

A vital component of children's general growth and well-being is their health. Early childhood health affects cognitive development, emotional stability, physical growth, and the capacity to learn and build connections. The early years are crucial for developing lifelong healthy behaviours. Because of this, early childhood education and care place a strong emphasis on health, and practitioners play a critical role in promoting children's health and welfare from the very beginning. (NSPCC, 2021)

What is Health?

"A state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" is how the World Health Organisation defines health (WHO, 1948). This definition emphasises the comprehensive nature of health, which encompasses social interactions, mental wellness, and physical health. Good diet, exercise, emotional stability, wholesome connections, and secure, caring surroundings are all important aspects of early childhood health. Therefore, health is a positive notion that emphasises both physical and social resources. (Schramme, 2023)

Why Is Health So Important in the Early Years?

Early years health is important because it lays the groundwork for a child's entire life, influencing brain development, physical growth, emotional regulation, and future learning. (UNICEF, 2024) Positive habits formed early are difficult to break later, affecting everything from social skills and lifelong well-being to disease risk. Early childhood health and long-term results are closely related. Childhood health problems, such as obesity, poor nutrition, or inactivity, might raise the likelihood of chronic illnesses, lower wellbeing, and health disparities in later life. (CDC, 2023) Early experiences have a lasting impact on social development, educational performance, mental health, and physical health, according to research.

How does this link to early years?

Early years practitioners play a huge role in enhancing children health and lifestyle. By fostering environments that encourage healthy habits from an early age, early childhood professionals play a critical role in promoting children's health, wellness, and lifestyle development. By offering wholesome meals and snacks, encouraging regular exercise, and encouraging active play both indoors and outside, practitioners may enhance physical health. Nurturing connections, regular routines, and responsive care all contribute to children's emotional wellbeing by making them feel safe and secure.(Foundationyears.org.uk, 2014) Additionally, early childhood educators serve as role models by exhibiting healthy habits including self-care, balanced diet, and good attitudes towards physical activity. In order to assist children acquire lifelong healthy lifestyle practices and lessen future health disparities, practitioners can reinforce healthy messaging throughout the home and environment by collaborating with parents and carers.(Strelitz J, 2018)

Since childhood is a crucial period for prevention and early intervention, health, wellbeing and lifestyle is covered in early childhood education. Supporting healthy behaviours early in life is more beneficial than trying to change habits later in life, according to public health guidelines. (Public Health England, 2021) The NHS and Public Health Wales offer recommendations on good food, physical activity, and early intervention, while the World Health Organisation highlights a holistic approach to health and the significance of early childhood for lifetime welfare. (NHS, 2026) The significance of early years settings in encouraging healthy lifestyles is further highlighted by the UK's rising rates of childhood obesity and health disparities.(GOV.WALES, 2025)

What does well being mean in early education?

Wellbeing refers to a person's overall quality of life and includes physical, emotional, social, and mental health. It is directly related to health and lifestyles because maintaining wellbeing is mostly dependent on beneficial daily habits including healthy eating, exercise, emotional support, and safe surroundings. Since early childhood is a crucial developmental stage, wellness is particularly important in early years settings. Children are more likely to acquire lifelong healthy behaviours, emotional resilience, and positive social skills when they feel protected, appreciated, and supported. Therefore, by creating caring surroundings, fostering healthy routines, and assisting children's emotional and social development, early years practitioners play a crucial role in promoting wellbeing. (Cowley A, 2021)

Why is lifestyle important?

The daily actions and decisions that impact one's health and well-being, such as eating, exercising, sleeping, and interacting with others, are referred to as lifestyles. These actions are important because they directly affect long-term life outcomes, mental stability, and physical health. Children start forming lifestyle patterns in early childhood settings that they may carry into adulthood. Early childhood professionals improve children's immediate and long-term health by helping them build solid foundations for a healthy lifestyle through active play, healthy nutrition, routines, and positive social interactions.(Jirout et al., 2019)

How these concepts shape early years development?

A child's whole growth is greatly aided by the interconnectedness of health, lifestyles, and well-being. Children who are in good health have the physical foundation they need to develop, study, and be active. A balanced diet, regular exercise, enough sleep, and constructive routines are examples of healthy lifestyle choices that enhance brain growth, behaviour, and energy levels. By emphasising a child's emotional stability, self-assurance, and sense of belonging, wellbeing connects these components. Children are better able to explore, build relationships, and participate in learning when they feel protected, appreciated, and supported.

Because early experiences have a lasting effect on development, it is particularly crucial for practitioners to support health, behaviours, and welfare in early childhood. Early childhood educators are uniquely positioned to foster caring surroundings, set an example of appropriate conduct, and spot early issues. In order to provide children with the best foundation for future learning, wellbeing, and long-term health outcomes, practitioners support the development of resilience, positive habits, and social and emotional abilities.

Who Tells Us This?

Strong longitudinal evidence suggesting the childhood environment has a long-lasting effect on health, lifestyle and well being across the lifecycle is provided by Shah, Barsky, Vaillant, and Waldinger (2016). The study found that while negative or stressful early experiences were linked to worse health perceptions, caring, stable, and supportive childhood environments were linked to improved perceived health in later adulthood. Significantly, these results imply that early experiences affect not only physical health outcomes but also how people perceive and comprehend their own wellbeing over the course of their lives. In order to improve growth and health, the 2019 World Health Organisation guidelines for children under five advocate increased physical exercise, reduced screen time, and adequate sleep. These guidelines emphasize that more activity and less sitting are always better, aiming to reduce childhood obesity and improve mental well-being (World Health Organization, 2019).

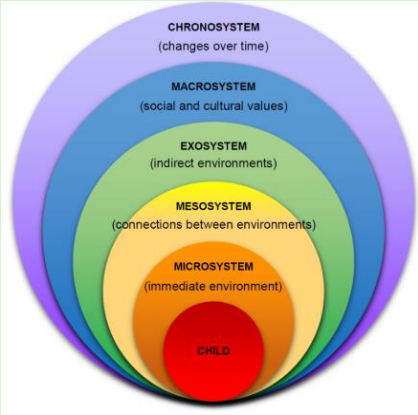
A variety of public health initiatives are being actively carried out by the UK government with the goal of enhancing health, lowering obesity, and promoting healthier lifestyles. (Health, 2025) The UK government have previously stated that Reducing obesity, particularly among children, is one of the priorities of Public Health England. (Public Health England, 2019) In order to promote better nutrition and decrease health disparities in children which will overall improve health and wellbeing, one major focus has been addressing the increasing rate of childhood obesity through comprehensive action plans that include limitations on junk food advertising, increased free school lunches, and universal healthy breakfast clubs. Along with initiatives that promote physical activity and balanced diets in schools and communities, the government's childhood obesity plan also includes policies like the soft drink industry fee and updated nutrient profiling to promote industry reformulation and lower sugar intake. (Parliament.uk, 2024) Families are also encouraged to adopt healthier eating and active lives through behavior change campaigns and resources provided by the public health system, such as programs under the Better Health campaign. These legislative initiatives promote settings that promote health and wellbeing in all contexts where children live, learn, and play, reflecting a larger trend towards prevention.

Research, international guidelines, and UK public health policy all provide strong evidence that early childhood health, wellbeing, and lifestyle choices have a long-lasting effect on an individual's entire life. While adverse early experiences raise long-term health risks, longitudinal research show that stable and supportive early environments are associated with better physical health, healthier lifestyle choices, and enhanced wellbeing in adulthood. Information on these concepts can be found through The World Health Organization's recommendations and UK government programs that encourage exercise, a balanced diet, enough sleep, and less screen time to avoid childhood obesity and boost mental health complement this. When taken as a whole, this data emphasises the value of early intervention and the critical role that early childhood settings play in fostering long-term health and welfare.



Theoretical Frameworks Supporting Health, Wellbeing and Lifestyles in the Early Years

These theories emphasise that early years professionals support children’s health and lifestyles by creating nurturing environments, meeting basic physical and emotional needs, modelling healthy behaviours, and providing consistent routines. Practitioners play a key role in reducing health inequalities by offering supportive, inclusive, and health-promoting environments for all children.



Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory shows how the places where children live and grow up affect their health, happiness, and the way they live their lives. According to Bronfenbrenner, a variety of linked systems, such as the family, early childhood settings, the larger community, and larger social and policy contexts, all have an impact on a child's development. (Guy-Evans, 2025) This theory explains how children's diet, activity levels, and general welfare can be directly impacted by a variety of factors, including home routines, nursery routines, access to nutritious food, chances for physical activity, and financial circumstances. For instance, even in situations where there are difficulties at home, regular health-promoting activities in early childhood settings can encourage healthy lifestyle choices. This idea acknowledges that children's health outcomes are influenced by broader environmental and social factors rather than just personal decisions.(Lopez M,et al.2021)

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, children cannot completely participate in learning and growth until their basic needs are satisfied. In addition to the need for safety and emotional stability, Maslow argues that physiological demands including proper nourishment, sleep, and physical health form the basis of wellbeing. (Care Learning, 2024) Young children may find it difficult to focus, control their emotions, and engage in educational activities if they are hungry, exhausted, or feel uncomfortable. This approach emphasises how crucial it is for early childhood environments to foster connections, regular routines, balanced diets, and good health. Practitioners foster an environment where children thrive emotionally, socially, and cognitively by attending to their basic health and wellness needs. (McLeod, 2025)This promotes both immediate development and long-term results.

Supporting children's emotional welfare through thoughtfully designed surroundings that foster independence, respect, and self-regulation is a key component of the Montessori method. Children's wellness is improved when they feel safe, appreciated, and empowered to make important decisions in their surroundings, according to the Montessori Institute (2024). Children can grow in confidence, emotional resilience, and good self-esteem when they have opportunities for independence, peaceful routines, and steady adult support. This method promotes holistic health by acknowledging the intimate relationship between learning and physical health and emotional wellbeing. Healthy lifestyle choices and emotional balance can be supported in early childhood settings through Montessori-informed practices like child-led activities, consistent routines, and caring interactions, laying a solid basis for long-term wellbeing.

Early educational contexts can have long-term consequences on health and wellbeing, according to peer-reviewed research by (Lillard et al. 2021). Higher levels of adult wellness, such as enhanced social skills, emotional control, and life satisfaction, were linked to Montessori education throughout childhood, according to their research. These results imply that early childhood strategies that emphasise emotional stability, independence, and nurturing surroundings may have a beneficial impact on long-term wellbeing outcomes. The relevance of caring, child-centred practices in fostering lifetime health and wellbeing is reinforced by this research, which supports the idea that early childhood environments play a vital role in moulding healthy lifestyles and emotional resilience.

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