, nutritional guidance, health visitor support, and parenting advice. These services help families establish positive routines around diet, physical activity, and emotional well-being. Aligned with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 2019), the programme also values children’s voices, encouraging them to participate in decisions about their daily routines, such as choosing play activities, which fosters autonomy and supports the adoption of lifelong healthy habits.



(Source: Lisa Kane, no date)

Conclusion

In summary, supporting health, well-being, and positive lifestyle habits in early childhood requires a holistic and responsive approach that acknowledges the diverse and interconnected influences on development. Establishing consistent routines, nurturing secure relationships, and promoting healthy behaviours contribute significantly to positive developmental outcomes. This discussion has illustrated how early years professionals translate national policy and theoretical frameworks into inclusive, everyday practice. Although challenges remain, especially for children experiencing disadvantage, reflective and responsive approaches can help reduce barriers and promote equity. The effective application of frameworks such as the Curriculum for Wales (Welsh Government, 2020) and the Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (Department for Education, 2024) depends on cultural awareness, ongoing professional reflection, and strong collaboration with families and multidisciplinary teams. Ultimately, supporting children in developing positive lifestyle patterns from the earliest stages is crucial for improving long-term health and developmental outcomes.

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