

Health, Well-Being and Lifestyles

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Student ID: 2507924

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Introduction

This poster looks at the ideas of health, wellbeing and lifestyle, explaining their meaning and why they matter for young children. It draws on key theories to show how they influence children's overall development and connects these ideas to everyday early years practice. It also highlights the important role practitioners play in supporting children such as building positive relationships and working with families. Throughout the poster, the continuous links between health, wellbeing and lifestyle are shown, emphasising how each of them overlap and work together to support children's needs, growth and learning.

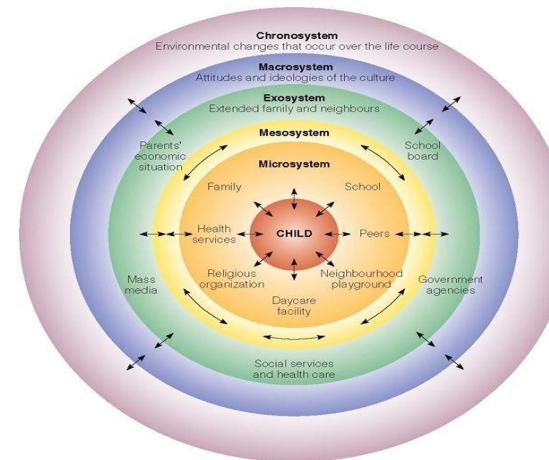
Health

Sarafino (2022) states health is more than just the absence of illness or disease. Musgrave (2017) reinforces this by suggesting health is holistic as it comes from a mix of physical, mental, social, intellectual and emotional factors that work together to support a person's overall well-being and that good health includes maintaining physical fitness, mental wellness and a lifestyle that supports long term wellbeing. Health is complex because it is shaped by many different factors, and it changes as children's needs, experiences and environments change. Enhancing the importance of supporting children to help them grow and develop holistically (NHS England, 2021).

The World Health Organization (World Health Organization, n.d) highlights that health in the early years is essential because it provides the foundation for all aspects of development, and this aligns closely with Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow's theory shows that from birth, children need their basic physiological and safety needs met such as food, rest, warmth, security and access to healthcare before they can fully engage in social interaction, learning and exploration (Maslow, 1943). This is reflected in the World Health Organisation, which emphasises the importance of good nutrition, immunisation, treatment for illness and disease and access to clean air, water, hygiene and safe play spaces (World Health Organization, n.d). When these fundamental needs are met, children are more able to form relationships, regulate their emotions and develop to their highest potential. However, when these needs are not met, Maslow's theory explains that children may struggle to concentrate, engage in play and learning or build confidence, which impacts their over-all development (Pichère and Cadiat, 2015).

The Dahlgren and Whitehead model illustrates that health is shaped by various layers, beginning with individual factors such as age and genetics, and extending to lifestyle elements like nutrition, sleep and physical activity (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 2021). Dahlgren and Whitehead (2021) highlight that children's social networks including family relationships and support systems play a crucial role in shaping emotional security and daily routines as well as their living conditions, such as housing quality, access to healthcare and early years provisions. These also are influenced by the wider socioeconomic factors such as poverty, education, employment and environmental quality (Chaudhary, 2024). All those factors continuously overlap, showing that health is not just one thing but is a combination of many different influences within a person's life.

Hayes, Halpenny and O'Toole (2017) highlights that Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem shows how children's health changes over time, showing that health and well-being is shaped not only by environments but by when experiences happen. Periods of instability, stress or poor health during sensitive stages can make children more vulnerable, while positive changes such as stable routines, safer housing or access to early years provision can strengthen resilience and support healthier outcomes (Hayes, Halpenny and O'Toole, 2017). These experiences and the microsystem of family practitioners, community services and national policies, all shape children's health as they grow. This also links to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, as repeated experiences of stress and instability can affect children's health, growth and development because their basic needs are not being met (Naaz and Khalid, 2023).



Pinterest (n.d.)



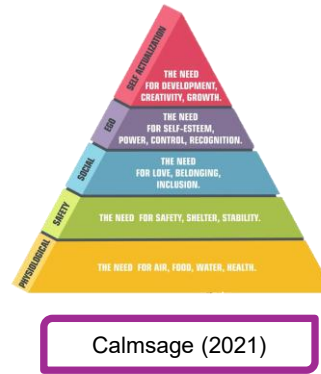
Envato Elements (n.d.)

Well-Being

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (2022) has divided well-being into three separate categories which are social well-being, emotional well-being and psychological well-being as their research shows there are a range of factors that can influence a child's health and well-being. Which reinforces Rose, Gilbert and Richards (2017) work stating that being healthy includes mental health and well-being as well as a person's physical health.

Musgrave, (2017) defines social well-being as children's ability to form positive relationships, feel a sense of belonging and interact confidently with others in their family, early years settings and wider community. Identifying social well-being as a key part of children's overall health because supportive relationships help them feel valued, included and safe. This links strongly to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which argues that children learn and develop through social interaction, shared activities and communication with others (Vygotsky and Cole, 1978). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory also highlights the importance of the microsystem which are family, peers and practitioners, in shaping children's social experiences (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). Factors influencing social well-being include secure attachments, opportunities for cooperative play, inclusive environments and positive peer interactions. For example, children who regularly engage in group play, feel accepted by peers and experience warm relationships at home are more likely to develop strong social skills and positive health outcomes. However, social isolation, bullying or unstable relationships can negatively affect confidence, behaviour and long-term well-being (Bradshaw, 2016).

NICE (2022) says emotional well-being refers to children's ability to understand, express and manage their feelings in healthy ways and highlights emotional well-being as essential for resilience, coping and mental health. This is closely linked to Bowlby's attachment theory, which emphasises that secure early relationships help children develop emotional regulation and a sense of safety (Bowlby, 1982). Emotional well-being is influenced by factors such as predictable routines, nurturing relationships, secure attachments and supportive environments (Brown and Mander, 2021). Brown and Mander (2021) highlight that children who experience consistent caregiving and have adults who help them label and manage emotions are more likely to develop resilience and emotional stability. However, they also suggest exposure to stress, instability or inconsistent caregiving can make it harder for children to regulate emotions, increasing the risk of anxiety, behavioural difficulties or poor health outcomes.



Laver-Bradbury, *et al* (2021) describe psychological well-being as a broader concept that includes emotional health, resilience, self-esteem and the ability to cope with challenges and problem solve. That psychological well-being as part of children's overall mental health, influencing how they think, feel and behave. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs helps explain this, as children require safety, belonging and esteem to develop confidence and positive mental functioning (Maslow, 1943). Factors influencing psychological well-being include family stability, opportunities for exploration, supportive adults and experiences of success. Research by Cowley, (2021) indicates that children who feel competent, receive praise and have opportunities to learn are more likely to develop strong psychological well-being. However, chronic stress, trauma or repeated negative experiences can undermine self-esteem and increase the risk of mental health difficulties.

Lifestyle

The National Health Service (NHS) (2025) indicates a lifestyle is the pattern of daily habits, routines and behaviours that shape how children live and develop. It includes eating, sleeping, playing, hygiene, physical activity and the emotional tone of their home environment (NHS, 2025). Because early childhood is a sensitive period of rapid growth, the lifestyle children experience forms the basis for their long-term health, wellbeing and the choices they learn to make (Finnegan and Lawton, 2015).

EduCare (2021) highlight that positive and supportive lifestyle experiences help children build confidence, resilience and the ability to make healthy decisions. Predictable routines such as regular meals, consistent sleep patterns and opportunities for active play create a sense of stability that supports emotional regulation (EduCare, 2021). Calm, organised environments allow children to explore safely, engage in meaningful play and form secure relationships. Access to safe indoor and outdoor spaces encourages physical activity and social interaction, strengthening communication skills and self-belief (Birth to 5 Matters, n.d.) Early years settings reinforce these experiences by modelling healthy routines and offering structured opportunities for movement, rest and cooperative play. Over time, these positive influences help children develop a better understanding of how to make thoughtful choices and manage challenges (Welsh Government, 2020).

These experiences shape far more than children's daily routines, they influence the beliefs, expectations and coping strategies children develop as they grow. When a child is raised in an unstable or stressful environment such as a home that is noisy, crowded, cluttered or unpredictable, the lifestyle they learn becomes their understanding of what life should look like (Mollborn and Lawrence, 2018). Research by Schmeer and Yoon (2016) suggests exposure to constant noise, conflict or disorganisation can heighten stress and disrupt the body's developing stress-response systems and these conditions can affect children's confidence, decision-making and ability to form secure relationships. Over time, these early patterns can become deeply rooted, creating a cycle that continues across generations. If a child absorbs a negative lifestyle as their only idea of what life should be, it can have an impact on their health and well-being in later life as they may carry these patterns into adulthood and unintentionally recreate them, simply because they have never known anything else (Ferraro, Schafer and Wilkinson, 2016).

Babies and young children are easily affected by the parent's lifestyle because they spend most of their time at home and rely heavily on adults to meet their needs. Factors such as poor sleep caused by household chaos, limited safe space for play, or exposure to hazards like damp, mould or excessive noise can make them more vulnerable to the emotional and physical effects of stress (Schmeer and Yoon, 2016). At this stage, they have little ability to change or escape harmful environments, which increases the impact of these experiences. Even as children grow older and gain more independence, the impressions formed in early childhood can remain influential, shaping their behaviour, wellbeing and relationships long into the future (HM Government, 2021).

How can practitioners support children's health, well-being and lifestyle

Practitioners play a central role in promoting children's health and wellbeing by shaping the daily experiences, routines and environments that influence their lifestyle. Because young children rely on adults to meet their physical and emotional needs, the way practitioners interact with them directly affects how they learn to care for themselves, make decisions and develop positive habits that support long-term wellbeing (Welsh government, 2024).

A way practitioners support children's health is through consistent routines that promote stability and safety. Barnardo's (n.d.) highlight that regular mealtimes, predictable sleep or rest periods and opportunities for active play help children understand what to expect, reducing stress and supporting emotional regulation and well-being. Practitioners can also model healthy behaviours such as handwashing, brushing teeth, choosing nutritious foods and staying active helping children build a clear picture of what healthy living looks like, adhering to article 24 of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child (UNICEF UK, 2019). These everyday interactions encourage children to develop confidence in making healthy choices and foster resilience as they learn to manage their own needs (Rosário, *et al.*, 2025).

The Curriculum for Wales has incorporated health and well-being into the foundations of the frameworks and practitioners bring this to life by creating rich learning environments that are welcoming, nurturing and safe (Welsh Government, 2020). Approaches such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia also strengthen the curriculum by encouraging independence, self-care and emotional awareness through child-led exploration (Lillard *et al.*, 2021 and Rinaldi, 2021). Activities such as outdoor play, yoga, mindfulness, cooperative games and creative investigation help children strengthen their bodies, communicate feelings and build positive relationships. These experiences contribute to a balanced lifestyle and support children's mental health by giving them safe, meaningful ways to express emotions, develop coping strategies and take increasing responsibility for their own wellbeing (Harris and Cale, 2019).

Practitioners also recognise that home environments strongly influence children's lifestyle and wellbeing. Practitioners can work closely with parents to build trusting relationships, share observations and agree on strategies that promote the child's health, wellbeing and lifestyle. This helps families feel included and supported rather than judged (Public Health Wales, n.d). Through a positive relationship practitioners can share guidance, model routines and offer supportive, non-judgemental conversations, that can help parents create healthier, more predictable environments for their children. This partnership approach strengthens continuity between home and setting, helping children feel secure, understood and supported (Wilson, 2025).

Multi-agency working is when practitioners, parents and other professionals work together using a holistic approach to meet all aspects of a child's needs. It ensures support is coordinated and based on a child-centred approach, so the child's health, wellbeing and lifestyle are prioritised across home and educational settings. For example, if a child is struggling to stay awake in school due to a difficult home environment, practitioners will work with parents, a health visitor and family support services to create a plan that helps the child feel secure and supported. This approach ensures that both the child and their family are supported holistically (Walker, 2022).



West Cheshire
Children's Trust (2020)



Saskatchewan
Advocate for Children
and Youth (n.d.)

Conclusion

In conclusion, practitioners play a crucial role in shaping children's health, wellbeing and lifestyle by building warm relationships, establishing consistent routines and creating environments that support exploration and growth. Children's lifestyles are influenced by both positive and challenging circumstances, making it essential for practitioners to understand the full context of each child's life. By recognising both the strengths and difficulties, practitioners can work alongside other professionals and families to promote healthy habits, strengthen resilience and help break cycles of disadvantage, giving every child the best possible foundation for lifelong wellbeing (Musgrave, 2017).

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