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The importance of Health, Well-being and Lifestyle

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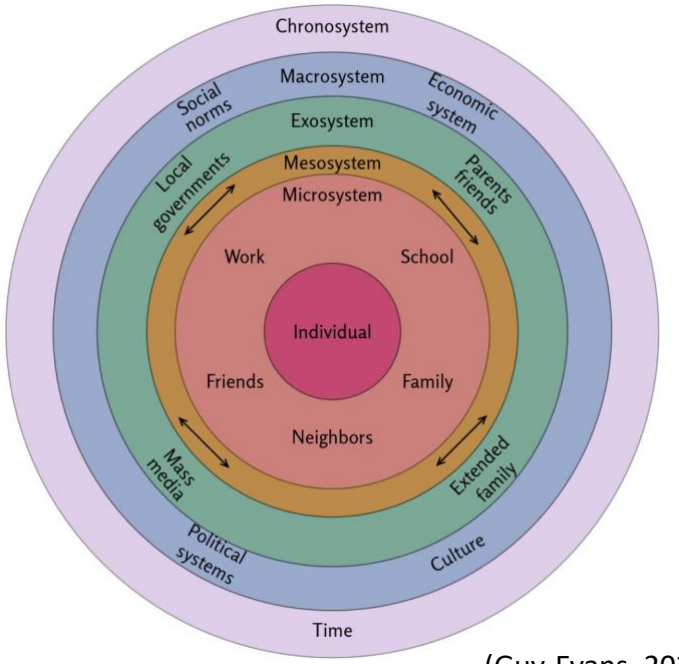
Introduction

This poster will explore and define the concepts of health, well-being and lifestyles and highlight why these are important in early years. The practitioner's role in supporting young children's health, well-being, and lifestyle choices will be discussed, with strategies aimed at promoting holistic development.



(Guy-Evans, 2025)

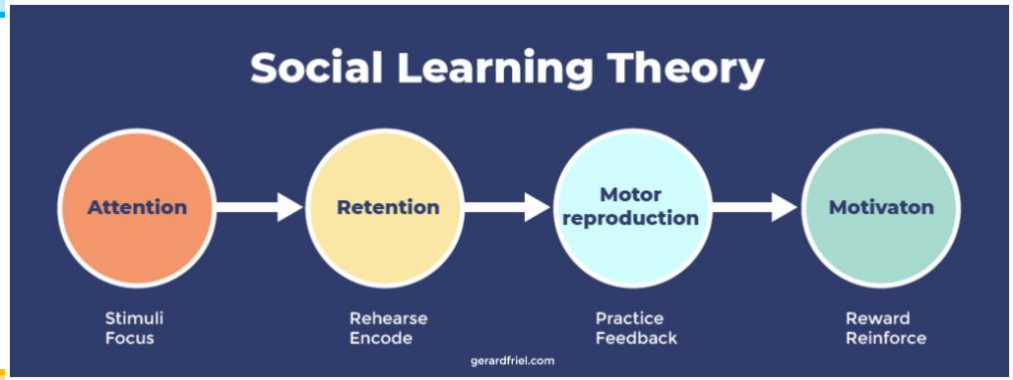
Health

The definition of health is often a complex and unclear concept, making it difficult to define precisely. One reason for this challenge is the lack of a single definition of what constitutes health (Musgrave, 2017). However, according to the World health organisation (2025) health is understood to be a comprehensive state of physical, mental and social well-being rather than merely the absence of illness or disability. This highlights the importance of an integrated approach to health, well-being and lifestyle. The Health Foundation (2024) states that good health and well-being is important because it enables children to enjoy life, feel happy, and makes it easier for a child to reach goals.

According to Durch, Bailey and Stoto (1997) good health is influenced by a range of factors, including the child's genetics, the environment they live in, their diet and physical activity, availability of healthcare services, and the presence of supportive social networks. The World Health Organization (2024) supports this by recognising that health is shaped by a wide range of social, environmental, and individual factors. In the early years, a child's health and development are closely linked to the conditions that they are born and raised in. Factors such as family income, parental education, housing quality, access to nutritious food, and availability of early health and childcare services play a critical role in shaping developmental outcomes (World health organisation, 2024). Good health is very important for a child's overall growth and ability to succeed. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helps us understand this by showing that a child's development is influenced by different layers of their environment (Stern, Barbarin and Cassidy, 2021).

The NHS (2024) states that there is scientific evidence that regular physical activity contributes significantly to a healthier and more fulfilling life. Engaging in consistent exercise has been shown to reduce the risk of numerous major health conditions, including coronary heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer such as bowel and breast cancer. It can also lower the risk of early mortality by up to 30% (NHS, 2024). Engaging in regular physical activity has been shown to have significant benefits for mental health. According to Harold and Cook (2013) physical activity in young children can help reduce the risk of developing anxiety and depression later in life by promoting healthy brain development and emotional regulation. Physical activity can also encourage positive social interactions, and foster self-confidence from an early age.

Practitioners can support children's health by ensure children have access to nutritious food. This includes providing balanced meals and snacks in line with national nutritional guidelines and using tools such as the healthy eating plate to help children understand the importance of a variety of food and portion sizes (Welsh Government, 2024). This aligns with the Curriculum for Wales, which emphasises health and well-being as one of its six areas of learning and experience (Welsh Government, 2022). Within this framework, children are supported to develop an understanding of how food choices impact their physical and mental health and are encouraged to make informed decisions about what they eat. Practitioners can incorporate cooking activities, food tasting sessions, and discussions about where food comes from to make healthy eating accessible and engaging (Welsh Government, 2022). Practitioners can support children's health by establishing consistent routines that incorporate outdoor play, active learning, and rest, which contribute to physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being. These daily practices lay the foundation for lifelong healthy habits. Outdoor play promotes physical health by encouraging exercise, which supports fitness, muscle development, and coordination, and also reduces the risk of childhood obesity (Welsh Government, 2022).



(Friel, 2020)

Lifestyle

According to Cambridge Dictionary (2019) lifestyle is defined as a child's way of living, the habits, behaviours, and routines that a person usually follows in their daily life. It includes the choices they will make about how they eat, how active they are, how much rest they get and how much they play outdoors. Lifestyle shapes not only how children live day-to-day but also influences their overall health, well-being, and quality of life. Because lifestyle reflects patterns of behaviour that can be shared within communities or cultures, it also helps define social identity and how people relate to their environment (Brivio *et al.*, 2023)

A child's lifestyle is particularly important, as the early years lay the foundation for lifelong health and well-being. A balanced diet is crucial during this stage, as it ensures children receive enough energy and essential nutrients to support their bodies and brains during this a period of fast growth and development. In the early years, children's bodies are developing rapidly, they are building strong bones, growing muscles, and forming brain connections (Welsh Government, 2024). NHS Wales (2024) states that sleep is essential for children's health, development, and well-being. During sleep, the body carries out important processes that support physical growth, such as releasing growth hormones. Sleep is also crucial for brain development. It helps children create memories, process information, and develop attention, problem-solving skills, and emotional regulation (NHS Wales, 2024). Lack of sleep-in children can lead to a range of challenges, including difficulty concentrating, irritability, and delayed cognitive and emotional development. Over time, persistent sleep deprivation can contribute to more serious health concerns, such as anxiety, and poor academic performance. Establishing healthy bedtime routines—such as a set bedtime, calming activities before bed, and a quiet sleep environment—can support better sleep quality (National Institutes of Health, 2025).

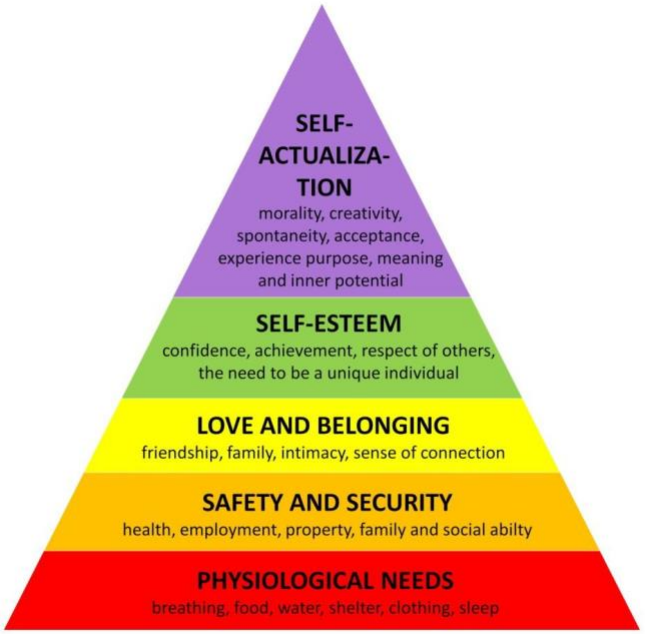
While screen time can be used for learning, excessive use of digital devices can negatively impact communication, language development, and social interaction, as it often replaces face-to-face engagement and real-world exploration (Muppalla *et al.*, 2023). A child's lifestyle is influenced by the behaviours they observe in their environment, this is consistent with Bandura's Social Learning Theory. According to Bandura (1971), children learn by observing and imitating the actions of others, particularly those of caregivers, educators, and peers. This means that lifestyle habits such as eating patterns, physical activity, and sleep routines are often formed by what children see adults modelling in everyday life. For example, if a child sees their parents or practitioners choosing healthy foods and engaging in regular exercise, they are more likely to adopt these positive behaviours themselves (British Nutrition Foundation, 2025). By creating a supportive and health-conscious environment, adults can positively influence children's habits and promote long-term well-being.

Practitioners play an important role in supporting and influencing a young child's lifestyle. One of the most important steps is to build a trusting relationship with both the child and their family, especially as not all children experience consistent or secure relationships at home. Trust enables open communication and allows practitioners to better understand and respond to the child's individual needs (Department for education, 2021).
Additionally, practitioners can support children by connecting their families with support services, especially for children whose home environments may not promote positive health and well-being. Many children face barriers such as poverty, unstable housing, food insecurity, or limited access to healthcare, which can significantly impact their holistic development (Department for Education, 2022). Practitioners have a professional and ethical responsibility to identify these challenges and act as a link between families and appropriate services, such as mental health support, nutrition programmes or social care.

Well-being

Well-being includes children having a strong and healthy sense of self-worth, where they feel confident in who they are and recognize their own value. Feeling capable and appreciated not only boosts a child's motivation but also enhances their overall life satisfaction (Underdown, 2007, p5). Well-being in the early years refers to a positive and nurturing state that young children feel safe, loved, and supported in their growth and development. It is much more than simply being free from illness, well-being in early childhood lays the foundation for lifelong learning, emotional resilience, and social relationships (WHO, 2025). Well-being in early childhood links to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which describes how human motivation progresses from meeting basic needs to achieving self-fulfilment. For young children, well-being depends first on fulfilling physiological needs such as nutrition, sleep, and health, as well as safety needs like a secure and stable environment (Underdown, 2007, p4). These needs must be met to create a sense of security and physical well-being.

(McLeod, 2025)



Following this, Maslow (1943) states that children require strong emotional connections to caregivers and peers to fulfil their needs for love and belonging, which are essential for developing trust and social skills. As children feel supported and valued, they begin to build self-esteem by gaining confidence in their abilities and receiving positive recognition. This growing sense of self-worth enables them to engage more fully in learning and play, which are early forms of self-actualisation, where they explore, create, and express themselves. (Underdown, 2007, p4). Therefore, supporting well-being in early childhood involves ensuring that children's physical, emotional, and social needs are met to promote healthy development and lifelong resilience.

A child's well-being is essential to their overall development and future success, particularly in relation to their educational outcomes and emotional resilience. A child's education and mental well-being are closely connected and schools that promote a positive environment play a vital role in enhancing children's learning, engagement, and cooperation (Welsh Government, 2021). When learners feel safe, valued, and emotionally supported, they are more likely to participate actively in school and develop a stronger commitment to their education. In addition, the link between physical and mental health is significant for example, poor physical health can lead to increased risk of mental health issues, while mental distress can negatively impact physical well-being.
The Welsh Government (2021) also states that good emotional and mental well-being allows children to develop the resilience needed to face challenges, adapt to change, and grow into healthy, well-rounded adults. Key factors that support well-being include being listened to, feeling respected and known as individuals, having time for play, and being part of a supportive family and school community. Children who experience these conditions are more likely to feel motivated, optimistic, and engaged in life, which in turn supports both their mental health and their academic achievement.

Practitioners play a vital role in supporting a child's well-being by creating an environment where every child feels safe, heard, and valued. One of the most effective ways to promote well-being is by actively listening to children and showing genuine interest in what they say. Taking time to engage with children, allowing them to express their thoughts and feelings freely, and responding with care helps them feel respected and understood (Department for Education, 2023). This reflects the principles of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly the child's right to express their views and have those views taken seriously (United Nations, 1989). By including the child's voice in everyday practice, practitioners support the development of a child's confidence, sense of inclusion, and emotional well-being. Practitioners can also support a child's well-being by providing consistent opportunities for creativity through play, this supports emotional development and encourages confidence. Additionally, when Practitioners allow time for meaningful interactions, they not only build strong, trusting relationships but also create a classroom culture that values each child's individuality (UNICEF, 2022). By doing this, practitioners contribute to what makes children happy, being listened to, being seen, and being given space to be themselves. All of which are essential to their well-being and holistic development.

(Unicef, 2024)

Summary

By understanding the concept of health, well-being, and lifestyle, we can see the similarities in how they come together to shape a child's holistic development. Health is recognised not just as the absence of illness, but as a holistic state of physical, mental, and social well-being. A range of factors, such as nutrition, sleep, physical activity, and emotional security contribute to a child's development and long-term outcomes. This poster also highlights the importance of early lifestyle habits, as they influence physical health, mental well-being, and learning. While drawing on theories such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, the poster explores how a child's environment and relationships play a critical role in meeting their needs and promoting resilience. Lastly this poster explores the practitioner's key role in supporting young children by creating nurturing environments, modelling healthy behaviours, and listening to the child's voice. In line with the UNCRC, giving children time to express themselves and feel genuinely heard helps foster a sense of self-worth, happiness, and belonging, which lays the foundation for healthy, confident, and well-rounded individuals.

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