



INTRODUCTION

This poster explores and defines the concepts of health, wellbeing and lifestyle, and examines their significance within an early years (EY) context. It considers relevant theoretical perspectives and research, highlighting the crucial role of early childhood in establishing strong developmental foundations.

The EY represent a critical window for lifelong health, particularly within the first 1000 days, when early experiences have a lasting impact on development (World Health Organization, 2020).

During this period, children's experiences shape brain development, creating either strong or fragile foundations for future learning, health and wellbeing (UNICEF, n.d.).

This poster examines the role of families and EY practitioners in supporting children's development, emphasising the interconnected nature of health, wellbeing and lifestyle. It highlights how relationships, routines and environments influence children's physical, emotional and social development, contributing to positive long term outcomes (World Health Organization, 2020; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012).

Health, wellbeing and lifestyle are interrelated concepts that shape early childhood development. Health includes physical growth and is influenced by wider social determinants (Marmot, 2010), while wellbeing encompasses emotional and social security, particularly through positive relationships (Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). Lifestyle refers to daily routines and environmental influences shaped by family and wider systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Together, these three factors interact to shape child development and establish the foundations for lifelong health and wellbeing (World Health Organization, 2020).

HEALTH

According to the WHO (1946), health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing, not merely the absence of illness. However, this definition has been criticised as idealistic and difficult to achieve, particularly in contexts of social inequality (Armitage, 2023).

Health is now more commonly understood as a dynamic process, reflecting an individual's ability to adapt, manage challenges, and function within their environment (Huber et al., 2011; WHO, 2023). This shift recognises health as shaped by changing life circumstances rather than a fixed state.

In early years (EY) practice, this is especially relevant, as children's health is closely linked to their daily routines, relationships, and environments (Public Health Network Cymru, n.d.; Welsh Government, 2024). Factors such as nutrition, sleep, play, and access to services significantly influence physical and emotional wellbeing (Black et al., 2017; Shonkoff et al., 2012). For instance, consistent routines, a balanced diet, active play, and secure relationships support positive health outcomes (Welsh Government, 2018).

Equally, children living in poverty or adverse conditions may face disrupted routines, limited nutrition, fewer play opportunities, and restricted access to services. These outcomes are shaped by wider social and economic pressures, not simply parental choice (Marmot et al., 2010; WHO, 2008).

This highlights the limitations of focusing solely on individual responsibility for health, particularly in early childhood, where outcomes are strongly influenced by environmental conditions. Guzys and Arnott (2014) emphasise that health is shaped through ongoing interaction between individuals and their social context, aligning with the social model of health.

In practice, children's health should be assessed not only through physical development but also through their living conditions (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991). For example, overcrowded housing or food insecurity can negatively impact health due to structural inequalities rather than parental failings (Welsh Government, 2016).

This approach is reflected in Welsh policy, where health is viewed within a preventative, integrated framework. The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) stresses that improving outcomes requires addressing social, economic, and environmental factors alongside individual behaviours (Welsh Government, 2015).

In EY settings, programmes such as Flying Start and Sure Start demonstrate this integrated approach, combining health visiting, parenting support, anti poverty strategies, and early language development. This illustrates how practice moves beyond a purely medical model to address the wider determinants shaping children's development and wellbeing (Welsh Government, 2026; Hayre et al., 2024).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model demonstrates how a child's health, wellbeing and lifestyle is shaped by the interactions they have between their family, childcare, community and wider environment, all of which influence their overall wellbeing.



(Structural Learning, n.d.)



LIFESTYLE

In the context of EY, lifestyle refers to children's daily routines, experiences, relationships and behaviours, shaped by families, caregivers, environments, and wider social influences, which collectively impact long term health and wellbeing (Cockerham, 2005; WHO, 1998). The quality of these experiences is significant, reinforcing the view that supportive and enriched environments are fundamental to development (Malaguzzi, 1993; Welsh Government, 2026). However, while theory and policy emphasises the importance of nurturing relationships, this perspective places excessive responsibility on caregivers by overlooking structural barriers such as poverty, limited access to services, and social inequality, which restrict families' capacity to provide these experiences (Dahlgren and Whitehead, 1991).

This is particularly important within EY practice, this stage represents a critical developmental period when lifestyle factors have a lasting influence on children's health and wellbeing (Harvard, 2016). Research on the first 1000 days further supports this, identifying early life as crucial for long term outcomes (UNICEF, 2023; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Centre on the Developing Child, 2016). During this period, children are especially sensitive to the quality of their environments; responsive caregiving supports development, while exposure to poverty related stressors such as overcrowded housing, parental stress, and reduced access to services can negatively impact outcomes (Public Health Wales, 2023).

This highlights that children's development is shaped through the interaction between family experiences and structural influences. The Welsh Government's Families First program reflects this approach by providing integrated, multi agency support, including parenting interventions, emotional wellbeing services, and EY provision demonstrating how early intervention can address both family environments and wider social determinants and reinforcing the importance of integrated practice within Welsh policy (Welsh Government, 2017).

This perspective is also embedded in wider Welsh policy frameworks, such as the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), which promotes a preventative, long term, whole system approach to improving outcomes (Welsh Government, 2015). Consequently, children's lifestyles should be understood within broader systems, including financial and social circumstances, access to services, and community resources (Marmot, 2010). For example, children living in deprivation may have limited access to safe outdoor spaces and affordable nutritious food, while financial pressures can reduce engagement with services regardless of parental intentions. In contrast, targeted interventions provide enhanced health visiting, early language development, and parenting support, helping to mitigate some of these inequalities (Welsh Government, 2026).

Wellbeing can be defined as the overall quality of an individual's life. It is a dynamic state, enhanced when people are able to achieve personal and social goals. It can be understood through both objective factors, such as income, education and health, and subjective experiences, including happiness, life satisfaction and personal perceptions of quality of life (Statham and Chase, 2010; WHO, 2021). For example, children living in stable environments with adequate resources, access to nutritious food and consistent routines are more likely to experience positive wellbeing, alongside feeling safe and secure through supportive relationships.

However, despite the importance of relationships and environments, wellbeing remains a complex concept within research (Pollard and Lee, 2003). It is widely recognised as multidimensional, with no single agreed definition, making it difficult to measure consistently. This creates challenges for EY practitioners, as different frameworks may prioritise different aspects of wellbeing, such as emotional, physical or social development (Lee Pang et al., 2026).

Children's emotional wellbeing is closely linked to development, underpinning brain development, learning and long term outcomes (Harvard University, 2024). In practice, children who feel safe and supported are better able to regulate their emotions, engage in play and build relationships, whereas those experiencing stress or instability may struggle with concentration and social interaction (Bowlby, 1969; Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Wellbeing can also be understood through children's subjective experiences, including their daily emotions, life satisfaction and sense of belonging (OECD, 2026). Positive indicators of wellbeing include enjoyment in play, supportive friendships and inclusion in group activities, while exclusion or limited opportunities to form relationships can negatively impact emotional wellbeing (Holder and Coleman, 2015). These experiences are shaped by interactions within the home, EY settings and the wider community (OECD, 2026; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For example, children who form nurturing relationships with key workers can develop emotional security and confidence through secondary attachment relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Similarly, opportunities for outdoor play and social interaction can enhance physical and social wellbeing. In contrast, children who experience isolation, lack of socialisation or inconsistent caregiving may have fewer opportunities to develop social skills, emotional resilience and a sense of belonging, which can negatively affect overall wellbeing (Bowlby, 1969; Shonkoff et al., 2012; Public Health Wales, 2024).

The OECD (2026) further emphasises that wellbeing is developmental and age sensitive, requiring consideration of children's changing needs across different stages of development. It is closely linked to outcomes such as education, health and future life chances, reinforcing the importance of early intervention. This is reflected in Welsh Government policy, which places wellbeing at the centre of early childhood provision and recognises that high quality early experiences are fundamental to long term development and attainment (Welsh Government, 2024).

WELLBEING



EY settings play a crucial role in promoting children's health and wellbeing by providing consistent, nurturing environments that support a child's holistic development, as reinforced through Care Inspectorate Wales National Minimum Standards (2026) which have a strong focus on wellbeing, care, and the quality of the environment to support children's overall care and development (CIW, 2026; Shonkoff and Garner, 2012). As many children spend significant time within EY provisions, practitioners are uniquely positioned to influence routines, model healthy behaviours, and create experiences that underpin long term outcomes (Welsh Government, 2024). This also affords settings a strong position to support families by providing guidance, resources and early intervention, helping to address wider determinants of health such as poverty, parenting capacity and access to services (Welsh Government, 2026). Through close partnerships with parents and multi agency professionals, practitioners can identify emerging needs early and offer targeted support. This contributes to improved outcomes for both children and their families potentially supporting future health, wellbeing and lifestyle outcomes (Welsh Government, 2021).

HEALTH

EY settings support physical health by promoting balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and healthy routines such as sleep and hygiene. Through structured, play based opportunities, children develop motor skills and establish positive habits that contribute to lifelong health (WHO, 2019). To support this many settings engage with the Healthy and sustainable Preschool scheme promoting outdoor play, engaging in nature, as well as access to nutritious foods and the encouragement of healthy eating habits and routines such as handwashing, toothbrushing and rest periods helping children develop positive hygiene practices and healthy attitudes (Public Health Wales, 2023).

WELLBEING

EY practitioners play a key role in fostering emotional wellbeing through secure, responsive relationships. Attachment informed practice and strong key worker systems help children feel safe, valued, and supported. For example, keyworkers who consistently greets a child on arrival, offers comfort during times of distress, and builds trusting relationships over time supports the development of emotional security (Page and Elfer, 2013). Similarly, practitioners responding sensitively to children's cues such as acknowledging their feelings helps them to feel understood and supported. When children are encouraged to share their thoughts and feelings, have consistent routines, such as predictable transitions between activities this further promote a sense of safety and belonging. These approaches align with theories such as Bowlby's attachment theory (1988) and Shonkoff's (2012) work on brain development, highlighting that warm, consistent interactions are fundamental for emotional regulation, resilience and overall wellbeing.

LIFESTYLE

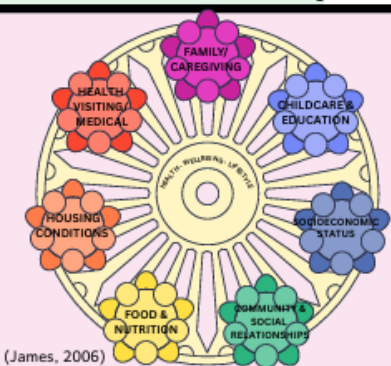
EY settings influence children's lifestyle development by shaping their daily experiences. Through consistent routines, opportunities for outdoor play, and social interaction, children learn behaviours, expectations, and coping strategies that form the basis of lifelong habits (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Cockerham, 2005). A strong example of this is structured daily routines such as regular mealtimes, consistent transitions between activities helping develop organisation and self regulation skills. Daily outdoor play allows children to engage in physical activity, explore risk safely, and build resilience, while group activities and cooperative play support communication and social skills (Gill 2014). Early childhood is a key period when health behaviours and routines are established, influencing long term outcomes (WHO, 2019). Settings also promote inclusion, play, and child centred approaches, supporting subjective wellbeing and a sense of belonging. For instance, inclusive practices such as adapting activities to meet children's needs, celebrating diversity, and encouraging participation help children feel valued, secure and confident (Welsh Government, 2023).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, children's health, wellbeing and lifestyle are closely interconnected concepts that play a fundamental role in shaping children's early development. While traditional definitions of health have been criticised as idealistic, contemporary perspectives recognise health and wellbeing as dynamic processes that are influenced by relationships, environments and wider social factors. Within EY contexts, children's experiences are critical in establishing the foundations for lifelong outcomes.

EY practitioners play a vital role in this process by promoting positive health behaviours, supporting emotional wellbeing through secure relationships, and shaping daily experiences that influence lifestyle development. However, it is also essential to recognise that children's outcomes are not solely determined by individual or family choices, but are significantly influenced by wider structural factors such as poverty, inequality, social stressors and access to appropriate services.

Overall, a holistic and multi agency approach within EY practice is essential to support children's development, reduce future inequalities, and promote positive health and wellbeing from the earliest stages of life.



AI Statement

I acknowledge the use of Copilot and Google editor in line with the guidance given by UWTSD for Module ECEY5009 - 18/05/2026 & 13/06/2026.

I used the prompt(s):

1. Use of Google Editor to check spelling and grammatical errors
2. Put my Harvard references into alphabetical order.
3. Help me reduce the word count without losing the content

I confirm that I have not presented any AI generated text as my own work.

I confirm I have retained copies of my drafts, notes, and other resources I used before, and after the use of AI tools which I may be asked to provide in evidence

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