

ECEY5009

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Introduction: The early years are widely recognised as a critical period for children’s physical, emotional, and cognitive development. In Wales, this stage is prioritised within national policy as one of the Welsh Government’s priorities for early years’ care (Welsh Gov 2024), reflecting compelling evidence that early experiences significantly influence long-term health, well-being, and life outcomes. The economic advantages of early childhood education extend far beyond individual career trajectories, contributing significantly to wider societal and economic outcomes. Long-term studies, have shown that investing in early childhood programmes generates substantial returns, particularly through reduced social expenditure and enhanced economic productivity (Solang et al., 2024). When young children and their caregivers are attuned to one another, and when caregivers can recognise and respond sensitively to children’s emotional signals, their relationships will strengthen and flourish. Warm, responsive early interactions lay the foundations for healthy development across multiple areas, including communication, cognitive growth, social-emotional competence, and emerging moral understanding. As highlighted in the *Birth to Three Matters: Literature Review*, research consistently emphasises the focus of positive relationships with parents and other key people in young children’s lives (Roberts 2010).

Well-being in early childhood is understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing physical health, emotional security, social relationships, and psychological resilience. In the Welsh context, well-being is strongly influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989), which is embedded in Welsh policy and emphasises children’s rights to health, development, protection, and participation (Children in Wales 2026). This rights-based approach aligns with ecological theories such as Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which highlights how children’s development is shaped through interactions between family, community, and wider socio-economic systems.

Marmot (2010) reports that there are links to adverse effects for some who are parenting whilst considered as being on low-income. However, this is not exhaustive and cannot be considered as a rule that affects all, but rather a graded relationship between wealth and parenting capabilities. There is evidence that shows the harmful effects of low-income and health, with inequalities being researched around the world – areas with lower incomes show higher rates of crime and other social outcomes.

The WHO (2026) set out to establish the support required for those families living with conflict. It was reported that there is a shift in global financial support, with funding falling sharply. This is significantly affecting those families that rely on outsourced incomes from organisations such as this. Conflicts are reported as ‘dismantling health systems’ and the call for financial aid is required more than ever before. Detrimently to the support being offered, conflicts destroy those resources available to the millions who are affected, such as hospitals etc. The return of diseases (such as Polio, which had previously been wiped out through immunisation) have further impacted on support strategies.



Healthy lifestyles are more effective when considered, implemented and established within the early years. Nutrition, physical activity, and sleep, are vital to supporting children's development and preventing long-term health conditions. Welsh public health initiatives emphasise the role of early intervention in promoting positive lifestyle behaviours, particularly in response to increasing concerns around childhood obesity and inequalities in health outcomes (Public Health Wales, 2025). Evidence indicates that the first 1,000 days of life are especially important for brain development, physical health, and emotional well-being, reinforcing the need for integrated health and education services (NHS Wales 2016). In 2015 the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act set out to establish the expectations around well-being for the Welsh public. The goals of the Act were to establish a more prosperous Welsh community, linking prosperity, equality and resilience. It was considered that with the challenges faced by the Welsh community, such as climate change, poverty and economic activity, etc an Act would further ensure collaborative working to combat these challenges. Unfortunately, whilst reviewing this document in 2026, it was felt that not all milestones had been reached.



Additionally, the Welsh Government's vision for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) promotes a comprehensive approach to development, integrating physical, emotional, social, and cognitive needs to support lifelong well-being (Welsh Government, 2019). Policies such as the Childcare Offer for Wales, the Healthy Child Wales Programme, and the First 1000 Days initiative further show a coordinated effort to support children and families through access to care, health services, and early education. The COVID-19 pandemic is also referenced as having a significant impact on well-being and mental health in children with an estimated 3 children in every classroom being said to be managing a mental health difficulty. (Children in Wales 2026).

Recent research in Wales has also highlighted the growing importance of children's health and well-being, including difficulties with being overweight or obesity and studies indicate that early intervention, secure relationships, and access to support services are essential in promoting resilience and preventing long-term health difficulties (Public Health Network Cymru, 2025). This aligns with contemporary theoretical perspectives as documented by Help Children Live Better (2024), including relational well-being frameworks and the concept of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which emphasise the long-term impact of early environments on health outcomes. This is echoed by TIS UK (2018) where consideration must be given to adversity and historical life experiences before expectations around learning can be implemented. Emotionally available adults must be in place to support any young person who has experienced ACEs.

Well-being in early childhood is a multidimensional concept encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological health. A key theoretical framework underpinning this understanding is used by Eriksson, Ghazinour & Hammarstro, where they review mental health using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979). The original theory emphasises that children's development is shaped through dynamic interactions between the child and multiple environmental systems, including family, education, and wider socio-economic influences. Welsh policy aligns with this perspective and uses an approach that looks to address social determinants of health, recognising that poverty, housing, and access to services significantly affect children's well-being.

Further theoretical insight is provided by Behrens, Jones-Mason & Forslund (2025) reporting on Bowlby’s Attachment Theory of 1969, which highlighted the importance of secure relationships (and the damage caused by separation) in early childhood for emotional development and mental well-being. Secure attachments between children and caregivers are associated with increased resilience, improved social competence, and better long-term mental health outcomes. In the Welsh context, programmes such as Flying Start promote supportive parenting and early bonding, reflecting Bowlby’s emphasis on the significance of early relationships. The Flying Start programme is a flagship early years initiative targeting disadvantaged communities, providing high-quality childcare, enhanced health visiting, parenting support, and speech and language development services (Welsh Government 2024). This programme reflects a preventative, holistic approach, addressing social determinants of health and aiming to reduce inequalities from an early age. 12.5 hours of childcare is being made available to all children 2 and below, gradually and over time, across Wales.



Healthy lifestyles in early childhood - including balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and adequate sleep - are fundamental to physical and cognitive development. These behaviours are influenced by early experiences and social environments, consistent with Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (1977), which suggests that children learn behaviours through observation and imitation. This theory is particularly relevant in understanding how children adopt dietary habits and physical activity patterns from caregivers and peers.



In addition, Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) provides a useful framework for understanding the relationship between health, well-being, and development. Maslow argued that basic physiological needs, such as nutrition and an environment in which one feels safe, must be met before higher-level psychological needs, including self-esteem and self-actualisation, can be achieved. This highlights the importance of ensuring that children’s basic health and care needs are met to support overall well-being and development.

In Wales, these theoretical perspectives are reflected in key legislation and policy frameworks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) is embedded in Welsh law, promoting children’s rights to health, development, and well-being. Additionally, the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 places a duty on public bodies to improve social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being, including the best possible outcomes for children. Early years programmes such as Flying Start, the Healthy Child Wales Programme, and the Childcare Offer for Wales further support the development of healthy lifestyles and well-being through integrated health, education, and family support services (Welsh Government 2024).

Recent research continues to emphasise the importance of early intervention and holistic approaches to child development. Contemporary frameworks, including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and relational well-being models, highlight the long-term impact of early environments, relationships, and lived experiences on health outcomes. These approaches reinforce the need for supportive, nurturing environments in the early years to promote resilience and reduce inequalities (TISUK 2018).

Cognitive and developmental advancements in early childhood are also explained through the policies of the Welsh Government (2024) where those who are reported as benefitting the most are those who are exposed to the most consistent support around them from an early age. This along with children actively supported through interaction with their environment.

There is hope however, children can be further supported regardless of their start in life, and this is something that practitioners with the correct training and knowledge can enhance. (TIS UK 2018).

Maholmes (2014) presented hope as being a powerful psychological resource linked to a person achieving positive outcomes across everyday life and therapeutic contexts. It is described as an intangible yet influential force that helps with navigating uncertainty, pursuing goals, and making sense of challenging circumstances. Historically, hope has been recognised within mental health practice. More modern psychological theories further emphasise the role of hope in promoting emotional, educational, and health-related benefits. Within therapeutic and rehabilitative settings, hope is recognised as supporting recovery from illness, bereavement, and adverse life events, it can be positioned alongside optimism and resilience as interconnected concepts that contribute to adaptive functioning and well-being. Optimism relates to individuals' interpretations of events and their behavioural responses, while resilience reflects the capacity to adapt and grow despite adversity. Together, these constructs offer a framework for understanding why some children and families manage to thrive even under difficult circumstances. It can be argued that hope, optimism, and resilience collectively underpin well-being, defined as a general state of satisfaction, health, happiness, and success. Importantly, the degree to which individuals develop these qualities is shaped by protective factors within their social and physical environments. This conceptual foundation sets the stage for further exploration of how such strengths can be nurtured in children and families facing adversities associated with economic disadvantage.

In conclusion, well-being, lifestyle, and health in the early years are deeply interconnected and shaped by a combination of biological, social, and environmental factors. The integration of established developmental theories with Welsh policy and practice highlights the importance of a holistic, child-centred approach to early years provision. Understanding these theoretical and practical frameworks is essential for practitioners aiming to create environments that support children to thrive and reach their full potential.

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