

What is good health in the early years

Student number 2520180

Module number ECEY5009

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From Conception to 5 Years: Holistic Child Health and Development
Health in the first five years begins before birth and shapes lifelong wellbeing. This period includes conception, pregnancy, birth, infancy, toddlerhood, and the early years up to age 5, making it the most important stage for development (Marmot, 2010).

Why the first 5 years matter

The first five years are a time of rapid brain growth, attachment formation, language development, and emotional learning. Experiences in this period can either strengthen or weaken future health, learning, and resilience (Bowlby, 1988).

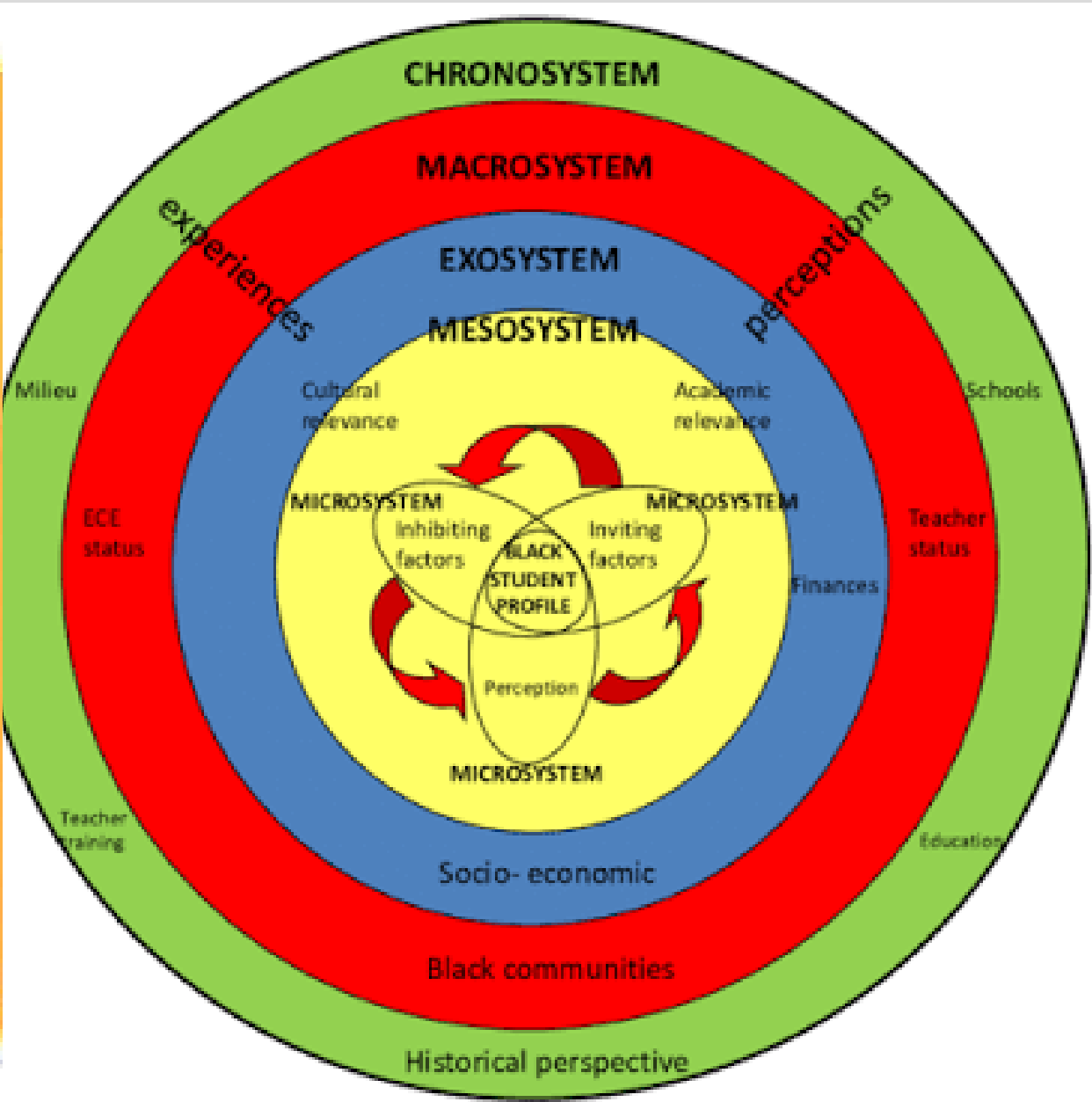
Children who receive safe, loving, and stable care are more likely to thrive. Children who experience stress, poor nutrition, or instability may face long-term risks to health and development (CDC, 2026).

Health begins before birth

Health starts before conception because the parent's physical and emotional wellbeing can affect pregnancy and the baby's future development. Preconception care includes good nutrition, folic acid, avoiding smoking and alcohol, and managing long-term health conditions (Welsh Government, 2025).

During pregnancy, maternal health, mental health, and lifestyle choices all matter. Alcohol should be avoided in pregnancy because the safest approach is not to drink at all (Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, 2023).

Maslow's theory helps explain how needs must be met in stages. Physiological needs such as food, warmth, sleep, and healthcare are the foundation for healthy development (Maslow, 1943).



Nutrition and food support

Good nutrition is essential from conception to age 5. During pregnancy, healthy eating supports fetal development, and after birth, babies and young children need age-appropriate feeding, weaning, and balanced meals (Welsh Government, 2025). Welsh policy on free school meals shows a wider commitment to child wellbeing and reducing inequality. Although toddlers are too young for school meals, this policy reflects the importance of nutrition across the early years (Welsh Government, 2024).

From birth, children develop attachment, sensory awareness, movement, and communication. In toddlerhood they begin to walk, talk, explore, and build independence, while by ages 3 to 5 they are developing language, social skills, and emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1988). Play is central throughout the early years because it supports physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development. Opportunities for reading, singing, sensory play, and social interaction help prepare children for school and lifelong learning (Maslow, 1943).

ACEs and safeguarding

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, include neglect, abuse, domestic violence, substance misuse, and parental mental illness. These experiences can affect pregnancy, attachment, behaviour, sleep, and brain development if children are not protected early (CDC, 2026). However, protective relationships and early support can reduce harm. Safeguarding is therefore essential from conception onwards, especially where there are concerns about neglect, instability, or family stress (CDC, 2026).

What practitioners can do

Practitioners can support families by offering advice on pregnancy, feeding, sleep, oral health, routines, and emotional wellbeing. They should monitor growth and development, ask about maternal mental health and alcohol use, and signpost families to relevant services (NHS Wales, 2025). Multi-agency working is important because children's needs are connected. Midwives, health visitors, GPs, nursery staff, dental teams, speech therapists, social workers, and family support workers all play a part in supporting the child and family (Welsh Government, 2025).

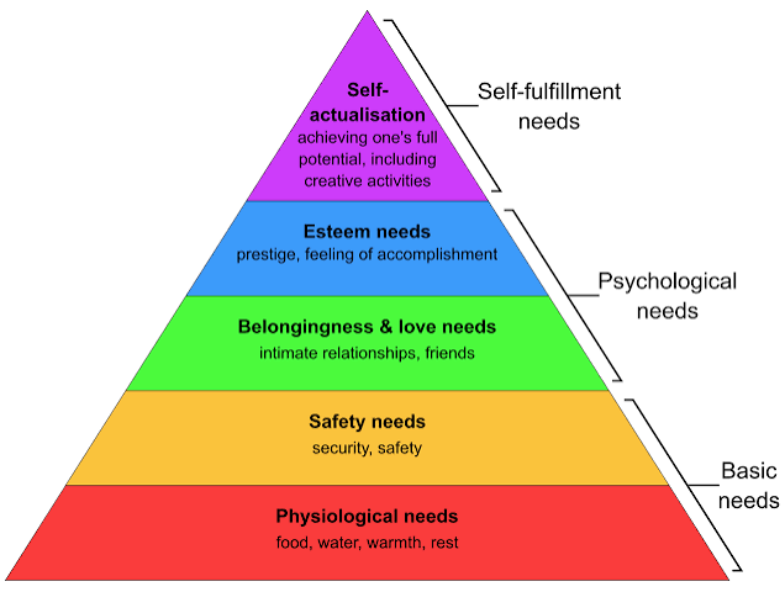
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Healthy start

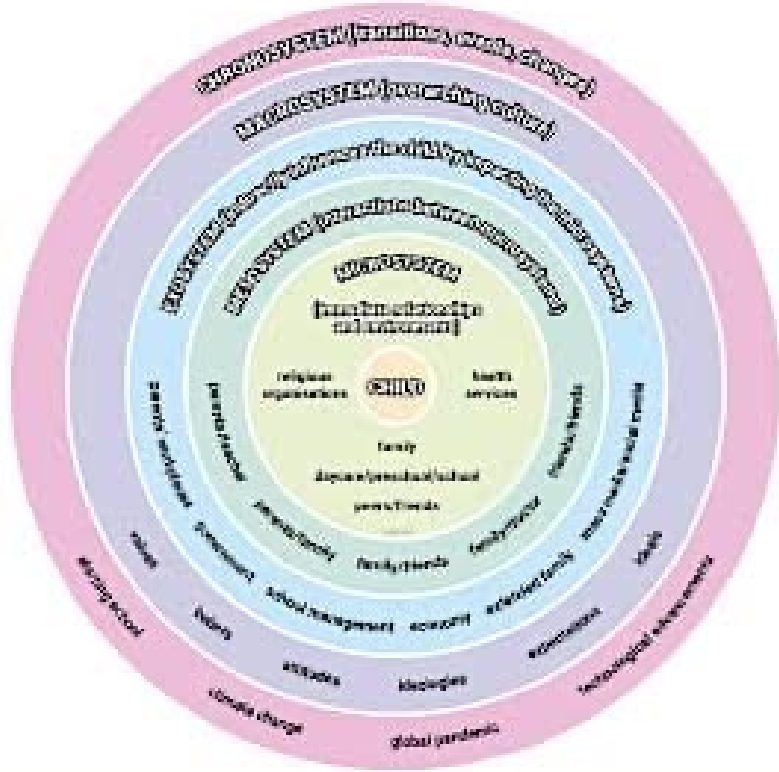
Nurturing Whole-Child Wellness



Maslow's theory helps explain how needs must be met in stages. Physiological needs such as food, warmth, sleep, and healthcare are the foundation for healthy development (Maslow, 1943).
Safety is also essential because babies and young children depend entirely on adults for protection. Belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation then build through attachment, praise, play, and exploration (Bowlby, 1988; Maslow, 1943).

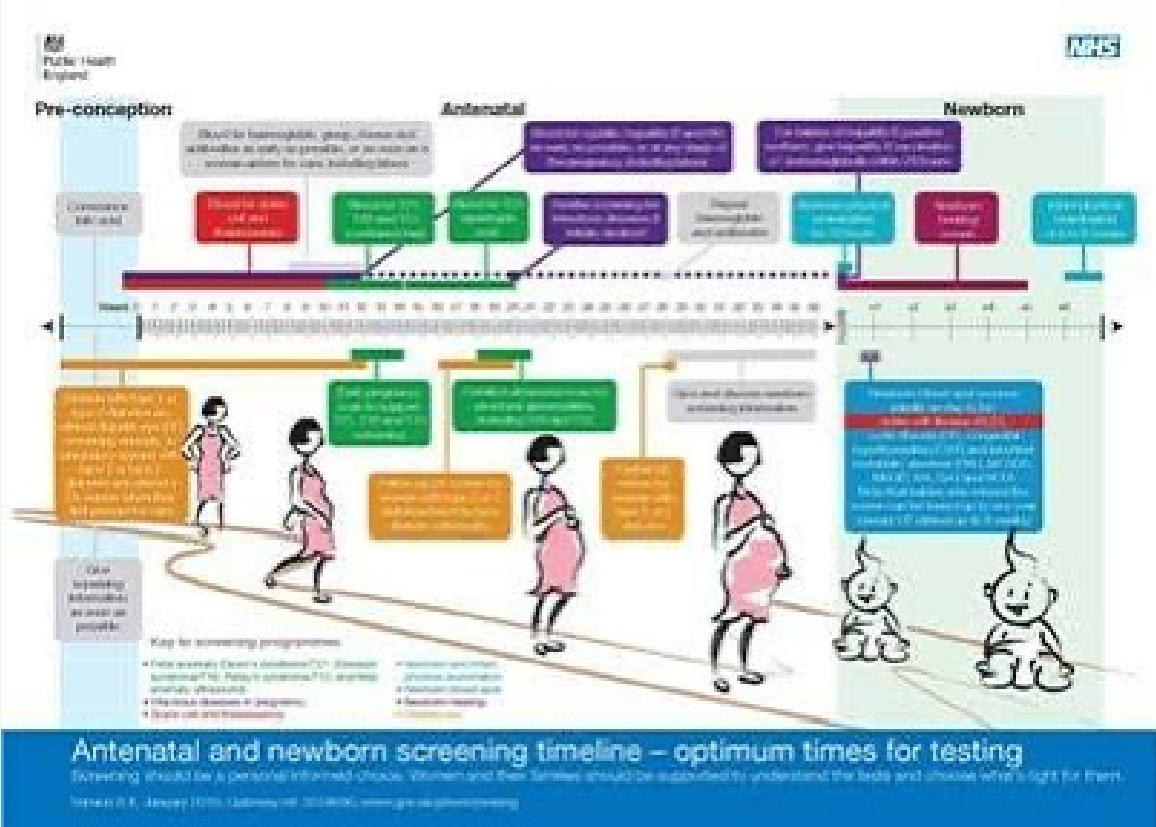
Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory
Bronfenbrenner shows that child development is shaped by the child's environment at many levels. The microsystem includes parents, carers, health visitors, midwives, nursery staff, and GPs who directly influence daily care (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).
The mesosystem is the connection between settings, such as communication between home, nursery, and health services. The exosystem and macrosystem include housing, work, income, culture, and policy, all of which influence family life and child outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The Rainbow Model shows that child health is affected by wider social determinants such as income, housing, education, and community support. These factors influence whether families can access healthcare, food, and services that support early development (Marmot, 2010).
Children growing up in poverty or insecure housing may face more barriers to health. That is why prevention and early intervention are needed to reduce inequality and improve outcomes (Welsh Government, 2025).



Maternal mental health

Maternal mental health is crucial because a parent's emotional wellbeing affects bonding, routines, and the baby's sense of security. Perinatal mental health services in Wales help women and families during pregnancy and after birth by providing assessment and support (NHS Wales, 2024).
If maternal depression or anxiety is untreated, it may affect attachment and family functioning. Practitioners should respond with empathy, not judgement, and signpost parents to appropriate help (NHS Wales, 2024).





Alcohol and pregnancy

Alcohol in pregnancy is a significant health concern because it can harm fetal development. NHS Wales advice is clear that the safest option is to avoid alcohol completely during pregnancy (Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, 2023). Practitioners should ask about alcohol use in a respectful way and offer support where needed. Early help can prevent harm and improve outcomes for both parent and child (NHS Wales, 2024).

Feeding, attachment, and early bonding

Feeding in infancy supports both nutrition and attachment. Breastfeeding, where possible, can promote immunity and bonding, while formula feeding can also support healthy growth when done safely and responsively (UNICEF UK, 2026).

The UNICEF Baby Friendly Initiative promotes responsive feeding and close parent-child relationships. Skin-to-skin contact and sensitive caregiving help babies feel secure and support emotional development (UNICEF UK, 2026).

Oral health in Wales

Oral health is a major part of early childhood health because tooth decay is common and preventable. The Designed to Smile programme in Wales supports children's oral health through supervised toothbrushing and prevention advice (Public Health Wales, 2024).

Children should brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and have early dental contact. Poor oral health can affect eating, sleep, speech, and wellbeing, so it should be treated as part of overall health (NHS Wales, 2024).

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FAMILY PARTNERSHIP

Growing Together as a Community

Welsh Government and NHS Wales policy

Welsh Government and NHS Wales place strong emphasis on early intervention, prevention, and family-centred care. The Healthy Child Wales Programme supports families from pregnancy onwards and includes planned contacts to monitor health and development (NHS Wales, 2025).

The vaccination schedule protects children from serious disease, while Designed to Smile supports oral health and the Perinatal Mental Health Programme supports parental wellbeing. Together, these policies show that early childhood health is a public health priority in Wales (Welsh Government, 2025; Public Health Wales, 2024; NHS Wales, 2024).

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From birth to five years, education and development are closely linked, with early experiences shaping cognitive, social, and emotional growth. During this period, rapid brain development enables children to acquire language, motor skills, and early problem-solving abilities. Play is central to this process, supporting learning through exploration, creativity, and interaction (Maslow, 1943). Attachment relationships play a key role in learning, as children who feel secure are more confident to explore their environment and engage with others (Bowlby, 1988). Communication with caregivers, including talking, reading, and singing, supports language development and prepares children for later education. Early years settings, such as nurseries, also contribute by providing structured opportunities for socialisation, routine, and skill development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory highlights how development is influenced not only by immediate relationships but also by wider systems such as education policy and community resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Inequalities in access to early education, nutrition, and support services can impact school readiness and long-term achievement (Marmot, 2010). Programmes such as the Healthy Child Wales Programme support developmental checks and early identification of additional needs (NHS Wales, 2025). A strong focus on early education, combined with supportive home environments, helps children build the skills needed for lifelong learning and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Health from conception to five years is shaped by a combination of biological, emotional, and social factors that interact to influence lifelong outcomes. Early development depends on meeting fundamental needs such as nutrition, safety, healthcare, and emotional security, as highlighted in Maslow's hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). At the same time, strong attachment relationships and responsive caregiving, as described by Bowlby (1988), provide the foundation for resilience, wellbeing, and healthy development. Broader influences, including family circumstances, income, housing, and access to services, further shape outcomes, as explained by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and the Marmot Review (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Marmot, 2010). Children exposed to adversity, including poverty or ACEs, may face increased risks; however, early intervention and protective relationships can reduce long-term harm (CDC, 2026). Policies and programmes such as the Healthy Child Wales Programme, vaccination schedules, perinatal mental health services, and Designed to Smile demonstrate a strong commitment to prevention and early support (NHS Wales, 2025; Public Health Wales, 2024). A holistic, multi-agency approach ensures that children and families receive coordinated care. Overall, investing in the first five years is essential to improving health, reducing inequalities, and enabling every child to thrive.

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