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(Source: Riverside Counselling Service, 2020)

Health, Well – being and Lifestyles



Introduction

This poster examines the importance of health, wellbeing and healthy lifestyles in the early years, exploring how key theories and models contribute to practitioners' understanding of children's development and wellbeing. It also considers the vital role of early years practitioners in promoting positive health and wellbeing outcomes through strategies and practices that support children's holistic growth and development. The Early Years Foundation Stage framework highlights the responsibility of practitioners to support children's health, wellbeing and overall development through responsive care, positive relationships and enabling environments (Department for Education, 2024).



(Source: Bishop, 2010)

Health

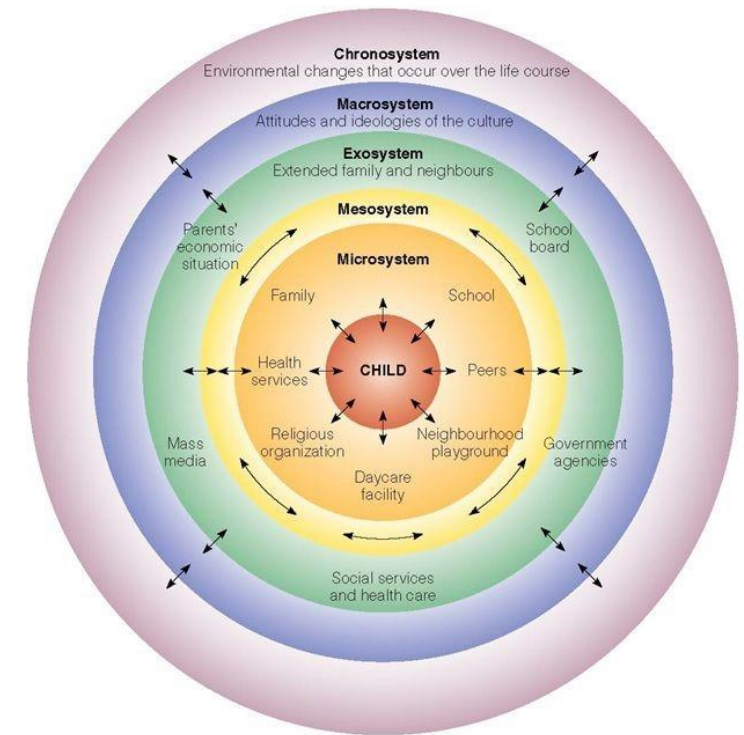
Health is a holistic concept encompassing physical, mental and social wellbeing. The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease” (World Health Organization, 2022). This definition is significant because it moves beyond a narrow medical view of health and recognises wellbeing as a multidimensional concept. However, in Early Learning and Care, health is also understood as a developmental process that is shaped over time through children’s experiences, relationships and environments (Osher *et al.*, 2018). This is particularly important in the early years, as research from Public Health Wales highlights that early childhood experiences have a lasting impact on later health, educational attainment and overall life chances. Positive health and wellbeing in early childhood support children in developing resilience, confidence and social competence, which are essential for lifelong learning and development (Public Health Wales, 2025).

This broad understanding is further supported by Musgrave (2017), who describes health as the achievement and maintenance of physical fitness and emotional wellbeing, emphasising that wellbeing involves both the body and mind. For example, physical fitness in early childhood may be seen when children develop coordination and energy through active play, while emotional wellbeing can be supported through secure relationships that help children manage emotions and feel safe. This highlights the importance of practitioners promoting both physical development and emotional wellbeing through supportive and nurturing environments.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory explains children's health and development as being shaped through continuous interaction between the child and their surrounding environments. Rather than being an individual process, development is influenced by immediate contexts such as family life and early years settings, as well as wider social structures including community resources and government policy (Tomlinson *et al.*, 2021). This highlights that health is not fixed within the individual but is shaped over time through relationships and environmental conditions. For example, parental stress or an unstable home environment may reduce a child's sense of emotional security, which can negatively affect their emotional wellbeing and ability to develop secure relationships within early years settings. The Center on the Developing Child (2021) emphasises that children's healthy development is strongly supported by stable environments and responsive caregiving relationships, which also help them manage and recover from stress.

This perspective is reinforced by research applying Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasises that development results from ongoing reciprocal interactions between children and the multiple systems around them (Yang and Oh, 2024). Bronfenbrenner's original work similarly highlights that human development is shaped by the interaction between individuals and their environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Overall, this suggests that children's health outcomes are shaped by the quality and stability of their environments, which places significant responsibility on Early Learning and Care practitioners to promote secure, nurturing settings that support emotional wellbeing and positive long-term development. In practice, practitioners play a vital role in promoting children's holistic wellbeing by providing consistent routines, nurturing interactions and positive reinforcement to help children feel secure and valued. Secure attachments formed through responsive caregiving are central to emotional regulation and confidence (Bowlby, 1969) and are supported by evidence highlighting the continued influence of early attachment relationships on emotional development and stress regulation (Twohig *et al.*, 2024). Practitioners support wellbeing through communication and inclusive practice, promoting positive health and development.



(Source: Skyland Trail, 2024)

Wellbeing

Wellbeing is a complex and multidimensional concept that includes physical, emotional, social and psychological health. Dodge *et al.* (2012) define wellbeing as a balance between an individual's resources and the challenges they face, suggesting that wellbeing is a dynamic process influenced by changing life circumstances. Children's wellbeing in early years education and care is influenced by protective and risk factors, with secure attachments, supportive practitioner relationships, play-based learning and good nutrition promoting positive development, while poverty, transitions and developmental difficulties can act as barriers to wellbeing. This understanding aligns with Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, which proposes that basic physiological and safety needs must be met before children can develop belonging, self-esteem and achieve their full potential. However, both perspectives have been criticised for focusing heavily on the individual, whereas wellbeing is also shaped by wider social and environmental factors. Murphy *et al.* (2021) emphasise that effective early years practice relies on strong partnerships between practitioners and families, with collaborative relationships improving children's educational, health and wellbeing outcomes by ensuring consistent support across home and early years settings. Therefore, wellbeing in early childhood should be understood as the interaction between individual needs, social contexts and collaborative professional practice.

The quality of early relationships plays a central role in children's emotional development and sense of security. Bowlby's Attachment Theory explains that children's wellbeing is strongly influenced by the consistency and sensitivity of their early caregiving experiences (Bowlby, 1969). Secure attachments develop when practitioners respond reliably and warmly to children's needs, enabling them to feel safe, supported and confident to explore their environment. This is directly relevant to wellbeing because emotional security forms a foundation for resilience and positive development (Bowlby, 1969). Fearon *et al.* (2017) found that early attachment security is significantly associated with later emotional regulation and social competence, highlighting the long-term impact of early relational experiences. Consequently, attachment theory remains highly relevant in early years practice, as practitioners who build secure, responsive relationships are actively promoting children's overall wellbeing.

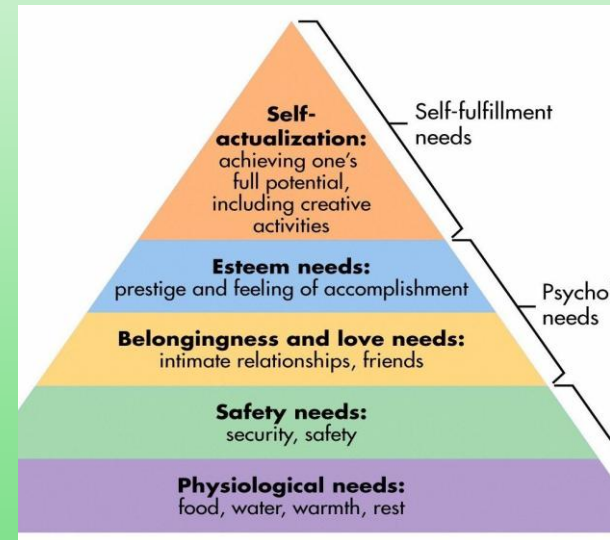


(Source: Communication Theory, 2019)

In practice, practitioners support secure attachment and wellbeing by providing consistent, predictable routines that help children feel safe and reduce anxiety around transitions (Opie *et al.*, 2020). They also use warm, sensitive and responsive interactions, such as comforting children when they are upset, offering reassurance, and responding promptly to their emotional and physical needs (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2022). Key person approaches are particularly important, as they ensure that each child has a trusted adult who builds a strong, stable relationship with them over time (Department for Education, 2024). Practitioners also support emotional wellbeing by modelling positive communication, helping children to name and understand their emotions, and guiding them in developing strategies for self-regulation (Department for Education, 2024). Play-based learning is another key approach, as it allows children to express feelings, build confidence, and develop social skills through interaction with peers (Public Health Wales, 2025). In addition, practitioners create inclusive environments where children feel valued and respected, and they work in partnership with families to ensure continuity of care between home and the early years setting (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2022). These strategies collectively strengthen attachment relationships and promote children's emotional security, resilience and overall wellbeing (Center on the Developing Child, 2021).

This emphasis on relationships also links to wider approaches within early years settings. Howard, Burton and Levermore (2020) argue that children's emotional wellbeing should be supported through a whole-school approach, where staff practices, organisational policies and the learning environment work together to create a culture that promotes wellbeing. This perspective extends beyond individual practitioner-child relationships by recognising the importance of a coordinated approach across the setting. Through effective leadership, inclusive policies and strong partnerships with families, early years settings can create environments that consistently support children's emotional, social and developmental needs (Howard, Burton and Levermore, 2020). Therefore, children's wellbeing can be understood as being shaped not only by individual interactions, but also by the broader organisational and social contexts in which they learn and develop.

Overall, wellbeing is a multidimensional concept influenced by children's individual needs, relationships and wider environments. Theories such as Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory highlight the importance of meeting children's basic needs and providing secure, supportive relationships to promote emotional security and positive development. In Early Learning and Care, practitioners play a key role in supporting wellbeing through responsive caregiving, inclusive practice and strong partnerships with families. By creating nurturing environments that promote children's emotional, social and developmental needs, practitioners help lay the foundations for positive wellbeing and long-term success.



(Source: Mind for Life, 2017)

Lifestyle

Lifestyle refers to the behaviours, habits, and daily experiences that affect a person's physical, emotional, and social wellbeing. It reflects the way people live and the choices they make in their everyday lives. These patterns are influenced by personal characteristics as well as social, socioeconomic, and environmental factors. (World Health Organization, 2018). In early childhood, lifestyle is particularly significant as it is a critical period for growth and development, during which children begin to establish patterns of behaviour that can shape their long-term health and wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2024). Healthy lifestyle behaviours such as balanced nutrition, regular physical activity and opportunities for play contribute to children's holistic development by supporting their physical, cognitive and emotional wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2021). Early years settings therefore play an important role in promoting these experiences by creating environments that encourage positive lifestyle choices and support overall wellbeing (Public Health Wales, 2025).

An example of this in practice is The Daily Mile, an initiative used in UK early years and school settings that encourages children to take part in short daily bursts of walking, jogging or running. It promotes regular physical activity and supports children's mental wellbeing, while also helping to improve stamina, coordination and concentration. By embedding daily movement into routine practice, it encourages positive attitudes towards exercise and healthy lifestyles from an early age (The Daily Mile Foundation, 2024).

Building on this focus on structured support for health and wellbeing, Estyn's expectations for early years provision in Wales further emphasise the importance of nurturing environments, consistent routines and opportunities that support children's health, wellbeing and readiness to learn (Estyn, 2022). In practice, practitioners are central to shaping children's lifestyles through their everyday interactions and routines. By providing structured yet flexible daily experiences, practitioners help children develop a sense of security while also supporting positive habits around eating, sleeping, hygiene and play (Department for Education, 2024). Practitioners further promote healthy lifestyles by modelling positive behaviours, encouraging active play, supporting emotional regulation and fostering independence in self-care skills (NICE 2022). These consistent experiences help children to develop confidence, resilience and the ability to make positive lifestyle choices (Center on the Developing Child, 2021).



(Source: Wyllie, 2016)

While practitioners play an important role in promoting healthy lifestyles, parents and carers are equally influential in shaping children's lifestyle development. Bandura's Social Learning Theory suggests that children learn through observing and imitating significant adults (Bandura, 1977). As a result, the routines, behaviours and attitudes demonstrated within the home can have a strong influence on children's health and wellbeing. This highlights the importance of positive role modelling, as children are more likely to adopt healthy habits when these are consistently reinforced by the adults around them. The theory also emphasises the value of partnerships between families and practitioners, as consistent messages across home and early years settings can support the development of positive lifestyle behaviours and contribute to children's long-term wellbeing (Department for Education, 2024).

However, while practitioners, parents and carers play a key role in shaping children's lifestyles, children's experiences are also influenced by wider social and environmental factors beyond their immediate relationships. Socioeconomic status is a significant factor, as children living in lower-income households may experience limited access to nutritious food, safe housing and opportunities for physical activity. The Marmot Review highlights that inequalities are strongly linked to structural factors such as income, education and living conditions rather than individual choice alone (Marmot *et al.*, 2020). This shows that lifestyle is shaped by both personal experiences and wider societal factors that can influence children's health and wellbeing from an early age.



(Source: Loyalist College, 2026)

Lifestyle plays a significant role in supporting children's physical, emotional and social wellbeing from an early age. Healthy lifestyle behaviours are influenced by the combined contributions of practitioners, parents and carers, who help shape children's habits through everyday experiences, routines and positive role modelling. However, wider social and economic factors can also affect children's opportunities to develop healthy lifestyles. Therefore, it is important for Early Learning and Care practitioners to work in partnership with families and create supportive environments that promote positive wellbeing outcomes for all children.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence presented in this poster, health, wellbeing and lifestyle are closely linked and play a key role in children's holistic development in the early years. As discussed, theories such as Bronfenbrenner, Bowlby and Bandura help to explain how development is shaped through relationships, environments and everyday experiences. It is also evident that Early Learning and Care practitioners play a crucial role in supporting positive outcomes by creating nurturing environments and working in partnership with families. Furthermore, wider social and economic factors can also have a significant influence on children's opportunities and overall wellbeing. Overall, promoting health, wellbeing and positive lifestyle habits in the early years is essential in laying the foundations for children's long-term development and resilience.

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