

Basic Acknowledgement format of AI tool use

I acknowledge the use of Canva

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the prompt(s):

1. Academic poster

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Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyles in Early Years

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of health, wellbeing, and lifestyle in the early years are closely linked to ecological systems theory, which suggests that children’s development is shaped by multiple layers of influence, from their immediate relationships and home life to broader community, cultural, and political environments (Bronfenbrenner and Cole, 1979). Children do not grow up in isolation, their physical health, emotional wellbeing, and everyday behaviours are all influenced by the people, places, and systems around them (Bronfenbrenner and Cole, 1979). Poor lifestyle behaviours, such as limited physical activity or poor nutrition, are known to increase the risk of mental health challenges and economic disadvantage later in life (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008) Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) shows that stress, neglect and harmful environments in early life can damage brain development, impair emotional regulation, and even weaken the immune system (Felitti *et al.*, 1998; Burke Harris 2014).



FIGURE 1. SOURCE: PUBLIC HEALTH WALES (NO DATE)

Early years professionals play a vital role in shaping children’s early lifestyle experiences by modelling healthy habits, creating structured routines, supporting families with health and nutrition and acting early to reduce ACEs (Marmot, 2010). This poster explores the three interconnected themes of health, wellbeing, and lifestyle in the early years. Each section presents key theories, relevant Welsh policy, and examples of practice. The conclusion highlights their connections and the importance of multi- agency support.

HEALTH IN EARLY YEARS

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) health is defined as not just as the absence of disease, but as “complete physical, mental and social wellbeing” (WHO, 1948, cited in Schramme, 2023). This definition encourages us to think more broadly about what it means for a child to be healthy, including how they feel, their relationships, and the environment around them (Schramme, 2023). However, scholars argue that the WHO’s interpretation of “complete” as meaning perfect wellbeing, risks making the standard unattainable for many people, especially for children in disadvantaged circumstances or with long-term health issues (McDonald, 2005). Goto (2000) further highlights that this idealised version can inadvertently stigmatise those living with chronic conditions. Schramme (2023) proposes reading “complete” in a qualitative sense, focusing on overall wellbeing rather than perfection. This perspective shifts the focus towards a more holistic and realistic understanding of health. The WHO’s Nurturing Care Framework (2018) supports this by identifying five key needs, good nutrition, access to healthcare, safety, responsive caregiving, and early learning (WHO, 2018). This policy supports Bronfenbrenner and Cole’s (1979) ecological systems theory, showing that development is shaped by close relationships and wider influences. Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs further suggests that human development follows a sequence, beginning with physiological needs, up to self- actualisation. In early years, this theory highlights how children cannot engage in meaningful learning if their most basic physical or emotional needs are unmet. However, critics argue that these needs are not always met in a fixed order. Kenrick *et al.* (2010) propose that emotional security can, in some cases, compensate for unmet physical needs, emphasising the importance of resilience and nurturing relationships. Building on this, Dahlgren and Whitehead’s Rainbow Model (2021) adds that wider social factors, such as housing, income and education, also shape health, they suggest supporting children requires more than individual care, it needs coordinated multi- agency support that considers families social realities. In Wales, these ideas are reflected in national policy. *The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* places a legal duty on public services to take a long-term preventative approach, that prioritises collaboration and sustainable wellbeing throughout a person’s life (Davies, 2015; Welsh Government, 2025). Complementing this, the Healthy Child Wales Programme provides universal and targeted support through regular developmental checks, parenting advice, and coordinated multi-agency input from midwives, health visitors, and early years practitioners (Welsh Government, 2022). Children’s rights are also central to Welsh policy. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 24 affirms every child’s right to the best possible healthcare and access to a clean environment and early education (UNICEF, 2022). While Welsh policy frameworks such as the *Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015* and the Healthy Child Wales Programme (2022) set out clear goals for improving children’s health and wellbeing, there are ongoing challenges in implementation. Studies highlight inconsistencies in service access, workforce training, and funding across local authorities (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016). This suggests a need for greater equity, sustained investment, and clearer accountability mechanisms to fully realise the aims of early years’ policy. Why is this so important? The first 1000 days are crucial to a child’s health and development (WHO, 2018). During this time, the brain develops faster than at any other time (WHO, 2018). If children’s health needs are not met during this window, it can affect their ability to thrive both now and in later life (Chriscaden, 2016). Poor early health has been consistently linked to long-term challenges in education, employment, mental health and overall wellbeing (Bellis *et al.*, 2015). However, while the importance of early intervention is well established, critics argue that services can be fragmented, underfunded, or difficult to access for families most in need (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016). This highlights the need not only for strong policy but also for consistent implementation, equitable service delivery, and greater investment in early years support.

What we can do in practice

- 1. **Build trusting relationships with families to identify and respond to children’s needs as early as possible (Public Health Wales, 2022).**
- 2. **Create nurturing environments that meet children’s basic physical and emotional needs—such as warmth, safety, and a sense of belonging (Maslow, 1943).**
- 3. **Use everyday routines and play to promote healthy habits, including balanced nutrition, oral hygiene, physical activity, and emotional expression (World Health Organization, 2018).**

WELLBEING IN EARLY YEARS

Wellbeing in early years includes emotional, social and mental health (Department for Education, 2025). It is defined by how children feel, connect and manage their emotions (Barnardo’s, 2025). However, defining wellbeing can be complex and is often a debated term, described as “conceptually muddy” (Morrow and Mayall, 2009, p. 7). Dodge *et al.* (2012) define wellbeing as a balance between an individual’s psychological, social, and physical resources and the challenges they face. When resources meet or exceed challenges, wellbeing is maintained, when challenges outweigh resources, wellbeing suffers. This strengths-based view moves away from defining wellbeing merely as the absence of stress and instead recognises it as a fluid, context dependent state. Ryff’s (1989, cited in Dodge *et al.*, 2012, p. 222) model of adult wellbeing includes autonomy, personal growth, life purpose, and self-acceptance. While these views are insightful for understanding adult development, they are less relevant for young children, who are still forming their identity and learning to express themselves (Dodge *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, the Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project (The Government Office for Science, 2008) offers a more child-friendly approach (connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, and give), these actions align well with early years pedagogy and are easier to implement in settings focused on play, relationships, and emotional literacy. Yet, as Pollard and Lee (2003) point out, the wide range of wellbeing definitions can create confusion. Without an agreed framework, early years professionals may struggle to assess or support wellbeing consistently, especially in a developmental phase where needs are highly individual and rapidly changing. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979) helps explain how children’s wellbeing is shaped by relationships and systems. For example, a child in emotional distress at home may struggle in nursery, even if the setting is nurturing. However, critics argue the theory can underplay children’s agency, portraying them as passive recipients rather than active participants (Trudge *et el.*, 2009). Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) highlights the importance of consistent caregiving for emotional regulation and resilience by explaining how secure attachments promote social confidence while insecure ones can result in behaviour challenges and trust issues. Yet Rutter (1995) warns against focusing solely on maternal bonds, noting the role of wider social networks and multiple caregivers. These theories highlight the importance of stable relationships and supportive environments, but they also show the need to adapt theory to reflect modern family dynamics and cultural diversity. In Wales, wellbeing is embedded in national frameworks. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies to work sustainably and collaboratively to improve wellbeing for current and future generations (Welsh Government, 2025). It emphasises prevention, long-term thinking, and equality. However, Bywaters *et al.* (2016b) argue that while policy aspirations are strong, local delivery is inconsistent, with some families facing barriers due to postcode-based service availability, staff shortages, or limited funding. Another key initiative is the Healthy Child Wales Programme (Welsh Government, 2022), which promotes wellbeing through regular health reviews, advice, and early identification of issues by professionals like health visitors and midwives. The programme supports early intervention, but concerns have been raised about pressures on health visitors and gaps in follow-up support (Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2020). From a rights-based perspective, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is also central. Article 24 affirms every child’s right to the “highest attainable standard of health” including access to healthcare, clean environments, and early education (UNICEF, 2022). This provides a clear moral and legal foundation for promoting wellbeing from birth. Yet, aligning rights-based ideals with real-world delivery remains a challenge, especially for children from marginalised or disadvantaged groups (Lundy *et al.*, 2021). Embedding children’s voices and lived experiences into policy design is essential to make wellbeing a lived reality, not just a written goal.

what we can do in practice

- 1. **Build strong, consistent relationships.** Secure bond with a trusted adult helps children feel safe and valued, providing emotional stability amidst stress (Public Health Wales, 2022).
- 2. **Use emotional literacy programmes like ELSA..** These create safe spaces for young carers to talk, regulate emotions, and develop resilience through structured activities (Weare, 2015).
- 3. **Celebrate strengths, not just struggles.** Shift the focus to resilience by encouraging self-worth, peer support, and achievements, no matter how small (Dodge *et al.*, 2012).

LIFESTYLE IN EARLY YEARS

Lifestyle refers to the daily habits and routines that influence a child’s development. This includes sleep, nutrition, physical activity, screen time, and emotional patterns (Public Health England, 2016; UNICEF, 2019). These behaviours have a lasting impact on children’s health, wellbeing, and happiness. Young children learn through imitation and consistent routines (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008). Physical play builds motor skills, supports brain development, and boosts self-esteem (Timmons *et al.*, 2012). However, not all families have access to safe outdoor space (Spence *et al.*, 2006; Public Health Wales, 2021). A balanced diet fuels both the body and the brain (Public Health England, 2016), yet poverty and food insecurity remain major barriers for many families (Children in Wales, 2023). Programmes like Healthy Start can help, but access is inconsistent (Welsh Government, 2022). Nutrition advice must also reflect diverse cultural backgrounds (Evans *et al.*, 2021). Sleep plays a vital role in behaviour, attention, and emotional regulation (Mindell *et al.*, 2006). But overcrowded housing, shift work, or family stress can make bedtime routines difficult (Hiscock *et al.*, 2007; NHS, 2022). Screen time is often debated. While excessive use can affect sleep and behaviour, co-viewing with an adult can promote learning, communication, and bonding (Radesky *et al.*, 2015; Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). It’s not just about limiting screens, it’s about quality, content, and connection. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are closely linked with lifestyle patterns. Trauma in early life can lead to poor eating habits, disrupted sleep, or sedentary behaviour (Bellis *et al.*, 2015). However, resilience plays a key role. Supportive relationships and responsive services can protect children from long-term harm (Finkelhor, 2020). In Wales, the Curriculum for Wales promotes lifestyle education through experiential learning and play (Welsh Government, 2022). *The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* emphasises early intervention and cross-sector collaboration, but outcomes rely on staff training and strong family partnerships (Jones *et al.*, 2020).

What we can do in practice

- 1. **Model consistent routines for food, rest, and movement** (Foresight Mental Capital, 2008).
- 2. **Tailor health advice to reflect families’ cultural values and lived experiences** (Evans *et al.*, 2021).
- 3. **Use play to teach hygiene, nutrition, and physical activity** (Whitebread, 2012).
- 4. **Adopt trauma-informed approaches to support children impacted by ACEs** (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

Conclusion

Children’s health, wellbeing, and lifestyle are deeply interconnected and shaped by multiple layers of influence. Bronfenbrenner and Cole’s (1979) ecological systems theory highlights how children’s development is impacted not just by immediate caregivers, but also by wider community, societal, and policy environments. Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs reminds us that without physical and emotional security, children cannot thrive or reach their full potential. Welsh policy frameworks such as the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* and the Healthy Child Wales Programme emphasise preventative action and holistic, multi-agency support to promote wellbeing from birth (Welsh Government, 2022; Welsh Government, 2025). However, research shows implementation is inconsistent across local authorities, often due to workforce capacity and funding (Bywaters *et al.*, 2016). Promoting healthy lifestyles through routine, play, and trauma-informed care can support children’s resilience, especially for those affected by ACEs (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Bellis *et al.*, 2015). Ultimately, early years professionals are not only educators, they are health promoters, advocates, and key players in supporting the whole child. A joined-up approach that reflects both policy and practice is essential to create safe, nurturing environments where every child can grow, belong, and thrive (Public Health Wales, 2022).

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