

Health, Well-being and Lifestyles

Introduction

Health, well-being and lifestyles are key concepts within Early Years practice as they influence children's growth, development, learning and future life chances. Research consistently demonstrates that positive experiences during early childhood years provide the base for physical health, emotional well-being, social competence and educational achievement throughout life (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). As a result, promoting children's health and well-being is a key responsibility of early years practitioners. This poster explores the concepts of health, well-being and lifestyles and examines their importance in supporting children's development. The role of practitioners in promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting children's physical, emotional and social well-being will also be discussed. Understanding these concepts is essential because children who experience positive health and well-being during their early years are more likely to achieve positive outcomes in education, relationships and later life (Department for Education, 2021).

Well-being

Pollard and Lee (2003) explain children's well-being as a multidimensional concept that considers emotional, psychological, social and physical health, alongside the ability to learn, develop and thrive. Well-being extends beyond the absence of illness and includes positive experiences such as happiness, emotional security, confidence, resilience and a sense of belonging. UNICEF (2024) highlights that children's well-being is influenced by both subjective experiences, such as life satisfaction, and objective circumstances, including access to healthcare, education, safety and supportive relationships.

Family relationships play a significant role in promoting children's well-being. Bowlby (1988) argues that secure attachments formed during early childhood provide children with a sense of security and trust, enabling them to explore their environment and develop confidence. Children who experience secure attachments are more likely to show emotional resilience, positive self-esteem and healthy social relationships. Oppositely, insecure attachments may contribute to difficulties with emotional regulation, behaviour and relationship formation (Bowlby, 1988).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights that a child's well-being is affected by various interacting environmental systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem, which includes family, friends, and educational environments, has the most immediate impact on a child's daily life. The mesosystem reflects the connections between these different environments, whilst the exosystem and macrosystem cover broader social, economic, and cultural factors. This theory demonstrates that a child's well-being is influenced not only by their personal traits but also by the surroundings they grow up in. Alongside this, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs emphasises the significance of well-being in development. Maslow (1943) suggested that individuals must first satisfy their basic physiological and safety needs before moving on to higher-level needs such as belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualisation. For young children, this means that having sufficient nutrition, shelter, safety, love, and emotional support is crucial for their learning and overall development.

Research indicates that children who grow up in stable, caring environments are more likely to develop positive mental health, achieve academically and establish healthy relationships throughout life (Dowling, 2014; Department for Education, 2021). Oppositely, children exposed to adverse experiences may encounter significant challenges. Felitti et al. (1998) found that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including abuse, neglect, domestic violence and household dysfunction, can have lasting consequences for physical health, mental well-being and social functioning.

ACEs can disrupt brain development, affect emotional regulation and increase the risk of mental health difficulties later in life (Felitti et al., 1998). As a result, resilience is increasingly recognised as an important protective factor. Resilience refers to a child's ability to adapt positively to challenges and adversity. Supportive relationships with parents, carers and practitioners can help children develop resilience, allowing them to cope more effectively with difficult experiences (Bowlby, 1988). Children's well-being is influenced by a complex interaction of personal, relational and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). (Department for Education (2021) state that positive well-being supports healthy development, educational achievement and long-term life outcomes

Lifestyles

Lifestyle refers to the patterns of behaviour, habits and daily activities that influence health and well-being (World Health Organization, 2024). During childhood, lifestyle behaviours are strongly influenced by family, culture, socioeconomic circumstances and the wider environment. These factors may include – home environment, diet, family income, nutrition and relationships (Welsh Government, 2021).

Healthy lifestyles are linked with improved physical, emotional and social outcomes. Key components include balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, adequate sleep and positive social relationships. Developing healthy habits during childhood can reduce the risk of illness and support lifelong well-being.

Physical activity plays a particularly important role in children's development. According to the World Health Organization (2024), regular physical activity strengthens bones and muscles, improves cardiovascular health and contributes to positive mental well-being. Physical activity also supports social development by encouraging cooperation, communication and teamwork.

Nutrition is equally important. A balanced diet provides children with the nutrients required for growth, brain development and immune function.

Poor nutrition may affect concentration, behaviour and educational attainment. Promoting healthy eating habits during early childhood is essential for supporting development.

Sleep is another critical aspect of a healthy lifestyle. Chaput et al. (2020) found that sufficient sleep contributes to cognitive functioning, emotional regulation and overall health. Inadequate sleep has been linked to behavioural difficulties, reduced academic performance and poorer mental health outcomes.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory demonstrates how lifestyle behaviours are shaped by environmental influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Family routines, school policies, community resources and cultural expectations all affect children's opportunities to engage in healthy behaviours.

Socioeconomic circumstances can also influence lifestyle choices. Children living in disadvantaged communities may have reduced access to healthy food, safe outdoor play spaces and organised recreational activities (Marmot et al., 2020). Therefore, whilst personal responsibility is important, children's lifestyles are also shaped by structural factors beyond their control.

Looking at evidence, lifestyles contribute significantly to children's physical health, emotional well-being and long-term development.

Health

Health is a fundamental aspect of children's development that affects learning, growth and future opportunities. The World Health Organization (2025) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. This definition recognises health as a holistic concept that encompasses multiple dimensions of well-being.

Musgrave (2017) explains that children's health includes physical, emotional and social well-being. Physical health involves growth, nutrition, exercise and protection from illness and injury. Mental health is linked to emotional well-being, resilience and the ability to manage challenges, whilst social health concerns relationships, communication and participation within communities. Naidoo and Wills (2016) argue that health is influenced by biological, psychological and social factors. This biopsychosocial model acknowledges that health outcomes are rarely determined by a single factor. Instead, a combination of genetics, behaviours, environmental conditions and social influences contribute to overall health.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps explain how children's health is shaped by their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Families influence dietary habits, physical activity and healthcare access, whilst schools and communities provide opportunities for learning healthy behaviours. Wider societal influences, including government policies and economic conditions, also affect children's health outcomes.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs reinforces the significance of health by highlighting the importance of physiological needs such as food, water, sleep and safety (Maslow, 1943). Without these basic requirements, children may struggle to concentrate, learn and develop effectively. Therefore, good health forms the foundation upon which all other aspects of development are built.

Early childhood health experiences are particularly important because they influence brain development and future well-being. Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) emphasise that positive early experiences support cognitive, emotional and social development, whereas poor health can contribute to developmental delays and educational difficulties.

Mental health is vital within early years. Children who experience emotional security and positive relationships are more likely to develop confidence, resilience and effective coping skills (Department for Education, 2021). Good mental health supports academic achievement, social competence and overall well-being.

However, health is not determined only by personal behaviours. Marmot et al. (2020) argue that social determinants such as income, housing, education, employment and access to healthcare have a significant impact on health outcomes. Children living in poverty often face increased exposure to health risks, including poor housing conditions, food insecurity and limited access to recreational opportunities.

Health inequalities remain a major concern. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience obesity, respiratory illnesses, mental health difficulties and poorer educational outcomes (Marmot et al., 2020). This demonstrates that children's health opportunities are shaped by wider social and economic factors beyond their control.

Application to Early Years Practice

Early years practitioners play a crucial role in supporting children's health, well-being, and lifestyles. Through daily interactions, planned activities, routines and opportunities for physical activity, practitioners can create environments that encourage positive development and healthy behaviours. Public Health Wales (2024) promotes early intervention strategies that nurture healthy child development and well-being. The Curriculum for Wales includes Health and Well-being as one of the six Areas of Learning and Experience, highlighting the significance of supporting children's physical, emotional, and social growth (Welsh Government, 2022). This emphasises the role of practitioners and importance to provide experiences that support healthy lifestyles and positive well-being.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory suggests that children's health and well-being are shaped by the environments and relationships surrounding them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The theory also highlights the importance of partnerships among families, educational settings, and communities in nurturing children's development. Consequently, practitioners should collaborate with parents and carers to ensure consistency between home and educational environments. Effective communication between practitioners and families can promote healthy routines, positive behaviours, and improved outcomes for children. Multi-agency collaboration is a vital aspect of effective Early Years practice. It involves professionals from various services working together to address children's needs and foster positive outcomes. This collaboration may include early years practitioners, health visitors, speech and language therapists, social workers, and educational psychologists. Effective multi-agency collaboration facilitates information sharing, early identification of concerns, and coordinated support for children and families (Department for Education, 2021). Bowlby's Attachment Theory highlights the significance of secure and trusting relationships in supporting children's emotional development (Bowlby, 1988). Practitioners who offer warm, responsive, and consistent care foster emotional well-being, confidence, and resilience in children. Additionally, practitioners can encourage healthy lifestyles by promoting balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and good sleep routines. Providing opportunities for active play, outdoor learning, and positive social interactions enhances both physical and emotional health. Furthermore, practitioners have a duty to identify concerns early and collaborate with families and other professionals to deliver suitable support. Early intervention can mitigate the effects of developmental challenges, health inequalities, and adverse childhood experiences, enabling children to achieve positive outcomes and realise their full potential (Public Health Wales, 2024).

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on strong evidence, health, well-being and lifestyles are interconnected concepts that significantly influence children's development and future outcomes. Children's experiences are shaped by a combination of individual, familial, environmental and societal factors. Theories such as Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs highlight the importance of supportive relationships, nurturing environments and the fulfilment of basic needs.

Early years practitioners play a crucial role in promoting children's health and well-being through positive relationships, healthy environments and collaborative partnerships with families. By adopting a holistic approach, practitioners can help children develop the foundations necessary for lifelong health, learning and success.

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