

Well-being, care and healthy living

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I have not used AI for this assignment

Health, Wellbeing & Lifestyles in Early Years

Introduction

Health and wellbeing are fundamental to children's overall development, influencing their ability to engage in learning, build relationships, and thrive in society. These aspects are crucial not only for academic success but also for the development of social and emotional competence (Howard et al., 2020). Early intervention and education play a critical role in shaping children's long-term health trajectories, particularly during the formative early years when brain development is at its peak (Musgrave, 2017). In Wales, these themes are central to the Curriculum for Wales and supported by national and international legislation (Welsh Government, 2022). The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides a statutory framework requiring public bodies to work towards improving the economic, social, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of Wales (Welsh Government, 2015). Within early years settings, promoting children's health and wellbeing is not only an ethical responsibility but also a practical necessity. Poor health and wellbeing can impact cognitive function, behaviour, and school readiness, making early support critical for children at risk (Musgrave, 2017). Therefore, practitioners must be equipped with theoretical knowledge and practical strategies to foster positive wellbeing from the outset. This poster explores the concepts of health, wellbeing, and lifestyles, outlines relevant guidance and legislation, and offers examples of how these principles are applied in early years practice. It aims to highlight the importance of holistic child development and the various influences that contribute to a child's overall wellbeing, including their lived experiences, community context, and early education environment (Berlinski and Schady, 2015). A comprehensive understanding of these dimensions empowers practitioners to create environments where health and wellbeing are embedded in every interaction and routine (Howard et al., 2020).



(Dreamstime,nd).

The Holistic Nature of Health and Wellbeing

Health and wellbeing are interconnected across physical, emotional, social, and cognitive domains. The concept of holistic development recognises that each of these aspects cannot be treated in isolation (Musgrave, 2017). For instance, a child who is physically unwell may struggle with emotional regulation, which can in turn impact social relationships and cognitive performance (Howard et al., 2020).

Physical wellbeing includes nutrition, physical activity, sleep, and medical health. Children benefit greatly from outdoor learning and play, which not only support motor development but also promote mental alertness and reduced anxiety (Welsh Government, 2022). Access to safe outdoor spaces and opportunities for movement contribute to developing healthy habits and physical competence (Policy Press, 2016).

Emotional wellbeing refers to the ability to manage emotions, build self-esteem, and adapt to new experiences. Supporting children's emotional literacy through mindfulness, storytelling, and reflective activities enables them to develop coping mechanisms and resilience (Howard et al., 2020). Positive mental health in early childhood is a protective factor for future wellbeing and academic engagement (Musgrave, 2017).

Social wellbeing includes the development of empathy, cooperation, and communication skills. Social learning through collaborative play and peer interaction is critical in helping children develop interpersonal understanding and positive identity (Berlinski and Schady, 2015).

Cognitive wellbeing is facilitated through curiosity, problem-solving, and active engagement. A child's cognitive health is strengthened by nurturing environments that provide stimulating resources, responsive interactions, and opportunities for choice and independence (Maholmes, 2014).

Understanding and promoting these domains as interconnected allows practitioners to tailor their approach to each child's individual needs. The Wheel of Wellbeing (Network of Wellbeing, n.d.) is a useful framework that illustrates this interconnectivity through six actions: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, give, and care. These actions align with both the Curriculum for Wales and wellbeing principles set out by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2022).

The role of play in health and well being

An additional key element influencing young children's health and wellbeing is the role of play. Play-based learning is widely recognised for its contribution to physical development, emotional regulation, and the acquisition of social skills. The Curriculum for Wales emphasises play as a fundamental approach in early years pedagogy, aligning with the view that learning should be active, meaningful, and enjoyable (Welsh Government, 2022). According to Musgrave (2017), play provides children with opportunities to explore their environments, solve problems, and build resilience in a safe and supportive context.

Free play, in particular, supports autonomy and decision-making, helping children to develop a sense of agency and control over their actions. These qualities are crucial for mental wellbeing and emotional development, especially for children navigating challenging home circumstances (Maholmes, 2014). Furthermore, social play allows children to build friendships, resolve conflicts, and experience empathy—core components of social wellbeing (Howard et al., 2020). Including unstructured time in the daily routine can serve as a buffer against stress and offer valuable moments of joy and connection, which are essential for wellbeing (Policy Press, 2016).

Practitioners can support play-based wellbeing by providing diverse, open-ended resources, encouraging child-led exploration, and adapting the environment to reflect the interests and needs of the children. Outdoor play should also be prioritised, as it combines physical activity, exposure to nature, and opportunities for risk-taking, all of which contribute to robust physical and emotional health (Berlinski and Schady, 2015). This play-centred approach also aligns with the principles of trauma-informed education, which stress the need for predictability, safety, and relational support (Howard et al., 2020).

Factors Influencing Health and Wellbeing

A multitude of factors affect children's health and wellbeing, ranging from immediate personal circumstances to wider socio-economic and cultural systems. These must be understood contextually to provide equitable and inclusive early years provision (Maholmes, 2014).



(Network of Wellbeing, n.d.)

- 1. Socio-economic Status**
Children from deprived backgrounds are more likely to face food insecurity, limited access to healthcare, and substandard living conditions, which negatively impact development (Maholmes, 2014). Practitioners must be aware of the effects of poverty and promote equity through inclusive practice and early intervention (Policy Press, 2016).
 - 2. Family and Cultural Backgrounds**
Family dynamics, parenting styles, and cultural values influence routines, emotional expression, and dietary practices. Respecting and integrating cultural diversity into classroom practices fosters inclusivity and helps children feel valued (Berlinski and Schady, 2015).
 - 3. Educational Environment**
Safe, nurturing, and stimulating settings enhance security and engagement. Consistent routines, respectful relationships, and open-ended learning experiences enable children to feel confident and motivated to learn (Howard et al., 2020).
 - 4. Peer and Social Relationships**
Positive peer interactions build social competence and emotional security. Encouraging group play and peer mentoring fosters collaboration, empathy, and a sense of belonging (Musgrave, 2017).
 - 5. Community and Public Services**
Children benefit from access to libraries, parks, health clinics, and early help services. Strong multi-agency collaboration supports holistic family needs and reduces inequality (Welsh Government, 2015).
 - 6. Digital and Media Exposure**
Screen time affects sleep quality, behaviour, and social interaction. Practitioners and parents must support digital literacy, model balanced use, and create offline opportunities for exploration and interaction (Howard et al., 2020).
- Barriers such as stigma, language, or accessibility must be addressed through reflective practice, continuous professional development, and parent engagement (Maholmes, 2014).

Application in Early Years Practice

Embedding health and wellbeing into early years practice requires intentional planning, reflective pedagogy, and child-centred environments. The Curriculum for Wales encourages flexible, experience-rich approaches grounded in real-life contexts (Welsh Government, 2022).

Planning: Practitioners should integrate "What Matters" statements from the Health and Wellbeing AoLE into lesson planning. These guide the development of secure relationships, physical wellbeing, emotional awareness, and ethical thinking. Inclusive planning involves differentiation, representation, and culturally responsive practices (Welsh Government, 2022).

Activities: Structured and free-play activities such as yoga, sensory play, outdoor exploration, music, and storytelling support physical, emotional, and social domains. Research shows that expressive arts improve children's mood, communication, and resilience (Howard et al., 2020).

Environment: A safe, organised, and enriching space with accessible resources and child-led areas encourages autonomy and exploration. Calm lighting, diverse materials, and quiet zones support sensory and emotional regulation (Musgrave, 2017).

Relationships: High-quality interactions between adults and children form the foundation of effective early years practice. Practitioners must demonstrate empathy, consistency, and attunement to support children's trust and security (Maholmes, 2014).

Parental Engagement: Building strong partnerships with families ensures continuity between home and setting. This involves regular communication, shared goal setting, and respecting parental insight. Programmes like Flying Start in Wales model collaborative, community-based wellbeing support (Policy Press, 2016).

Evaluation and CPD: Ongoing reflection and training ensure that educators remain up-to-date with wellbeing research, trauma-informed practices, and legislative requirements. Self-assessment tools and feedback from children and families can inform improvements (Howard et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The integration of health, wellbeing, and lifestyle practices into early years education is not a supplementary task—it is central to effective pedagogy.

A child who is emotionally secure, physically healthy, and socially connected is far more likely to thrive both academically and personally (Musgrave, 2017). Educators are in a unique position to shape children's development at a foundational stage, not only by delivering curriculum content but also by fostering environments that prioritise wellbeing through positive relationships, inclusive values, and responsive care (Howard et al., 2020).

As practitioners reflect on their roles, it becomes clear that the intersection of play, pedagogy, and policy must be carefully balanced. Effective early years education embraces a whole-child perspective—recognising that learning cannot occur in isolation from emotional safety or physical health (Maholmes, 2014). With continued training, support, and policy alignment, early years professionals can lead the way in ensuring that health and wellbeing are fully integrated into the daily experience of every child (Welsh Government, 2022).

Ultimately, promoting health and wellbeing is a collective responsibility. It requires collaboration between schools, families, health services, and policymakers. By working together, we can reduce inequalities, support vulnerable families, and promote a vision of early childhood where every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to develop the habits, attitudes, and resilience needed to lead a healthy and fulfilling life (Policy Press, 2016).

(Dreamstime,nd).

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