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Foundation Degree in Inclusive Education

ECIE5009

Essay – Identify and critically explore the issues that can have an impact on the Mental Health and Well-being in children and young people

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Essay

“Be strong, be fearless, be beautiful. And believe that anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you” (Copeland, 2017). This is something that educators try to instil in children and young people (CYP); that they should be uniquely themselves and know that there is always support available to them whenever they need it. Having the right support is invaluable to the “1 in 6” children and young people living in Wales with a diagnosed mental health condition; however, whether they are getting the necessary support they need is in question (Mind, 2025a). This essay explores the issues that impact the mental health and wellbeing in children and young people, linking the theories of Maslow, Bandura, Dweck, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner and Bowlby. It will also analyse the importance of play, interventions, the role of trusted adults and the policies that are used to tackle mental health and wellbeing problems.

‘Mental health’ and ‘wellbeing’ are related as “mental health affects how you feel, think and act. It refers to your emotional, psychological and social well-being” (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2020). Likewise, the World Health Organization (2022) proclaims that:

“Mental health is a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realize their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right. And it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development”

Therefore, mental health and well-being are something that everyone has and that affects us all, even in childhood. For children and young people to reach their potential they need to learn how to manage their emotions and communicate effectively when they are struggling, to get the help and support they require. Many factors contribute to poor mental health and well-being in children and young people. These can be split into two categories internal and external factors. Internal factors are things that happen from within themselves, such as an additional learning need (ALN) or neurodiversity; other internal factors are linked to how they feel emotionally, for example, if they have depression; anxiety; and/or low self-esteem (Kirkbride, 2021). However, these can also be linked to external factors such as

bullying, bereavement, parental separation, peer pressure and negative social influences (Kirkbride, 2021). Other external factors include their home environment, family circumstances, school life and the community surrounding them, these can all have adverse effects on a child or young person's mental well-being (Kirkbride, 2021). Additionally, the Covid 19 pandemic was a phenomenon that has caused a lasting impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing (Kirkbride, 2021).

A recent children and young people's survey on mental health support in Wales found that half of children and young people "didn't know where to access support to help with their mental health or emotional well-being" and only "16% percent felt they could access the right amount" of support when they needed it, whereas "83% felt their mental health needs affected their schooling" (Jones et al., 2024). Therefore, poor mental health can be detrimental to learning and a lack of professional support leaves children and young people with only their family or carers to turn to; however, this may not be appropriate for them if they feel their home environment is unsafe or unstable (Gove, 2012).

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs highlights the importance of a person's basic needs being fulfilled before they can contemplate achieving their potential. A child and young person's mental health and well-being also mirror this hierarchy of needs theory (Maslow, 2017). If a child or young person has poor mental health then they will be unable to concentrate on learning new skills in the classroom, and all their mental energy will be taken up with focusing on getting through the day, in effect they are in survival mode (Sousa, 2001). The brain uses its working memory to process information for "survival" and "generating emotions" before any "new cognitive learning" can happen (see Appendix A); in essence, children and young people need to "feel physically and emotionally secure" to be able to "turn their attention to cognitive learning (the curriculum)" (Sousa, 2001).

Children and young people who have "poor experiences" and become disengaged from learning in school are likely to have a "lack of interest" in lifelong learning which creates "a negative learner identity" (Gorard et al., 2004). This prevents a child or young person from reaching their full potential, limiting their career choices and

earning capabilities. This negative attitude to learning can become a pattern through a family's generations, perpetuating that family's poverty (Gorard et al., 2004).

Children growing up in poverty have “a one-in-three chance of developing a mental health issue by the age of 11”, whereas for those not in “persistent poverty” the figure drops significantly to “one-in-ten” (Kirkbride, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model shows how one area of a child or young person's life impacts the other (see Appendix B). The disruption caused to family routines due to poverty “is likely to impact the child's ability to engage and learn at school and may ultimately alter the capacity to regulate and manage stress” (Kirkbride, 2021).

Other causes for higher levels of mental health conditions in children are premature birth, being subjected to cultural practices, being in care, having a special educational need, living with domestic violence and being a refugee (Musgrave, 2017). Like poverty, Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model can be used to “unpack the layers of impact” these causes can have on the development of the individual and their family (Kirkbride, 2021).

Children and young people who are affected by these and other adverse childhood experiences (ACE's) such as parental separation; physical or emotional neglect; verbal, physical or sexual abuse; alcohol and/or drug abuse, or imprisonment of a family member can benefit greatly from early intervention (Science and Technology Committee, 2018; Welsh Government, 2021b). Targeted support enables them to function well physically, emotionally and socially; allowing them to reach their academic capabilities and economic potential later in life, which is why it is widely accepted “that intervening earlier is better” (Science and Technology Committee, 2018). It has been concluded that the risk of having multiple long term health conditions (multimorbidity) in later life becomes 12.9% higher for each ACE you encounter (Senaratne et al., 2024). A survey carried out the Welsh Public Health department “reported that 50% of Welsh adults had experienced at least one ACE” (Science and Technology Committee, 2018). Of these, 24.9% of Welsh adults by age 49, who had suffered “four or more ACEs reported having been diagnosed with one or more chronic diseases” (Welsh Government, 2021b). Therefore, “the effort made to improve children's wellbeing in the early years is a financially sound investment both for the individual and for society” (Musgrave, 2017).

Conversely, it is worth noting that although the risk of problems later on in life is known to be higher in children who experience adversity, the correlation between ACE's and health-harming behaviours "does not necessarily demonstrate causation" and not all children and young people who have suffered "four or more ACEs" go on to exhibit or take part in unhealthy or risky behaviours (Science and Technology Committee, 2018). Hence, "ACEs should never be viewed as being deterministic" (Welsh Government, 2021b).

However, it is well documented that poverty has a high risk of causing harm to children's mental health and well-being. In Wales approximately "30% of children... are living in poverty", 26% of those are "in working households" and "45% of children aged 7-11" worry about having enough food to eat (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2025). In recognition of this, the Welsh Government (2024) announced the Child Poverty Strategy for Wales 2024 "to tackle child poverty over the next decade or more to meet" the "ambitions for children and young people in Wales, no matter what their circumstances or background". Yet the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2025), "along with several other organisations, is deeply disappointed by the published strategy", regarding it as not taking the matter seriously enough. Poverty is an intricate problem to tackle as most parents feel embarrassed and worried about being unable to meet their children's basic needs for food and shelter (Sorrell, 2021). Schools in Wales try to counteract the effects of poverty with initiatives such as free breakfast clubs and 'Food and Fun' clubs that "promote healthy living, support positive well-being and improve engagement with education and the school during the summer holidays" (Welsh Government, 2022; WLGA, 2025).

Schools in Wales also try to improve children's health and well-being via Family Engagement Officers who aim to foster parental involvement with their children's education and bridge the socio-economic disadvantage by linking parents with specialist services and other agencies to help them in times of crisis (Welsh Government, 2023a). In addition to this, the Welsh Government (2024) now provide free school meals to all primary school-aged learners in Wales. For those who are from low-income households and meet the eligibility criteria, there is also a School

Essentials Grant and Free School Meals provision in Secondary Schools; as well as Pupil Development Grant funding for the school (Welsh Government, 2024). These initiatives recognise the importance of children being fed nutritiously, clothed appropriately and having safe home environments and the positive impact this then has on children reaching their educational potential. Maslow (2017) supports the view that children's basic needs must be met for them to thrive both physically and mentally; likewise, Bronfenbrenner (1979) supports this view by showing how environmental factors can influence a child's development.

It is important to note that the Covid-19 pandemic made life worse for the most deprived in the United Kingdom and the number of people suffering from "long Covid" in the poorest households is twice that of the wealthiest (Tapper, 2025). Children were also found to be "significantly" unhappier with their lives in 2021/22, which shows how damaging the pandemic was to their overall well-being (Chollet et al., 2024). Similarly, Tapper (2025) reports that "mental health problems among children and young adults are also worsening, accounting for 45% of all diseases affecting 10- to 24 – year-olds".

Correspondingly, vulnerable children and young people were at an increased risk of maltreatment during the Covid 19 pandemic as the isolation restrictions reduced their access to the safeguarding systems and support services that help to keep them safe (Romanou & Belton, 2020). Neglect is "consistently the most common reason" that a child is put on to the Child Protection Register (CPR); 43% of children in Wales were on the CPR because of neglect in 2016/17 (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2021). Neglect is defined as the "failure to meet a child's basic and essential needs including physical, emotional and medical needs" and it also includes "educational neglect", as all children have the right to be educated (Wales Safeguarding Procedures, 2021).

All "schools in the UK have a statutory responsibility to protect children from abuse"; therefore, schools have an important part to play in protecting children and young people from being subjected to any form of neglect (NSPCC Learning, 2024). Every school has a safeguarding policy and it "applies to all staff, governors and volunteers

working in the school”, everyone is responsible for reporting anything that seems suspicious or gives cause for concern (Golden Grove School, 2024).

Nevertheless, it has been shown in the past that these safeguarding procedures are only as good as the action taken upon them; regrettably, there have been some very well-publicised cases of horrendous child neglect in the UK, such as the deaths of Victoria Climbié, Peter Connelly and Khyra Ishaq (Gove, 2012). The prime reason why these and other “appalling” cases occurred is due to “optimism bias”, where authorities believe that with the right help and support biological parents will take better care of their children; “the interests of adults” have been put before the needs of the children in many of cases of neglect and as a result children are consistently left in danger for far too long (Gove, 2012). This bias has been created through a misguided belief that maltreated children who are taken into care are more likely to suffer mental health and well-being problems later in life, whereas the root cause of their suffering is from living in a neglectful home before being taken into care (Gove, 2012).

Children in care have a “much higher rate of mental health problems” as they “are more likely to have experienced significantly more risk factors which predispose young people to develop mental health problems” (Richardson & Joughin, 2000). Commonly children and young people taken into care suffer from “anxiety, fears and depression, conduct disorder and attachment disorder”; although, once they are in care “there is an opportunity for some of the protective factors to come into play” (Richardson & Joughin, 2000). As Maslow (1954) inferred, humans must have their physical needs met for them to address and meet their emotional needs; so, when a child’s basic needs and educational needs are met they begin to feel safe and can start to recover from the emotional trauma they have faced (Musgrave, 2017; Richardson & Joughin, 2000).

Bowlby (1973) also confirms this need to develop secure attachments with “a caregiver who is psychologically, physically and emotionally available” (Kirkbride, 2021). Unfortunately, even with the warmth and security of a good foster placement some children will still struggle with their mental health and exhibit “out-of-control behaviour” due to the level of harm they have been previously subjected to, which

“makes it almost impossible for the recovery process to begin” (Richardson & Joughin, 2000). In these cases, interventions become critical in creating stronger “relationships with the child” to allow the healing process to start; “effective intervention” might also become the key to reducing the risk of harm to the child's future mental health and well-being (Richardson & Joughin, 2000). Children spend a significant proportion of their lives in education; therefore, school staff have a large role in providing interventions and building positive relationships with children and their families (Layard & Hagell, 2015). The benefits of early intervention and supporting families have long been recognised as the key to reducing the risk of long-term mental health and well-being problems (Layard & Hagell, 2015).

Layard and Hagell (2015) reported that life skills can be taught just like any other subject or skill and that mental health problems must be addressed as soon as they present themselves, to prevent further problems later in a child's life. Children who have lacked the necessary nurturing in their early years can struggle to understand and regulate their emotions; likewise, those children or young people who experience trauma can struggle to process and cope with the emotions they are feeling (Layard & Hagell, 2015). Emotional literacy sessions delivered by qualified Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA's) can help children to recognise and control their emotional behaviour which increases their self-esteem and builds resilience to negative experiences (ELSA, 2017). ELSA's use techniques such as Dweck (2017) growth mindset theory to encourage disengaged learners to think proactively about the challenges they face in their life and Piaget (1962) importance of play theory, that can help children “to develop the structures required to understand their world and make sense of their experiences within it” (ELSA-Support, 2025; Kirkbride, 2021).

Most importantly, ELSA's actively listen to children and help them understand their emotions, reassuring them that their feelings are normal and teach them ways to regulate their big emotions and react more healthily when those emotions overwhelm them (ELSA, 2017). ELSA interventions target the emotional literacy individual or small groups, however there are also “systemic” interventions such as Trauma Informed Schools (ELSA, 2017; Trauma Informed Schools UK, 2025). Trauma Informed Schools is a whole school approach to meeting the needs of children who

encounter adverse experiences, as they recognise the benefits of maintaining positive relationships with children who are struggling with their mental health and behaviour (Trauma Informed Schools UK, 2025). This builds on Carl Rogers (1957) theory of “unconditional positive regard”; where there is understanding and empathy for the child or young person’s “internal frame of reference” (Rogers, 1992).

Early interventions and positive relationships are important for children and young people to feel that “there is someone they can trust” in school, as having at least one strong relationship” with someone “who they feel has their best interests at heart is paramount to not just their academic achievement but also their social development” (Welsh Government, 2021a). This level of support helps foster “resilience” which “is the protection that is learned from having adverse life experiences” (Musgrave, 2017). Bandura (1977) social learning theory also supports this as children and young people can learn new behaviours by “imitating” others; this is why a whole school approach to empathy, respect and creating positive relationships is so effective, as practitioners are role-modelling to children how they deal with negative situations or problems calmly and constructively (Welsh Government, 2021a). Again, it reflects Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory model and the interactive effects that relationships have on the child or young person (Structural Learning, 2023).

However, it is not only relationships that impact a child or young person's mental health and wellbeing; compared to the general population, there is a higher risk of mental health problems for children and young people who have physical or learning disabilities (Youngminds, 2023). These can create interlinked problems, as they may also find it difficult to maintain social relationships or friendships and/or live in poverty (Youngminds, 2023). For conditions that prove too difficult for school practitioners to manage, a multi-agency approach is used such as Children and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) (Mind, 2025b).

Conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have a high co-morbidity with mental health disorders, as their moods can cause issues with their conduct, attention and relationships (RDaSH NHS Foundation Trust, 2025). Every person’s experience of these disorders will be unique to them, so specific individual needs must be recognised and supported. As

previously mentioned, Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows the importance of meeting their basic needs, which may be substantially different to the general population; for them to feel accepted and a sense of belonging which allows them to access the ability to fulfil their potential (Maslow, 2017).

Conversely, Bronfenbrenner shows the interactive effect of issues and how that can negatively impact a child or young person's life (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Structural Learning, 2023). One of the biggest impacts can be on their education as "no pupil is an island. Every incident has a range of immediate and longer term causes" (Lord Elton, 1989).

Schools in Wales are required by the Curriculum for Wales to take a more holistic approach to education where the child as a whole entity is considered not just their academic ability (Welsh Government, 2023b). The word 'empathy' is repeatedly mentioned throughout the guidance for the Curriculum for Wales, and it encourages practitioners to be more aware of children and young people's well-being and highlights the benefits of developing their emotional literacy; so that they can overcome challenges and build the resilience required to deal with problems they encounter throughout their lifetime (Welsh Government, 2023b).

The Curriculum for Wales has four main purposes, to develop "ambitious, capable learners"; "ethical, informed citizens"; "healthy, confident individuals"; and "enterprising, creative contributors" that can lead full and valued lives as members of society in Wales and the rest of the world (Welsh Government, 2023b). It encourages children to view education as a lifelong journey and aims to foster a love for the process of learning, so they can "adapt and thrive in the modern world" (Welsh Government, 2023b). The Curriculum for Wales is designed to be inclusive and celebrates diversity, recognising the importance of social and cultural interactions (Welsh Government, 2020).

This is seen as best practice as "a curriculum should be designed to encompass the diversity of needs of all learners, rather than including individualized actions that compensate for specific groups" and "a competency-based curriculum has adaptability to real-life settings" (Knight & Crick, 2021). Contrary to this, it could be

argued that “there is relatively little consistency about how issues of inclusion are understood and communicated within the policy and guidance documents” as every school has interpreted the Curriculum for Wales in their way to suit the needs of their school (Knight & Crick, 2021).

Additionally, the Curriculum for Wales and the Welsh Government actively promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) which says that every child has a right to be heard and “that they are safe, not discriminated against, have the things they need to survive and develop” (Welsh Government, 2025).

Children are taught about their rights and are encouraged to share their feelings, thoughts and wishes with school staff, on what they would like to learn for each of the class topics as well as decisions that affect their life in school. Initiatives such as pupil voice/pupil participation and Voice 21 encourage and teach children to advocate for themselves, it encourages them to question thoughts, beliefs and opinions which allows them to express their personal views and ideas (Golden Grove School, 2023; National Governance Association, 2023; Voice 21, 2024).

As has been demonstrated, the issues that can have an impact on children and young people's mental health and well-being are multi-faceted, requiring support from several areas to ensure children and young people can overcome negative experiences in their lives. Building this resilience is vital to allow children to fulfil their ambitions and reach their potential in their lifetime (Musgrave, 2017). Children spend most of their time in education and as our emotional responses develop in early childhood, schools can have a significant impact on children and young people's ability to foster good mental health strategies and encourage the positive aspects of looking after their overall wellbeing (Musgrave, 2017). Most schools have now adopted a positive discipline policy which emphasises a whole school approach to promoting “positive values” and the “importance of the pastoral role” which nurtures children's emotional health and wellbeing (School A, 2023). Improving emotional literacy has a significant and positive impact on children's mental health and well-being, as well as their academic outcomes (Silver et al., 2024). Mental health and well-being are embedded in a whole-school approach in the Curriculum for Wales and whole-school interventions such as Trauma Informed Schools highlight the

importance of early intervention and prevention (Trauma Informed Schools UK, 2025; Welsh Government, 2020, 2021a).

Whilst schools are on the frontline daily with children's mental health and well-being, sometimes a child or young person has complex needs beyond the capabilities of school practitioners and multi-agency working becomes necessary. However, it is important to note that despite the importance of early intervention, access to some multi-agency services such as CAMHS has long waiting lists with over a quarter of a million children and young people waiting for support in 2022-23; 40,000 of which were waiting for "at least two years" (Children's Commissioner, 2024). This is a significant barrier to children getting the support they need when they need it and why government funding for whole-school approaches to mental health has doubled (Mentally Healthy Schools, 2025). Children and young people have openly talked about their mental health and the effects of waiting lists for support (The Children's Society, 2025). Some children and young people are put off by the stigma of going to their General Practitioner but by publicly discussing the issues that have an impact on their mental health and well-being "they've moved society forward" to reduce "the stigma surrounding mental health" (The Children's Society, 2025).

Overall, for children and young people "to be successful learners and productive citizens" they must learn to their "emotions intelligently", as their "emotions interact with reason to support or inhibit learning" (Sousa, 2001). In terms of looking after children and young people's mental health and well-being, "the most effective schools seem to be those that have created a positive atmosphere based on a sense of community and shared values" (Lord Elton, 1989).

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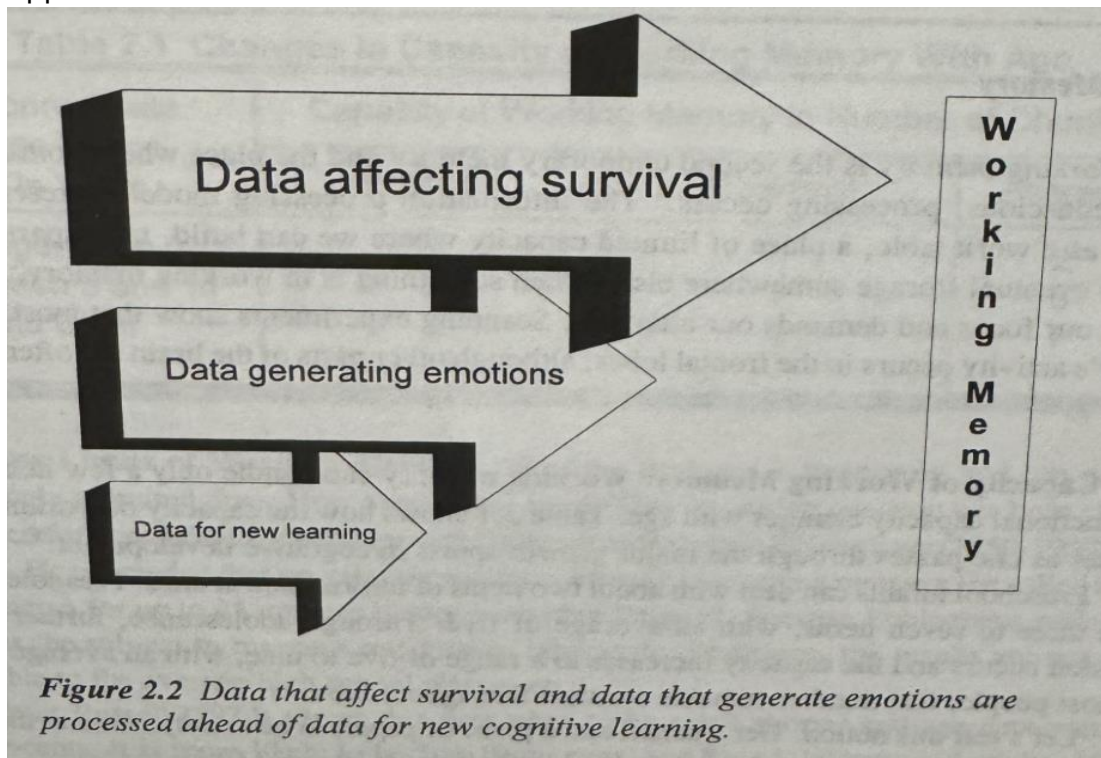
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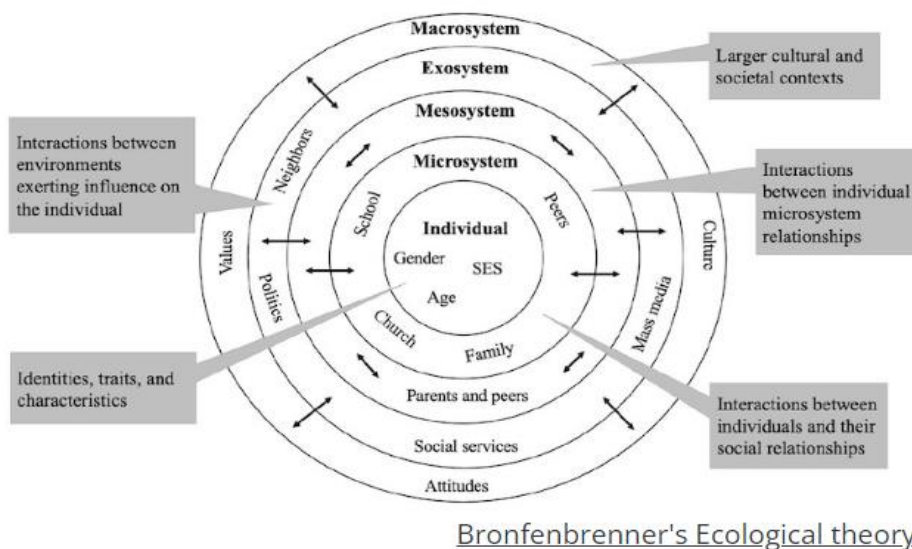
Appendices

Appendix A



(Sousa, 2001)

Appendix B



(Structural Learning, 2023)